

Matthew 3: 13-17

How Baptism Changed Everything

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This month our topic for worship is Rites and Sacraments of the Church. It is really a series on the way that the rites and sacraments in worship bring us together, and transform our lives. Last week we took communion and we talked about the way that this monthly practice of sharing the bread and cup regularly brings us into God's presence and draws us ever closer to one another. Today we baptized Nathaniel and we will be talking about why baptism is a life-long blessing. Then, next week on Jan. 20, Rev. Jamie will talk about Confirmation, and we will finish this series talking about Church Membership, and the difference between belonging to the church and coming to the church.

Whatever your religious background you probably have some impressions of baptism. Some of you may believe that all infants should be baptized. Others may think that baptism is mostly for the relatives. Some of you may be worried that anyone who is not baptized is in danger of eternal damnation. Others may think baptism is a wonderful way to thank God for the gift of a child. A few of you may even think that whole procedure, while sweet is somewhat superstitious. This congregation believes in baptism. We require it for youth who want to be confirmed. We ask you if your children are baptized when you register for Church School. We insist on you being baptized before you join the church.

We believe in baptism not only because it is a special family day, but because we think the sacrament is transformative for us and for the community. The earliest Christians baptized new believers on Easter, after weeks of study and prayer in preparation for the sacrament. The waters initiated these people into the faith and family of Jesus and changed their identity. The whole community rejoiced and took

responsibility for these newest members. Today I want to talk about why we believe so much in the power of baptism in the life of this church.

In the first place, Baptism is a reminder that life has a sacred purpose. Water is the first and most potent symbol in the Bible. At creation, God's Holy Spirit hovers over water to create all life as we know it. When Noah put the creatures into an ark, that boat held creation as it glided over the waters. When Moses took the people out of Egypt, they crossed through water to get to their new life. Jesus changed the life of a Samaritan woman at a well, healed a crippled man at a pool, stilled a storm on the sea, and washed his disciples' feet. Ours is the water planet and our bodies are full of water. In each of these moments, waters sanctified life.

For Jews, life is ordered around rituals to be a reminder that life has a sacred purpose. The Sacrament of Baptism has its roots in Jesus' dedication at the temple. It was the custom for Jewish babies to be taken to the temple when they were 8 days old to be circumcised. Mary and Joseph took Jesus to the temple in Jerusalem for this ritual. When Jesus was born he joined the human race, but when he was dedicated he joined his people. He became part of his community of faith. The whole community reminds us that we are not our own. God owns us.

When Jesus was ready to begin his adult ministry he sought out John the Baptist at the River Jordan. The Bible is a little ambivalent about this moment, and the text is not entirely sure who should be baptizing whom. But Jesus insists on having John baptize him. I think that Jesus understood that this was a pivotal moment in his life. He was done with his career as a carpenter, and he needed the waters of baptism to mark this transition as a sacred turn, a new beginning. Nothing is haphazard when you live as though your life has sacred intention.

The seduction of our modern society lies right here. We tell ourselves we don't have time to live with sacred purpose. We think we can jump from opportunity to opportunity at breakneck speed and be

happy. So many shiny things come across the screens of our lives and we follow them all for an instant, and wonder why we get so easily distracted. We are told we can have it all, and so most of us are drowning in this marvelous and unintentioned abundance and have a hard time finding a satisfying balance of activity and rest. We have lost the sense of sacred purpose.

When we live with purpose, it brings a peace and powerful stability to everything we do. When you stop to pray before you eat, it changes your meal. When you end each day with some meaningful ritual that takes on a sacred pattern, it changes your day. When you make worship a priority, it changes your week. The Jews understood that- that is the reason to cook kosher meals, because we eat all day long and it forces you to think about God all day long.

Baptism is not something you check off your list. It is not a rite of passage either. It is the moment when we join a faith community and our lives are dedicated to God. It is a moment when the church declares that life is fundamentally sacred. Basic elements like water confer God's love. You cannot control much in life, but you can live with sacred awareness.

Secondly, Baptism tells us that Life is always new.

John the Baptism preached about repentance, and used baptism as a symbol that you can leave the past behind you and start again. You don't have to live with regret or feel defeated by your past. The future is yours if you seize it, and baptism helps you find a way to focus your energies to begin anew. John came with an inspiring message that gave people confidence they could confront the hypocrisy in themselves and other. The notion of new beginnings is at the heart of baptism.

So it made sense for Jesus, who wanted to start down a new path after he had been a builder for years. After prayer and study, Jesus was leaving Joseph's profession and becoming a healer and rabbi. It was

challenging and frightening, and so much less predictable than building, so he fortified himself at the river.

When you travel to Israel one of the most common archeological sites is the mikvahs. These are ritual baths, and they are very distinct. They are not like the Roman baths because they are sunken into the ground and have stairs on both sides. People in Israel used these baths for ritual cleanliness. When they want to let go of an old habit or move on, they take a ritual bath. They enter the tub on one side and leave it on the other; they were obsessed with purity but the symbol is clear; let go of the past, with its regrets. It makes sense to me that Jews invented ritual baths. Theirs is a history of defeat, disappointment, pogroms, and persecution. The miracle of their survival as a people is that they never gave up. They did not allow themselves to quit. So they have this ritual that reminds – life is always new.

There are many crossroads, turning points and transitions in life. Some are more easily taken than others. Some require long hard work; some come as natural as breathing. Though life sometimes seems to stand still, the future is always coming.

Baptized people don't have to ever be stuck. God welcomes your emerging sense of who you are, and who you are becoming. God loves your creative new solutions. God blesses your new endeavors. Water is the perfect symbol for this. If you have a plant you forget to water it may look dead, but when you water it, overnight it comes back to life.

Finally, we are God's own. When Jesus was baptized, the heavens were reported to have opened and God said "This is my child, with whom I am well-pleased". Most of us assume that God loved Jesus, we are not sure that God would smile in that same way on us. We write off this experience as an aberration- a hold moment but unattainable. I don't believe that is true. I think that Jesus came to show us what life could be like for everyone, and that same blessing is available for each of us when we are baptized.

That sense of connection to God can be a powerful motivator and source of encouragement. I think it also serves as a reminder. When Jesus was baptized the heavens opened and God said this one is my own. Clay of my own potter's wheel, this one is a work of art. I depend on him to do my work.

I was baptized in a good church in New York state. My father served those people for 19 years and then we moved to the Middle West when I was six. I remember Sunday School but I don't remember my baptism. When I was in High School, the organist of that church died and left a ring for me and one for my sister, in her will. I wear it now, because it reminds me of the church- that particular church and the concept of a community of faith where children are loved long after they go off to other ventures.

Today we baptized young Nathaniel. He is the newest member of this family of God's people. He depends on us to love him in all the ways we can, to remember him, to cherish him. And to do more for him than just dote on him. He and every other child we baptize depend on us to make this world better for them. He depends on our outreach to others. He depends on our work to end violence and to make this world safer for all children in this country. He depends on our advocacy for God's creation, and our determination to understand and address the trends of climate change.

Of course Nathaniel is today's best example of why we need to be strong in our faith, determined in our outreach and steadfast in our faith. He is just today's reminder that we have a responsibility to the children here to live our faith out loud.

Baptism celebrates the future while rooting us in the traditions of the past. In Baptism we pause in our celebration of this new life and form a foundation, a grounding for this future, our future as God's dear ones, God's voice, and God's ambassadors.