

Baptism: Soon Forgotten or Forever Empowering? Matthew 3:13-17

A pastor with many years experience serving the church found a great conversation-starter to use when meeting visitors with a church background, or people in a church to which he was newly assigned. His question was, “What do you remember about your baptism?” The follow-up question was, “Did your baptism change your life in any way?”

This pastor says the answers varied greatly. Generally, he found they fell into three categories. The first went something like, “Yes, I was baptized. It was no big thing for me, but I’m glad I did it (or I’m glad my parents had me baptized). I really don’t think about it much at all.”

The second category of responses was a bit more intentional, usually going like this: “Yes, I was baptized. It was important to me (or to my parents) and I think about it from time to time. Once in a while it helps me in some of my decisions — like, someone who is baptized should probably *not* do such-and-such.”

The third category of responses was much more positive; the individual usually said something like, “Yes, I *am* baptized, and that has changed so much about my life.

Knowing that I am baptized helps me not to make bad decisions and, more importantly, helps me make good decisions. Knowing that I am baptized affects the way I look at life and the way I live. I am a child of God, and I want my life to reflect that in all I do.”

The fact that so many conversations around baptism even happen is based, first, on the fact that Jesus was baptized. Matthew, Mark and Luke each record Jesus’ baptism. Our text today is in the middle of Matthew’s prelude to Jesus’ public ministry. (Matthew’s account of Jesus’ public ministry starts in 4:17 where, after hearing of John’s arrest, Jesus begins to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”) In the first three chapters, Matthew has established Jesus as God’s anointed one, the Christ; has linked his birth to both Abraham and David; and has proclaimed him “Emmanuel” and “king of the Jews.” All of this points to and affirms Jesus’ identity.

Leading up to the baptism, Matthew shows us John’s baptizing activity. John’s baptism of repentance was a call for people to turn their lives around so as to show their commitment to God. Matthew reports, “Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to [John], and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.”

John also addressed the Pharisees and Sadducees who came for baptism and said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance.”

Finally, John spoke of the one coming after him. “I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

The conversation between Jesus and John is not recorded in Mark or Luke. But in Matthew, John protests to Jesus about baptizing him. In fact, he suggests the proper thing would be for Jesus to baptize *him*. But Jesus says to John, “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.”

And so, it was that John baptized Jesus, and it was *a momentous occasion!* The text says the heavens opened up, which is a way of saying that Jesus had a life-altering encounter with the Father. The Spirit of God descended like a dove and rested on Jesus. A voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” Does it get any better than that? A momentous occasion all around!

We know that the temptations in the wilderness followed immediately after Jesus' baptism. During the next 40 days Satan came to Jesus time after time and threw one temptation after another at Jesus, attacking in any way he could. With each temptation Jesus remained strong and determined. He successfully thwarted each attack. While we don't know for sure, it's certainly possible that with each attack of the devil, Jesus remembered his Father's words, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." How could Jesus give in to temptation in light of the love and eternal connection with his heavenly Father?

Given the powerful example Jesus set for us, how is it that the momentous occasion of *our* baptism is sometimes soon forgotten? Let me share two true-life examples that suggest some contributing factors

Susan, a pastor at a church in the Midwest, received a phone call from a woman who lived a few miles away from the church. Alison was not a member of the church and had never attended. She was not a regular attender at any church. Her request for Susan that day was simple: "My grandson, Alex, was born a few months ago and his parents are going to be in town this weekend. They thought it would be a good idea if they could get him baptized on Sunday. Would you be able to do that for us?" Susan asked several questions and found out that Alex's parents were not members or attenders of any church.

Allison and her husband were not members or attenders of any church either. Susan learned that another family member had suggested they get Alex baptized somewhere, and Allison was tasked with finding a church willing to do it. When Susan offered to meet with the family to discuss baptism and the commitment required by the parents of an infant to be baptized, the family decided they would find a more agreeable pastor somewhere. Lack of commitment to God and to the church often leads to a momentous occasion soon forgotten.

The second story is of Steven, who grew up in the church. Though not baptized as a child, he took part in all the usual activities — Sunday school, various youth groups, a couple of summers at church camp, and vacation Bible school several summers. When he graduated from high school and left for college, it occurred to him that he had graduated from church too. He certainly wouldn't need that anytime in his bright future. After college he found a great job, got married, bought a house and soon there were two beautiful children running around in their home. Life was good.

After their second child was born, Steven and Loretta began to sense a void in their lives, and they had enough sense to do something about it. Steven had a friendly relationship with the pastor who lived down the street from them. They played golf from time to time and the two families had a few picnics together.

Steven called Jim, his pastor friend, and began to have conversations with him about this sense of emptiness. Over a period of months, Steven and Loretta started to attend Jim's church. They found a welcoming congregation and the whole family felt at home. As Jim continued to counsel his friend, Steven found he was desiring a closer walk with God for himself and for his family. Steven and Loretta went through the church's membership class and seriously considered baptism and membership in the church.

With their minds and hearts open to God and God's family in the church, Steven, Loretta and their children were baptized on the same day. Each year as their baptism anniversary comes around, they take time to remember the blessing God gave them as they became part of the family of God in new and decisive ways. They count their blessings and serve God with strength and gladness. Life continues to throw them curves, as it does for everyone, but God gives them strength and help as they remain faithful to him.

Baptism is not a remedy for all of life's problems and troubles. It is not part of a spiritual formula that will help everything work out okay in the end. It's not a magic trick whereby we receive God's blessings.

Historically, baptism has been described as “*the outward sign of an inward grace.*” That may be as good a way to describe it as any. But what we know and affirm today is that baptism is important. Jesus, the Son of God, chose to be baptized and, in his great commission, gave the mandate for the church to go and “make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

If you haven't been baptized, a momentous occasion awaits! If you have been baptized, this is a good time to remember what you promised or what was promised in your name — and, above all, what God promised you — at your baptism. Luther tells us in his Small Catechism that baptism promises forgiveness of sins and delivers us from death and the power of the devil and promises us eternal salvation. Christ has won all that for us through his death and resurrection, but baptism is a means of grace by which the Holy Spirit makes these blessings our own. So, let baptism be a beacon for your life. Remember your baptism and allow it to make a difference in your life.