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Title: Crowded Waters

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Scripture: [Matthew 3:1-6](#)

Text: [Matthew 3:13-17](#)

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Here we are on the second weekend of our new year. Two weeks ago, we celebrated the birth of Jesus. Friday, the kings showed up with presents. That was the Twelve Days of Christmas. A few of you grew up in traditions where Three Kings day was really big. You had worship services, parties and presents. In some places in

the world, Friday was like Christmas all-over again, another special holiday; even businesses and governments would close.

Today we begin a new season of the church called Epiphany. On the first Sunday of Epiphany, Christians around the world remember the baptism of Jesus. A few years ago, someone new to the faith said, "Let me get this straight. Two weeks ago, Jesus was born. Friday, he got presents from the kings. Today, his parents take him to get baptized." Well not quite. There is a little bit of time missing between Friday and Sunday: thirty years are missing.

Every year someone says, "Wow, that's fast. Why do we do that?" The best answer I can give is, "Scripture does that." It's the way the Bible tells the story of Jesus. There is very little about what happens after the birth of Jesus. Matthew says Joseph takes Mary and Jesus and flees to Egypt to get away from the murderous intent of Herod. Luke has a story about Jesus going to the Temple when he was 12, confounding the teachers and scribes with his wisdom. But that's it until the baptism of Jesus. All four gospels begin the ministry of Jesus with his baptism so every year, on the first Sunday of Epiphany, we look at one of those stories.

Baptism is a very important part of being a fully committed follower of Jesus Christ, a sacramental ritual of washing, commitment and initiation, the beginning of a new identity. Every time I preach about baptism, I know there are lots of people sitting in the congregation with different experiences of baptism. Not all of us are on the same page. I also know that probably

90% percent of the way you view baptism is shaped by how you were raised and your personal experience. That in itself gives testimony in and of itself to the power of baptism. But a lot of times, it means that people don't really know why we baptize, just that you should. The power of these memories and experiences are so strong that it engenders a deep felt, emotional responses.

Once or twice a year, I'll get a phone call from someone who wants to get the baby baptized. I had one last week. Someone who hasn't been in church for years and isn't really interested in making a commitment to church, but has this strong, emotional connection with baptism thinks, "I need to get our baby baptized because that's what you do when you have a baby." There is a memory there and it triggers a big emotional response. I try to explain that we do a baby blessing and dedication service for our members not an infant baptism. Without fail, the conversation goes south.

Occasionally, someone who has worshiped with us for a while has a child and then discovers that we are a believer's tradition of community; that we don't practice infant baptism. A conversation takes place about why but the explanation isn't good enough to overcome the powerful emotional experience of infant baptism. It's a deal breaker. They will leave and find another church. Baptism is an emotional issue for a lot of people, so deeply embedded in people that it somehow becomes a part of our DNA.

Of course there is a third emotional reaction which I sometimes get. "That's weird." I hear that response from people who really have no experience of baptism, who didn't grow up in the church and may never have seen a baptism. It feels like some ancient cultic ritual and doesn't make a lot of sense to them in the 21st century.

All of those emotions deal with the experience of baptism not with the why of baptism. Today, I want you to think about the why. Do you know why you were baptized? Or some you need to ask, "Do you know why you should be baptized?" Let's look at the context surrounding the story of Jesus baptism.

Let's start with a little bit of a word study of the word baptism. The word for baptism baptidso, βαπτισις from the root word bapto, βαπτο. Bapto is a common Greek word which means to wash. We know this from a lot of sources but the most commonly cited is a pickle recipe by the Greek poet and physician Nicander. He writes, "In order to make a pickle, the vegetable should first be 'washed' (bapto) into boiling water and then 'immersed' (baptizo) in the vinegar solution."¹ There are lots of other reference to these words, like bathing or ships sunk in battle or clothes dipped into dye, even

people drowned. There is even one reference in the gospel of Luke that gives a clue to what this word means. Jesus is invited to dinner and the "... Pharisee was amazed to see that he did not first wash (bapto) before dinner (Luke 11:38) It's the same word but every other place in it is used in the New Testament, the word is translated baptize and this is why. By the time the Bible was translated from Greek, baptism was the special, emotional experience so they decided to make up a new word, baptize. They didn't want people to confuse it with washing your hands or taking a bath. But it could have just as easily been translated, wash.

In fact, a wash or a bath was the way people understood it in the first century. Sometime before the birth of Jesus, a ritual developed in first century Judaism. If you'd gotten lazy about your spiritual practice, stopped following the Laws of Moses, fallen away from your faith, or done something that made you unclean, you repented by making a special offering in the Temple and then, washing. This ritualistic bath, in Hebrew called a "mikveh" was full immersion and was self-administered as a public cleansing.

It was a big tradition in Jerusalem in the first century and there were lots of pools for the ritualist bath all over of the city, particularly around the Temple. The faithful entered the waters aware of their separation from the holiness of God due to the sin in their lives, and emerged renewed, refreshed and spiritually clean. Orthodox Jews still use the "mikveh" today to prepare for worship, a holy day or their wedding. ²

A "mikveh" was also required if you were converting to Judaism. It was the final step in and is clearly spelled out in the Talmud. The symbolism is clear. You are literally washing away the old way of living and embracing a new way of living, accepting the Law of Moses.³ It was the way of publically saying, "This is how I'm going to live my life; this is who I am now, a Jew. I'm all in. I'm going to live by the Laws of Moses."

Now let's use that information to look at the story of the baptism Jesus. A revival broke out in Palestine and it was led by Jesus' cousin, John. He was this passionate, in your face preacher saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." (Matthew 3:2) Today, when you hear somebody on a street corner or a sporting event shouting with a bull horn, "Repent", what happens? People move away as fast as they can. This is the exact opposite of what happened. John gathered a big crowd. Matthew says "Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan...." (Matthew 3: 5) You might think of this description in geographically as about half of the State of Indiana. That's a big crowd.

Matthew adds this very interesting verse. "...and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins." (Matthew 3:6) That's something new. John's helping people with their ritualistic bath, their mikvehs. It wasn't self-administered. He's washing them. So, because of this new way of ritual washing, John picks up a nickname. He's John the washer guy or maybe John the dipper or maybe even John the drowner. John would not have been known as John the Baptist because that title came later. Remember, we made up this word when we translated the Bible, you know him as John the Baptist.

Now listen to the story of the baptism of Jesus but I'm going to translate it the way people in the first century would have experienced the story. "Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be *washed* (baptized) by him. John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be *washed* (baptized) by you, and do you come to me?" But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented." (Matthew 3:13-15)

Righteousness in Judaism was keeping the Law and was considered "doing what is pleasing to God." So now listen to this. "And when Jesus had been washed (baptized), just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." (Matthew 3: 16-17)

Remember what I said about the baptism. It's a sacramental ritual of washing, commitment and initiation, the beginning of a new identity. That's why Jesus is baptized, not because he needed to repent. It's the starting place. When Jesus was baptized, he is saying, "I'm beginning my mission and embracing the truth which John the Baptist declares about me, I'm the one greater than he. I'm in. I'm committed and we know he was, committed enough to stretch out his arms on a cross that we might know God's love.

You can see then why the baptism of Jesus is the starting place for the gospels in telling the story of Jesus ministry, death and resurrection and why it is the starting place for us. Baptism is an important part of the being a fully committed follower of Jesus. When you read through the New Testament, when you look at the development of the early church, as soon as someone put their faith in Christ, every time someone has an ah-ha moment and says yes to Jesus, they are baptized. Following faith, and following their profession in Jesus, they wash away an old way of living and embrace a new life in Christ. Baptism became central to Christianity as a way of stating your identity and saying, I'm in. Count on me."

And they were baptized not just because Jesus models it. Jesus also commands it. As Jesus ascends in to heaven he says, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you." (Matthew 28:19-20)

Why are we baptized? Because Jesus was baptized and because he commands us to baptize his followers. It is a sacramental ritual of washing, commitment and initiation, the beginning of a new identity. It's a public declaration that you gratefully accept Jesus gift of salvation on the cross and will live by his teaching. Baptism doesn't save us; the cross saves us but baptism is in grateful response to that gift. It isn't how we get right with God but it is pleasing to God. It's a sign of commitment. It's saying "I'm in, this is my identity now."

Baptism is an act of obedience and a declaration of intent. The bonus is that we become a part of the crowd. There are two things that connect us with ever Christian in the world and every Christian that has ever lived, baptism and communion. When it comes to washing in holy waters, there's a big crowd, not just of the people of Jerusalem and all Judea, but any and every place and time where the name of Jesus has, is or will be proclaimed. There you have a brothers and sisters in Christ.

Most of us are a part of that but a few of you aren't. You don't want to miss out on it. If you are ready to say yes to Jesus loving gift of life, then I hope you'll join me in the crowded waters of baptism, make your commitment and say, "I'm in." That's powerful stuff which is I'm sure why baptism engenders a lot of emotional responses. It gets down inside you, deep within you, takes your root in your soul.

When I was a pastor serving a small church in Glendale, California, one of my almost daily experiences was caring for the street people. There are a lot of those folk in southern California and we were at a major intersection of two freeways, so we had a lot of traffic. One day, I found a homeless man sitting in the empty sanctuary. Worried and protective of the church, I asked him if I could help him. "No, I just want to sit here with the crowd." "Crowd?" Yeah, all of these drowned folks around here" he said, waving a hand. "You don't brain wash them, do you?" "No, I wouldn't do that" I said, absolutely clueless about what he was talking about. "Well, it wouldn't matter if you do. They can be a part of the crowd because everybody knows, God loves a crowd.

I left him there for a few minutes and when I checked back, he was gone. I laughed about him being crazy all day long until driving home it hit me. He was talking about baptism, about sprinkling on the forehead or immersion. He was preaching to the young preacher. I never saw him again; never knew his name. Something tells me, it may have been John the washer guy. Whatever your experience of baptism, it is a sacramental ritual of washing, commitment and initiation, the beginning of a new identity. I hope you own it and claim your spot in the crowded waters.

¹From Strong Greek Lexicon, <http://www.studylight.org/lex/grk/view.cgi?number=907>

² Frykholm A. The house of secrets: the hidden world of the mikveh. *The Christian Century* [serial online]. July 27, 2010;127(15):40. Available from: ATLASerials, Religion Collection, Ipswich, MA. Accessed January 6, 2017.

³ Grasham B. Archaeology and Christian baptism. *Restoration Quarterly* [serial online]. 2001 2001;43(2):113-116. Available from: ATLASerials, Religion Collection, Ipswich, MA. Accessed January 5, 2017.