

Title: Crowded Waters

Preaching: Senior Minister Randy Spleth

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

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

E-Mail: [Randy Spleth](#)

Here we are on the second Sunday of the New Year. Two weeks ago, we celebrated the birth of Jesus. Last week, we remembered the magi visiting the manger, but we did so, early. The official day on the church calendar for that visit is January 6th. It begins the season of Epiphany. On the first Sunday of Epiphany, we remember the baptism of Jesus. Years ago, someone new to the faith said, "Let me get this straight. Two weeks ago, Jesus was born. A week later, he received presents from the kings. Today, his parents take him to get baptized." We'll not quite. There is a little bit of time missing between presents and baptism, thirty years.

Every year someone says, "Wow, that's fast. Why do we do that?" The best answer I can give is, "Scripture does that." That's pretty much the way the Bible tells the story of Jesus. There's no information about what happens after the birth of Jesus. Luke has one story about Jesus going to the Temple when he was 12, but that's it until the baptism of Jesus. All four gospels begin the ministry of Jesus with his baptism. Every year, on the first Sunday after the Epiphany, we look at one of those stories.

Baptism is an important part of being a fully committed follower of Jesus, 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. 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 also means that people don't know why we baptize, just that you should. The power of these memories and experiences are so strong that it engenders a deeply felt, emotional responses.

Once or twice a year, we'll get a phone call from someone who wants to get the baby done. Someone who hasn't been in church for years and isn't interested in committing to a church, but has this strong, emotional connection with baptism and thinks she needs to get her 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. We explain that we do a baby

blessing and dedication services for our members. We don't offer infant baptism. Without fail, the conversation goes south.

Less frequently, someone that has worshiped with us for a while will have a baby and suddenly discover that we are a believer's tradition community, that we don't practice infant baptism. A conversation will take place about the 'why' but the 'why' isn't good enough to overcome the powerful emotional experience of infant baptism and it's a deal-breaker. Baptism is an emotional issue for a lot of people, so deeply embedded that it becomes part of our DNA.

Sadly, there is a third emotional reaction which is becoming more common. It's "That's weird." I hear that response from people who have no experience of baptism, who didn't grow up in the church and maybe have never seen a real baptism. It feels like some ancient cultic ritual and doesn't make a lot of sense in the 21st century.

All of those emotions deal with the experience of baptism, not the "why" of baptism. Today, I want you to think about the 'why'. Do you know why you were baptized? Think about your baptism. For some, it may be imagining your parents taking you to be baptized in a special place. For others, you can see the very place. It may be here. Do you know why you were baptized? For the few here who haven't been baptized, "Do you know why you should be baptized?" To answer the question, let's look at the context surrounding the story of Jesus' baptism before we get to Jesus' actual baptism.

Let's start with a little bit of a word study of the word baptism. The word for baptism in Greek is "baptizo" from the root word "bapto." 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 many other references to these words, like bathing or ships sunk in battle or clothes dipped into dye, even people drowned. There is one reference in the gospel of Luke that gives a clue to what this word means. Jesus is invited to dinner and the "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.

A wash or bath was the way people understood it in the first century. There was a ritual in Judaism. If you'd gotten lazy about your spiritual practice, stopped following the Laws of Moses, fallen away from your faith, or become unclean, by going around swine or a dead body, you repented by making a special offering in the Temple. But before making the offering, there was washing, a ritualist bath, in Hebrew called a "mikveh." These mikvehs (the plural of mikvaot) surrounded the temple or later, synagogues. They had naturally running water filling them and they were deep, 85 gallons of water where you stood, unclothed, fully immersed. The bath was self-administered as a private, personal cleansing before entering the temple.

This was also the final step in converting to Judaism and is spelled out in the Talmud. The symbolism is clear. You are washing away the old way of living and embracing a new way of living, accepting the Law of Moses. It was the way of publicly saying, "This is how I'm going to live my life; this is who I am now. I'm a committed Jew. I'm in. I'm going to live by this truth."

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 to people, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." (Matthew 3:2) and people were listening to him because he was gathering a 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) That's interesting. It wasn't around the temple. It was in the river. And then he 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. 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. Because we made up this word when we translated the Bible, you know him as John the Baptist. While he was baptizing people, he was also preparing the way of the Lord. "I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." (Matthew 3:11)

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)

Do you remember the story that we read from Matthew about Joseph hearing that Mary was pregnant? Matthew tells us that Joseph was a righteous man just like Noah was a righteous man. Righteousness in Judaism was keeping the very letter of the Law. Joseph had to redefine righteousness in order to stand by Mary. The new definition is, "doing what is pleasing to God."

Hear now this connection. "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 all in. I'm committed. And, I know this is pleasing to God.

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 being a follower of Jesus. When you read through the New Testament, when you look at the development of the early church, as soon as someone puts their faith in Christ, every time someone has an 'ah-ha' moment and says yes to Jesus, they are baptized. Following faith, and 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 into 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 and because it is pleasing to God. 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. That act of obedience and declaration of intent functions, in both forms of baptism. If you were baptized by your parents, they were the actors on your behalf with the intent for you to become a follower of Jesus. If you were immersed at a later age, you were the actor, declaring your intent. Either way, the bonus for both is you become a part of the crowd. Baptism is the way we become part of the crowd. Two things connect us with every 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 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 young pastor serving a small church in Glendale, California, I found a homeless man sitting in the empty sanctuary. Worried, protective, 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 brainwash 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.

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