Jordan’s Water

Luke 3:21-22

When I was eight weeks old, my parents presented me for baptism at First Methodist Church in Hickory North Carolina, the same way many of you were presented. They had me in this white frilly gown with the tiniest little satin shoes, the way many of you were dressed. The pastor took me from my mother’s arms, much the way he did with you. He said some words over me that I didn’t understand. Then he took some water in the palm of his hand and dripped the water over my head. It was cold. I looked at my parents with a look that said “How could you let this man do this to me?” So, I started to cry, same as you. I grabbed the minister’s beard. He started to cry. My parents pried my little grip off the minister’s beard, and they took me back to our pew. I wouldn’t stop screaming, just like you, right? Baptismal day.

Truth is, I don’t remember anything that happened that day. Neither did my parents. I was one of four siblings. Mom and Dad did well to remember the fact that I was baptized. Others of us may have had a different experience of baptism. Some of us may have been a little older and remember the day quite well. A few of us may have never been baptized.

It is a rather interesting situation we find ourselves in here in America, especially in Protestant churches where baptism is practiced in different ways. It is quite possible, and happens more often than you think, for a person to come from a background whereby baptism isn’t performed until later in life, only to become involved in a church that practices infant baptism, but the person is now older than the age when most young people go through baptism and later confirmation, and are never baptized. Some never had a church experience until they became adults, and now that they are grown, they begin to see the importance of God in their lives and find a church home. They feel and act as though they are every bit a part of the congregation. It’s just that they haven’t been baptized.

It’s not really that unusual in the Methodist church to see a mix of different experiences or no experiences when it comes to baptism. In every place I have served as a minister, this has been true. Some of you may have come from a Baptist background, or a Catholic background, or some other background other than Methodist, or no background, so when it comes to baptism, I’ve learned not to take for granted that everyone is on the same sheet of music.

Which brings us to today’s reading in Luke’s gospel where it all began. As you know, John the Baptist had been baptizing for quite some time, with a ministry that preceded Jesus’ public ministry. John’s was a baptism of repentance to get ready for the messiah. So, when Jesus presented himself to be baptized, at least in the reading this morning, he came down to the water of the River Jordan as one among many that day, each taking their turn. It’s a little different rendering than in Matthew’s gospel where John would have prevented Jesus from being baptized, saying that he needed to be baptized by Jesus, not the other way around. In Luke, he was simply baptized. Either way, one does wonder, why Jesus? John’s baptism was for repentance and the forgiveness of sins. There was no need for Jesus to repent, no sins to wash clean. But in both Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus is baptized. At the very least, it must have been a humbling experience for the Son of God to submit to baptism. He didn’t need to be baptized to get right with God, God getting right with God.

But for Jesus, there was something deeper in the act of baptism, evidenced by the voice of God declaring Jesus to be his beloved Son, in whom God is well pleased. There was an epiphany, a manifestation that day, a voice from heaven, a dove, the Holy Spirit descending on him. It became a declaration of the special relationship between the Father and the Son, through the Holy Spirit. You know, when you think about it, it is one of the clearest expressions of the Trinity. The voice of the Father, to the Son, of their unique relationship, sealed by the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove.

So, what does it mean for us? Where were you, and who was with you, and what happened at your baptism? Was it right here? Or somewhere else? Was it a little sprinkle, or full immersion? Did it happen by a baptismal font like this one, or in a river like Jesus, or in the ocean, a swimming pool, a creek, in a backhoe loader (been there, did it)? Did it happen quickly, or slow? When I visited Israel, I went to the River Jordan where John was thought to have performed most of his baptisms. A group of about thirty people were there, dressed in white baptismal gowns, all going down into the river to receive baptism. We were there for a couple of hours sight-seeing, and that group was in the water the whole time. They were in no hurry to get out of that water. It meant something. Maybe you remember your baptism. Maybe you don’t. Doesn’t matter. What matters is that we understand in faith what happened that day, and what difference it makes today. And if you haven’t been baptized, it’s important to understand what happens on the day when, Lord willing, you allow the minister put some water on your head, or take the plunge, as the case may be. So what does our baptism mean?

**First, it means that we accept that if Jesus was baptized, and told his disciples to baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, then you and I should be baptized too**. It’s the right thing to do. It was the right thing to do for Jesus, and it’s the right thing to do for us. It is keeping our heads slightly lower than the Savior who humbled himself. It is not a day to say “I am too proud to submit to something like that.” It is to accept that we are standing in the need of prayer, standing in the need of grace, standing in the need of God to make it through this life.

I don’t know about you, but I get very nervous around people who won’t ever admit that they need help from a higher power. It reveals a character flaw, an insecurity, a stubborn unwillingness to admit that you are at best another human being prone to make mistakes like everybody else.

Recently, I was at the dinner table on Christmas day with my family, remembering times past, growing up around the family table, and how my youngest sister used to dump her glass of milk all over the table at least once a week. It happened so often, we would all laugh, and she would leave the table in tears. Every month or so, my mom would have to get on her hands and knees to scrape the dried milk that had formed a thin line from where it had spilled between the leaves of the table onto the floor. I laughed so hard this past Christmas day, remembering that story, that I spilled my drink all over the table, on my chair, my shirt, my pants, the floor, had to get up from the Christmas table and change my clothes. God has a funny way of putting us in our place, lest we forget who we are.

Baptism reminds us that we stand in the need of grace, all of us, that we need to be honest with ourselves, with others, and with God. Unlike Jesus, we do need to get clean, and the water symbolizes the act of purification, of getting clean before the Lord.

**Second, at baptism, we receive a gift.**  God taking the initiative, before we are ready, before we have our act together. We come as we are and accept what God has already done for us through is son. Looking back on your baptism is to accept that God’s grace has been working in your life for a long time. Wesley calls it prevenient grace, grace that is with you throughout your life, molding the clay that is you into the image of Christ, if you let it.

It’s funny how people change over the years. People you could not stand as a child, grow up to become your best friend. Others with whom you used to spend every waking moment, turn out to be people you just don’t want to be around. People change. All of us have a need to change in some way. There are rough edges to everyone what needs smoothing out. I know that’s true for me. Baptism is saying God isn’t finished with us. That same grace that claimed us as a child of God continues to work in us until our dying day. I look back on the man I was when I was fifteen, seventeen, twenty-one, and I shudder.

One of my favorite movies is the Shawshank Redemption. In it, there is a scene where Red is up for parole after forty years of a life sentence for a murder he committed when he was a young man. The parole board asks him if he feels that he has been rehabilitated. He’s been asked that question many times only for his parole request to be denied. The real question, he says, is “Am I sorry for what I did?” He answers his own question. “There’s not a day goes by that I don’t feel regret.” He goes on to say, “I look back on the way I was then, a young, stupid kid who committed that terrible crime. I want to talk to him. I want to try and talk some sense to him, tell him the way things are. But I can’t. That kid’s long gone and this ole’ man is all that’s left. I gotta live with that.” In his own way, Red conveys the truth that he isn’t the same man he was. On that day, Red is finally granted parole after forty years in Shawshank Prison.

If you will, baptism is the beginning of God’s great work of rehabilitation. Years later, we can look back and say we are not the same person we used to be. And it happens throughout our lives. After a lifetime of being a Scrooge, Ebenezer Scrooge learned how to keep Christmas well. No longer the mean old miser he once was, he saw the error in his ways and allowed the Spirit of Christmas to live in him the rest of the days of his life. So can we, through the gift of God’s grace.

**Third,** **baptism is saying yes to God.**  Perhaps if you are like me, you were too young to say yes. If so, then your parents said yes, and promised to raise you in the Christian faith until the day would come when you would say yes to your baptism and yes to God.

Jesus tells a parable about two sons who were tasked by their father to go work the vineyard. The first says no, but later changes his mind. The second says yes sir, but never does. Jesus asks which one did the will of their father. The answer is obviously the first son.

Saying yes to God is more than saying yes. It is living the yes. It’s loving your neighbor. It’s loving the people God loves, including those who rub us the wrong way. It’s pitching in and being known as one of God’s people, working in his vineyard.

Over the years, I’ve had all sorts of solicitors come to our front door unannounced, or who call me out of the blue on the phone, wanting to sell me anything from insurance, security systems, girl scout cookies, you name it. Now I will say yes to girl scout cookies and cub scout popcorn. But with a lot of these solicitors, I used to be polite and let them talk, until I realized it was only leading them to believe I’ll say yes when I’ve already made up my mind to say no. Nowadays I just say no.

It’s one thing to do that with solicitors. It’s another to do that with God. When God invites us to have a relationship with him, we have the right to say “no” because God doesn’t want to make us slaves. I wonder though, when God reaches out to us, how often do we respond the way I have with solicitors. “Let me think about it and get back to you.” “Sounds like a great idea, but I’m very busy right now. Call me next month.” Or any number of other answers. But the answer most pleasing to God is most likely this one: “Yes.” Baptism is saying yes to letting God into your life. Not later, not when we feel like it, not when we have the time, but all throughout our lives.

I like yeast rolls. Do you? There’s something about the flavor in the yeast. Saying yes to God is letting God be the yeast in everything we do. It’s not an aspect of our lives that we struggle to make room for. It’s not what we do in our spare time, as if we have spare time. It is being so influenced by the love of God, that God flavors everything we do.

Baptism is accepting our need for God’s grace. It is a gift. It is saying yes to God.

**And then, baptism is being open to God’s plan for your life**. It is accepting the mystery of your life that only God knows. It’s not being afraid of your future, but trusting that if you place your life in God’s hands, whatever happens, it will be a good life. It may not be an easy life, but a good life.

It isn’t clear in the scriptures when Jesus recognized his earthly ministry. If Jesus was like other children, and scripture goes to great lengths to say he was, he would not have had the capacity to understand such things until time had passed. It could have been as early as twelve years old when he was listening and asking questions in the synagogue. It might have been as a teenager. It’s hard to say. We do know that however old he was when he realized God’s purpose for him, Jesus had to wait until the right time. He would not have been well received as a teenage savior, or even in his twenties. Tradition has it that the age of full maturity for a man was thirty. That also happened to be the age when David became king and the prophet Ezekiel began his ministry. The age of maturity.

Jesus is baptized, and he then begins his public ministry. You and I are baptized, and God’s plan begins to unfold in mysterious and wonderful ways.

**Finally, when we are baptized, we die**. That may come as a bit of a shock. When Jesus was baptized, he then began his public ministry, culminating on a cross. Knowing what would happen on Calvary, Jesus waded into the River Jordan and plunged beneath the waves.

For you and me, baptism is not so much a physical death as it is a spiritual one. We die to sin. It is perhaps the greatest mystery of baptism.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul writes, “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore, we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.”

In other words, to be baptized is to die, but it is a death we can live with. We die to sin, and live to Christ. Does that mean we will never sin again? Of course not. Does it mean we’ll never make mistakes? Of course not.

Baptism means that God’s grace is working inside us, destroying our proclivity (that’s a good word), our inclination to sin, giving us the power to live after the example of our Lord.

I said earlier that I shudder when I look back on the man I was when I was a lot younger. I’m not the same man. Hopefully, you have changed over the years. Here’s my question to you: Do you still have room to grow? I would like to say that today I never lose my temper, that I never say a discouraging word, that I am always patient and kind and reasonable, considerate in every way, every day. As one of my grandson’s toys says, “Keeping nice stuff on my mind,” but I know myself better than that. It is then in those moments when I put my hand to my head and say, “Remember, Van, you’ve been baptized,” and by God’s graced, I try again.

Remember your baptism and be thankful. God is not finished with us!

Living God, when the Spirit descended on Jesus at his baptism in Jordan’s water, you revealed him as your own beloved Son. You anointed him with the Holy Spirit. Grant that all who are baptized into his name may keep the covenant they have made, and boldly confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior now and forever. Amen.