

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Today's gospel reading reminds us of the role of John the Baptist, baptizing with water for repentance yet announcing that the one who is coming – Jesus – who will baptize them with the Holy Spirit. Robert Cargill of Bible Odyssey says, "I think it's important for people to remember, especially Christians to remember, that baptism had already existed in a different form, or in a similar form, prior to what we know today as baptism. When John the Baptist is in the river baptizing people, people didn't walk by and say, "What's he doing? That's a strange thing!" They knew what he was doing, he was baptizing; and this probably emerges from the idea of ritual immersion that existed in Judaism long before." Cargill goes on to say "We have evidence of ritual immersion going on prior to the advent of Christianity because we have mikva'ot (mikvehs) we have Jewish ritual immersion, and this was for ritual purity. Before you could go worship, you would ritually immerse yourself and this wasn't necessarily for hygiene or for cleanliness, it was for spiritual purity. You would make yourself pure so that you could go in the presence of the deity, you could worship, you could offer sacrifices. So, long before Christianity developed the idea of baptism, Jews had been practicing ritual immersion in the form of entering into a mikveh, immersing oneself and then emerging from that purified (retrieved 1/11/25 from BibleOdyssey.org. Cargill, R. R., *Origins of Baptism*. 2024 Society of Biblical Literature).

But John the Baptist, the cousin of Jesus, has put a spin on baptism, baptizing people in the River Jordan, absolving them of sins and reminding them to repent and live in righteousness. And as mentioned earlier, he has also reminded them that one is coming — Jesus — who will baptize them with the Holy Spirit. Jesus didn't need to be baptized to be included in the family of God or to experience the presence of God. Rather, Jesus comes to the river as a witness of the covenant with our creator and with us. Jesus walks into the river to be baptized by John, his cousin, and the heavens are torn open. The voice of God joins the blessing of the dove, in recognizing Jesus as the beloved of God in whom God is well pleased.

Martin Luther calls baptism a "bath of the new birth in the Holy Spirit." (The Book of Concord [2000 ed], p.359) Baptism changes recipients, opens them up to whole new ways of being and acting. In a sermon, Luther put it this way: "The gospel should instill such amazement in us that we too would exult and proudly assert: I have been baptized in Christ; there is no doubt, that through the Lord Jesus, I became a lord and can overcome death and sin, and heaven and all creation must serve my best interests (Complete Sermons, Vol.5, p.156). I can't say that I ever thought that in baptism my best interests would be served, only that I had become a member of the family of God who had received the Holy Spirit. But let's say Luther is correct, that heaven and all creation must serve my best interests. What would that look like?

Some might think this would bring all the material wealth the world offers and the power that goes along with those possessions. Some might think that this would mean that everyone loves them, and they can do no wrong in the eyes of others. But what if it meant that your best interests come when you serve Jesus by serving others? What would that look like?

Ancient theologian Cyprian of Carthage offers a powerful testimony to how baptism opened the way to a new manner of living for him and what it can do for us. He wrote: "But after that, by the help of the water of new birth, the stain of former years had been washed away, and a light from above, serene, and pure, had been infused into my

reconciled heart, — after that, by the agency of the Spirit breathed from heaven, a second birth had restored me to a new man...” (Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol.5, p.276)

Some people believe that people cannot change their personality, that once they have grown into an adult they are who they are going to be for life. If they are a criminal, they will always be a criminal. If they are honest, they will always be honest, and so on and so forth. However, neurobiology has shown that the kind of openness to new possibilities and activities that baptism offers can lead to more happiness and impede aging. Because activities such as baptism allows the brain to release neurochemicals which feel good and serve to retard aging (Sherwin Nuland, *The Art of Aging*). It has been shown that the neuroplasticity of the brain, that is the ability for the brain to change and adjust, functions in such a way that positive experiences outweigh negative ones and can help us to become more optimistic and confident in our outlook on life. Openness to new ideas and activities can stimulate the brain to release chemicals that lead us to experience happiness and impede the aging process by stimulating the brain to make new neural connections. In baptism we have been made new. Our sins have been washed away. We belong to God, and God works for the good of those who love him.

Baptism means we are living in the reality of the coming kingdom, to live in a future-oriented way, no longer trapped by the past or the present. Hall of Fame pitcher Bob Feller described this sort of future-oriented, new-opportunity style of life saying, “Every day is a new opportunity. You can build on yesterday’s success or leave its failure behind and start over. That’s the way life is, with a new game every day...” “ To live the baptized life is to live by the way Christian author Toy Campolo described it: “Your past is important but it is not nearly as important to your present as the way you see your future.”

Baptism changes you, makes you somebody who is not hung up on yourself and not bound up by where you have been and what you have done. Baptism makes you somebody with a concern for the future, looking for new possibilities to serve God, almost with reckless abandon. Baptism gives you the confidence, for you know that you are pleasing to God and have the Spirit, the power of God, to live in this way.

If you’re not baptized and you’d like to be, talk with me. If you are a member of this congregation, or any congregation, you most likely have been baptized, and may be wondering if you can be baptized again. The short answer to that is no. We believe in one baptism. Baptism is God’s work, and God’s work does not need to be repeated. What if you don’t feel as though your baptism took? What if you feel like you don’t have a connection with God? Intentionally set aside time to be alone with God, asking for a strengthening of your faith and a revelation through the Holy Spirit. It most likely will not happen at that moment. Stay aware of your circumstances and watch for where God intervenes. It may not be obvious; God’s presence may be revealed after thinking about something that happened. Continually remind yourself that you belong to God; put a note on your refrigerator, on your mirrors, on your car dash. Look for ways you can serve God remembering it isn’t what you do but who you are doing it for (and that would be God) that matters. Believe that God is present, and you will draw closer. Reading or listening to the Bible, especially the New Testament, is helpful, as is joining a Bible study with others. And have an ongoing conversation with God, pray without ceasing. Learn to live into your baptism. God is ever present and protects you even when you can’t feel God’s presence.

All glory be to God.