

Baptism of Our Lord – B
Mark 1:4-11**Pastor Wayne Peterson**
January 8, 2012

No one can be an expert at everything, with the possible exception of Cliff Clavin on the old *Cheers* TV show, but most of us have one or two topics about which we feel particularly passionate. It's easy to tell what that topic is because the moment it pops up, it's almost as if our mouths go into automatic overdrive and we will expound on that topic at great length for as long as anyone is willing to listen – sometimes even longer.

For some people the topic may be politics. For others it's baseball, or gardening, or cars, or nutrition. For me, it's baptism. I know – I'm a little weird. My family reminds me of that fact quite often. I'm not sure when and how I got so interested in the implications of baptism. During seminary, I guess. I remember an early Tuesday morning Bible study I was leading almost 30 years ago when I was serving Richfield Lutheran Church, when after eloquently (at least I thought it was eloquently) describing the importance of baptism in our daily lives, Harold Lindstrom looked up at me with a smile and said, "Sounded just as good this time, pastor."

Now I had been Harold's pastor for only three years at that point, so I can imagine what some of you are thinking after having to listen to me around here for 25 years – "here he goes again..." But I don't apologize if what I'm about to say is repetitious for you, for baptism is the very core of the Christian faith journey and no one can ever hear that enough. Baptism defines who we are and what our purpose is in life, and those are the two fundamental questions that everyone must strive to answer.

I am not going to address questions about whether children who die before they are baptized are saved or, more generally, if it's possible that God might save those who, through no fault of their own, never heard the message of Jesus Christ. Such questions might provoke an interesting discussion, but they betray an attitude that believes that the effects of baptism occur only after one dies.

My contention is just the opposite – that the significance of baptism is most important for us in the here and now, as we try to cope with the disappointments, frustrations, and uncertainties of everyday life.

Perhaps I can best make this point by sharing with you how I have come to understand baptism in my own life – a testimonial, if you will. Like 95% of you, I remember absolutely nothing about my own baptism. I was less than two months old at the time. The only thing I know about my baptism is that I was baptized at Salem Lutheran Church in Rockford, Illinois by Pastor Ragnar Moline. I know that because my folks used to tell me I was born in Moline, Illinois, baptized by Pastor Moline, and I used to get rides on my Grandpa Peterson's Minneapolis-Moline tractor.

The fact that I remember nothing of my baptism does not make it meaningless by any means. On the contrary, it fills it with meaning. Primarily, it underscores the truth that my baptism is God's action, not mine. I did nothing to earn or merit God's gift. It is God's way of showing that I am loved and accepted without prior conditions. It is God's way of promising that he will never take that love away from me.

Coming to know just that one thing – that God loves me and will never take his love away from me – is the most profound and freeing truth I have ever known or ever will know. You see, there are times when my self-esteem gets kind of low. I can look at the abilities that others have and realize that no matter how hard I try, I won't ever do it as well as they do. I can look back over the last week and list all the things that I got done and then make an even longer list of things I should have done but didn't. I can examine my thoughts, and it scares me that I can sometimes have such condescending, or angry, or self-centered feelings.

All of those things can deflate my self-esteem because I don't measure up to my expectations. It is precisely at this point that my baptism becomes important to me. I recall that at one point in my life, Pastor Moline made the sign of the cross on my forehead and said, "Wayne Bennett, Child of God, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the sign of the cross forever."

Wayne...child of God...forever. When I find it hard to accept myself, I remember that God accepts me. I am God's child forever. And if God accepts me, I have no reason not to accept myself. God thinks I'm lovable, and that's the most important opinion around. This assurance is not based on my feelings and emotions, which would be a very shaky foundation because those can be like a roller coaster ride – sometimes I feel spiritually alive and other times I feel almost spiritually dead, like God is very distant. The water of baptism and the sign of the cross remind me that my relationship with God is not based on my feelings of the given moment, but on the solid foundation of God's promise.

From time to time I do something very simple that Martin Luther once suggested. That is, when I get up in the morning and am standing in front of the bathroom mirror with squinting eyes, wishing that God might have added an extra hour in the middle of the night, I put some water on my hand, make the sign of the cross on my forehead, and say "I am baptized."

Try that every morning this week. You'd be surprised how it affects your whole outlook on the day. You feel like someone special because you are someone special – you are a child of God. You'll find that this simple act is kind of a confession. It's turning over all the sins, frustrations, and anxiety of the previous day and starting out with a clean slate. You will think, "This is a new day. Every waking hour of this day is a gift God has given to me that I'll never get again. How I use that time is my gift to God."

Many years ago our family vacation took us to Idaho where Jackie's brother was working as a park ranger. He took us camping one night on the banks of the Snake River. Jackie and Kaity went exploring along the banks of the river and returned with a handful of rocks, for Jackie loves to collect unique-looking rocks. She started to show one of them to me, but then stopped with a surprised look on her face. "You know," she said, "this was a real pretty rock when it was in the river because the water made it sparkle in the sunlight, but now that it's dry, there's nothing special about it. It's just ordinary."

We are kind of like that rock. By ourselves there is nothing special about us. We're ordinary people. But when we are washed in the waters of baptism and receive God's promise, we enter into what musician Handt Hanson calls "waterlife" and we emerge glistening. Now we are indeed special people: people of the promise, claimed and named by God. And as we live out our baptism each day, we are "walking wet" – God's love reflects off of us and we shine.

Baptism is a one-time only event. It doesn't come in stages. We receive all of God's love and grace in that moment. But, at the same time, baptism is a daily event, for God's promise to us is reaffirmed each day and we are called on to respond anew each day. After we listen to Handt Hanson's song about Waterlife, we will take the opportunity to once again reaffirm our commitment to living out our baptismal promises.

Waterlife – Handt Hanson

Before I can remember the covenant was sealed
with Father, Son, and Spirit, in water was revealed.
The cleansing was for certain, with water and the Word;
gentle words were spoken, in heaven they were heard.

They were singing waterlife, beginning life,
waterlife all my life,
waterlife, Spirit life, waterlife.

A simple sweet beginning, a loving place to start:
Christ began the singing that swells within my heart.
His love became my calling, his life my ministry.
His name is my adoption into his family.

My hope and expectation for true community
begins with resurrection, his death and life in me.
His Spirit fills the Body: his church through water sees
promise for tomorrow, his waterlife in me.