

Pastor's Message: Baptism of Jesus – 1/15/2023  
Matthew 3:13-17 Isaiah 42:1-9

In the church year, this Sunday, after Epiphany last week, the United Methodist Church and others focus on the baptism of Jesus by John. As we consider that baptism, some questions might arise. The Christian Church does not have a monopoly on baptizing. The history of baptism does not actually begin with the New Testament and the baptism of John, but many thousands of years earlier.

Baptism did not originate with Christianity. It is not a uniquely Christian rite. Early Mesopotamian, Egyptian, and Eastern religions practiced various forms of baptism. A form of baptism is also a central religious rite in Hinduism, various Indigenous American religions, and of course, in Judaism. Other types of washings and purifications by water are practiced in nearly every other religion in the world, including Islam, Buddhism, and Shintoism. No Christianity yet in John's time, but today we hear Jesus coming to John for baptism.

In Matthew's gospel, John the Baptist preaches a baptism of repentance—symbolized by baptism with water—and the corresponding drastic life changes. This was part of the Jewish tradition and in this tradition, but in a new way and with a new message, John immersed people in the Jordan River for the forgiveness of their sins. The Greek word for "immerse" is *baptizo*, from which we get our word "baptism."

He was calling the people to repentance, asking them to prepare for the kingdom of God that was coming in the person of Jesus.

It is no wonder, then, that he is so surprised when Jesus presents himself for baptism. If baptism is about repentance from sin, why, indeed, would Jesus, who was without sin, want or need to be baptized? After trying to convince Jesus that their roles should be reversed, John relents and immerses Jesus in the waters of the Jordan.

Today's reading from the Book of Isaiah includes a passage (vv. 1-4) that scholars once identified as one of the four so-called "Servant Songs" in the book of Isaiah (along with 49:1-6, which repeats lines from today's reading; 50:4-11; and 52:13-53:12). Although the servant's identity has been much disputed — most scholars today understand the servant to be personified Israel or, at the very least, a group within Israel — the songs' overall theme remains well established: To serve the God of Israel is to bring, as a people, righteousness and justice to the world through service to other people. There is a call and an identifying in the reading from Isaiah and a call and an identifying in the reading from Matthew.

One thread that we can pull from our two Bible readings is the reality of a voice: in this case "the voice of God." In the reading from Isaiah, God is speaking and says, "Look at my servant . . . He is my chosen one." In the gospel reading from Matthew, a voice from heaven says, "This is my dearly loved Son, who brings me great joy."

In both of these readings, who is God talking to? Who is the servant to whom God is speaking? Is the servant limited to just one particular person or is it the whole of Israel or is it a prophecy of Jesus or are all God's people included? It does seem to be someone whom God has chosen. Does he choose everyone? Is His servant only the pastor or a church council

member or a committee member or a musician? Is this passage for you, a member of a congregation and for anyone and everyone who considers this their church home? Is the voice in Matthew only for Jesus or for anyone who is a son or daughter of God?

In the reading from Matthew, the voice indicates that Jesus “is my dearly loved Son, who brings me great joy.” In our baptisms, just as Jesus’ baptism was a sign of identification, so it is also for you and me. It is a sign for the acceptance of the love and salvation of Christ. The water baptism identifies us with the family of God, the Body of Christ, the Church. It is about God’s call, God’s gift, God’s grace.

Some of you may have heard that this year, 2023, is the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of one of the favorite hymns of many Christians and of others too: Amazing Grace. As the Worship Committee and I gathered to start preparing for Lent this year, we learned of a Bible study that will focus on that hymn and would like to offer that as our Wednesday evening Bible study during Lent this year. I am being called to make this year in the Waupun United Methodist Church a year focused on the “amazing grace” of God. I think we should continue all this year talking about and praying about and thinking about the grace of God in our lives, in this Church, and beyond. I’m not sure how to do that yet; perhaps you have some ideas?

As we think about Jesus’ baptism today and about our own baptisms, it is in many ways, a mystery. I believe, as a United Methodist, that baptism is a sacrament. It is something that God does to us. Baptism is a means of grace. This makes baptism a miracle of grace. In and through baptism, God's grace comes personally, concretely, and individually to the person baptized. In the Wesleyan tradition, we call this prevenient grace — a grace that goes before us. A loving God is constantly reaching out, even before we are aware, wanting to be at the center of our lives. It is the amazing grace of God that leads us through every maze of life.

There’s a reason this Old Testament reading from Isaiah is paired with the gospel reading in Matthew 3 on this the “Baptism of Jesus” Sunday. The similarity of Isaiah 42:1 and Matthew 3:17 is striking. Isaiah: “Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights”; Matthew: “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” If we are to link the “servant” of Isaiah to Jesus of Matthew 3, then the thrust of the sermon can center on how to delight the “soul” of God (referenced in Isaiah). As followers of Jesus, we can bring “delight” to the “soul” of God by working to “bring justice to the nations” (v. 1; see vv. 3-4, 7). It is for this ministry that God has called us “in righteousness,” and has “taken [us] by the hand and kept” us (v. 6). If we were unsure whether God is pleased with how we’re using the precious life that has been given to us, we need be uncertain no longer. If we are working for justice, and therefore for peace, then we are bringing delight to the soul of God.

As God's beloved son or daughter, as God's partners in creation, are we living out of this gift of amazing grace? Are we extending God's amazing grace to others, instruments of the grace that brings together God's justice and mercy? Paul said we are to "shine like stars in the world" in the midst of a "crooked and perverse generation" (Philippians 2:15) - stars offering God's gift of amazing grace.

Baptism is both grace, the action of God, and also an individual commitment and promise. In the Wesleyan tradition, and in the United Methodist Church and in other denominations, we do believe each person must at some point make a personal decision for Christ. But for Wesleyans, converting people to Christ is not an end-goal; nor is it necessarily a one-time event. Rather, conversion for Wesleyans is a lifelong process of growing into deeper discipleship and deeper relationship with God in Christ.

Our journey toward discipleship, becoming more and more like Jesus and becoming more and more Christian, begins with baptism. When we baptize an infant or child, we are initiating them into the community of God's people. We mark them with water, symbolically recognizing before the community of faith that even though they do not yet recognize it for themselves, God's grace is within them. We pray for the Holy Spirit to guide them on their journey. And we promise as a community of faith to show them, by our example, what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ so that one day they will experience God's saving grace and make a confession of faith in Christ for themselves.

As United Methodists, we believe that experiencing the assurance of God's grace is a critical step in the journey toward a deeper relationship with the living Lord. But we also believe that the way it happens varies widely. For Methodists, there is no single way, and not even necessarily a single moment, in which someone suddenly changes status from "unsaved" to "saved." It is a process and a journey.

For many, the heavens have been opened, God has spoken, and conversion has happened more than once. Conversions can occur throughout our lives, in experiences big and small, formal and informal, public and private. As United Methodists, we don't limit conversion to being a single, definable event. Conversions are steps along the path in our journey to live more fully and perfectly as sanctified disciples of Jesus Christ. Conversions happen whenever we are reminded that God's grace, which was recognized in our baptism, has not just been planted, but has taken root and is continuing to grow in us.

Today the church continues to use the waters of baptism as a sign of death to our old lives and resurrection into new lives in Christ. We celebrate the grace of God as we are born anew and receive forgiveness. In baptism, we remember that we are the children of God, loved by God and pleasing to God.

This is why it is so important for us to remember our baptisms as we do today and celebrate them as a worshiping community. Because as Methodists, we don't believe it is something we have done, such as saying the right words, that has saved us. We believe it is God who has saved us. It is God who reached out to us first, in love and prevenient grace. It is God who sent Jesus into this world to show us how to live as God's people. It is God who has saved us and offered us eternal life!

Then comes our response and our commitment to work at growing our faith and continuing to live out our promises by participating in a church in whatever way we can for as long as we can – using the gifts we have to the fullest extent we can.

God continues to speak to us – continues to call us dearly loved. Can you still hear it? "You are my dearly loved daughter . . . my dearly loved son." We may be uncomfortable today speaking of anyone as God's chosen. But God's call is to service, not to privilege.

Anyone who hears God's voice in one way or another can discover she or he is God's beloved.

And as we live out our call, people see and notice how we live out our call as Christians and as members of a church. There was an older man who attended worship faithfully. What was so unusual was that the man couldn't hear very well and he couldn't see very well either. So, as far as participating in the worship service, it was marginal at best! Yet, there he was, Sunday after Sunday. One day, a good friend of his at church asked him: "George, I'm curious. I know you can't hear or see very well and that most of the worship service is probably not very meaningful to you. So, I'm wondering, why do you come?" George didn't hesitate a moment. He replied: "I just want people to know whose side I'm on!"

Today the heavens are opened again. And a voice is heard from heaven, saying, "This is my dearly loved son or daughter, look at my servant, who pleases me." Today is an opportunity once again to respond to God's call and make our promises to live out our faith in and through this Church. It is our chance to be a light to those who walk in darkness and cannot see or hear the voice of God. It is our chance to be a life preserver to those who are floundering and drowning. It is our chance to be salt for the earth and share the flavor of God's kingdom to a world which too often settles for what is not filling or healthy.

Today the heavens are opened; God speaks. Do you hear it and are you willing to come and follow?

Today the church continues to use the waters of baptism as a sign of death to our old lives and resurrection into new lives in Christ. We celebrate the grace of God as we are born anew and receive forgiveness. In baptism, we remember that we are the children of God, loved by God and pleasing to God.

We live into our baptism by serving Christ through our service to others.

In faith, we raise money to dig wells so that those in dry, remote areas can have the clean, safe drinking water they so desperately need.

In faith, every month, we help supply our local food bank so that those who are hungry have enough to eat.

In faith, the Church has provided gifts for seniors at Prairie Ridge that they can both receive Christmas gifts and gift others.

In faith, we paid 100% of our apportionments again last year so we can do the work of this Church through other United Methodists far beyond our own community and around the world.

In faith, 50 years ago, this Waupun United Methodist Church built a Wesley Center, not just for its own use, but as a gift to the community, a gift which is still available and used today.

In faith, we engage in the life of the Church not only to help it survive, but also to help it thrive.

Who knows, what more a year of grace can do for us and for God's world?

We are called to exercise our faith, and when we do, the waters of our baptism flow from this place to encourage and bless the least, the last and the lost.