



THE DIVINE TATTOO
Matthew 3:11-17, Acts 10:34-43

Today is the day on the church's liturgical calendar that we remember the baptism of Jesus – and our own. As we observe from our lesson today – it certainly was a significant event in the life of Jesus. All four gospels testify to it. Jesus presents himself for baptism – much to the amazement of John the Baptizer. His baptism is so important that at the close of Matthew's gospel – known as the Great Commission – we are commanded to “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” The command was now to baptize – not circumcise. It signaled that a new age and era had begun.

The baptism of Jesus is – for me – a pivotal moment when the life of Jesus shifts from the semi-private realm to the public arena. We know from **Luke 3:23** that Jesus is thirty years of age when he begins his public ministry. We don't know much about the life of Jesus from age 12 to 30. We do know he was actively learning the law – and amazing some of Israel's brightest religious scholars and teachers in Jerusalem. While Jesus would have some very pointed discussion with the Pharisees and others – he never boycotted the institution. He fulfilled the law and its obligations.

So today we find Jesus presenting himself to his cousin John for baptism in **verse 13**. John the Baptizer is how we identify his mission and ministry when we encountered him in the Advent season and drama.

John – in **verse 14** – is stunned and perplexed that he is there. Yes, John recognized that Jesus did not fit the image of those coming in repentance – seeking forgiveness. Jesus transcended John's baptism.¹

It has challenged theologians for centuries as to why Jesus presents himself to a preacher who calls for repentance and forgiveness of sins. While Jesus has no need to wash away his past – like we do – he is in reality opening up a new future for us. Jesus comes to be baptized that he might begin the ministry of restoring to us our identity as sons and daughters of God that was lost in the Garden of Eden. Identity theft is hardly a new experience. We know from our lesson from **Acts 10:43** that the baptism of Jesus inaugurated a new era in which forgiveness of sins was made possible through his name.²

The first words out of Jesus' mouth in **Mark 1:15** as he begins his ministry are similar to John the Baptist's words, "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news."

Repentance or renunciation of sin is a good first step – it is not enough for the Jesus way and life. It can become another form of work righteousness. We need someone who can "break the power of cancelled sin and set the prisoner free."³ We need a Savior/Redeemer who can give us a new direction and way.

Matthew's gospel shares in **verse 15** that Jesus was baptized "to fulfill all righteousness." Only then would John consent to baptize Jesus. God the Father willed it to be done – and Jesus obeyed it. At the baptism of Jesus (an epiphany in itself) we read in **verse 16**, "The heavens were opened" – a sign that divine revelation was occurring. Matthew's emphasis is on what happened after the baptism – rather than the act of baptism itself. The identity of Jesus is confirmed "this is my Son – whom I love, with him I am well pleased." Then the Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus empowering him for the mission and ministry he has accepted.

In baptism the identity of Jesus is validated and confirmed. This is why infant baptism is so very important. I call it the 'Sacrament of Belonging' or 'the Divine Tattoo.' The identity of Jesus would be further validated at his temptation – the transfiguration – his crucifixion – and resurrection. In **verse 15** Jesus speaks for the first time in the gospel of Matthew. In baptism Jesus accepts his co-mission – his calling – to be the Savior of the world. Immediately after Jesus is baptized he begins to do battle with the powers of evil. Satan tries to steal his identity, "If you are the Son of God" However Jesus knew his identity was not based on an 'if.'

Further, if the ministry of the Son of God had to be done in the empowerment of the Holy Spirit – you can be sure our ministry and mission must be performed in the same way. All the gospels demonstrate that something very important happens in baptism – therefore it is important for those of us who have been baptized to remember it – and claim the identity it grants us.

I have always loved Luke's genealogy of Jesus in **chapter 3:23-38**. He traces the genealogy of Jesus back to Adam – not just to Abraham. This demonstrates that Jesus is the Savior of the world irrespective of nationality – race – rank – sex – or age. Jesus was an equal opportunity employer long before the United States Supreme Court mandated it.

A friend of mine who is a Southern Baptist pastor often uses the texts from Matthew's and Luke's gospels as proof that infants should not be baptized. I smiled and shared, 'Using that kind of reasoning, all this text tells me is that no one under 30 should be baptized – and that I can be done only to a male in a flowing river. He said, "Eric, you got me on that one."

My friend then said, “Eric, it must be done as soon as the individual believes – makes a profession of faith.” I said, “You mean to tell that Jesus did not believe before he was 30?” (Hum).

I said to him, “Show me one verse where I am commanded not to baptize children and infants.” He could not.

I then showed him **Acts 16:15** – Lydia and the members of her household were baptized. In **Acts 16:30-34** Silas and his family were baptized. In **Acts 18:8** – Crispus, the synagogue ruler – and his entire household believed in the Lord and were baptized.” In **I Cor. 1:16** “Paul baptized the household of Stephanas.”

The Bible clearly teaches both family solidarity and personal responsibility. It is not either/or. **Joshua 24:15** declares, “As for me and my household – we will serve the Lord.” When lost sheep entered into the kingdom their lambs came with them.⁴

God’s covenant has always included not only believers – but also their children. God’s covenant with Abraham was an everlasting covenant – not a temporary one.⁵ It was Dr. James Boice and others who taught me that the covenant remains in effect to this day. God doesn’t change. Yes, the Lord who made promises to Abraham is the same Lord Jesus who embraced babies brought by believing parents – and still today this same Lord promises to be God of believers and their children.⁶

Yes, God in Christ brought the covenant into a new and better era with a new and better sign. Since Christ suffered and poured out his blood. God no longer calls for the bloody – painful sign of circumcision. Instead he gives the sign of baptism. This better sign is no longer limited just to males.⁷

It would be unthinkable to me that our awesome God who included children in the Old Covenant era would exclude them in the new.⁸ Dr. James Boice correctly point out the reason the New Testament does not address the issues or problems of infant baptism is because there were no issues or problems. Believing Jews who were used to having the outward sign of their faith applied to their children – did the same in the New Testament.⁹

The Sacrament of Baptism – regardless of the age or stage of life when administered – is always a response to what God in Christ has done for us. In that spirit I want to offer three insights about baptism for your consideration today.

FIRST OF ALL, BAPTISM GIVES US AN IDENTITY.

Carl Jung, the late Swiss psychiatrist shared that everybody needs an identity. If you don’t have one – the world will give you one. That is why I call the sacrament of baptism the ‘**sacrament of belonging**’ or ‘**the Divine Tattoo.**’ There is great power in belonging – in being known and called by name. We see the flip side of this in the

techniques of cults and gangs. Baptism declares we belong to God. We are given an identity as a son or daughter of the covenant.

When an infant is baptized we celebrate the prevenient grace of God at work in that precious life. God is at work in this life long before the child recognizes it. He/She responds to what God has done for him/her.

Occasionally when I baptize a child into the faith – someone will say to me “I wish I could be baptized again.” Usually I respond by saying “Why?” The person usually responds “Because I understand it so much more now.” I smile and say “**Of course you do!**” That in itself is proof that what God did – and what the church house taught you – is working quite well. God’s faithfulness and promises are steadfast – what you are experiencing is a recognition and deepening of how awesome it really is. Your parents asked God to begin a good work in your life – and God did.

In baptism we are being told that we have been and will be loved by God. God has made promises. While those of us who were baptized as infants cannot remember the time of our baptism – we can, as Dr. Stookey suggests, “celebrate the promises God made at the time and react to them in faith.” To celebrate my 57th birthday, I do not go back to my mother’s womb, for which she is eternally glad, but we did celebrate my entrance into the world. At my baptism, I was given my identity as a child of God. I rejoiced.

For someone like me, who grew up on an urban ghetto on the wrong side of the tracks – it was very important for me to know that my identity as a child of God was just the same as those on the other side of the tracks. It was important to know that God has no favorites.

Bishop Willimon shares when he baptizes an infant, he shares with the family and church family “God has big plans for this one. This one is set apart for God. This one belongs to us.”

SECONDLY, BAPTISM REPRESENTS OUR ENTRANCE INTO THE COVENANT PEOPLE OF GOD.

While baptism is immensely personal – it is never private. We are baptized into the body of Christ. Baptism is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. One lay person I know likened a baptism without a congregation to a football player without a team. It is just incomplete. The church helps to teach and model the faith journey. The sacrament of belonging now becomes the ‘**sacrament of becoming.**’

While baptism is more than initiation into the faith – it is the beginning point.¹⁰ However, it is a **beginning** point – not a destination.¹¹ A journey begins. Our identity grows in faith and understanding.

Empowered by God's grace we continue to fully claim our identity. Now we are invited to fully become what God has created us to be. Like a soldier, we are a soldier from our first day of enlistment – but it would be correct to say we are more of a soldier when boot camp is over. The action of baptism is not restricted solely to the moment of time in which the sacrament is celebrated. God begins a good work in us – but it's hardly completed. Like a soldier we are part of a larger body. We are not strangers. We are a royal priesthood – a Holy Nation.

When baptism is viewed in this light – then it becomes the event which facilitates our growth into faith and repentance. In church school and at home we learn the biblical stories which build our faith. Here we filter the information from the world. We do this because we are a different people. We have a different way of seeing, hearing, and knowing. Here we learn the vocabulary and words that help us to become who we are – and whose we are.

This is why the church is so important. It is clear that children cannot be baptized until there exists a covenant community of adults in which infants can be nurtured.¹² The parents are the vine – the children are the branches.

This is why we provide classroom spaces and resources for Christian education. This is why we hold Vacation Bible School. This is why we offer Bible studies and prayer groups. The list can go on and on. People don't make decisions in a vacuum – so we must provide the Christian resources to do so.

Remember, God has promised to work through his covenant. While we break the covenant – God does not. These promises have a powerful pull and tug upon us.

In the early 1970s – a pop/folk singer by the name of Judy Collins began to sing a song at her concerts which she learned as a small child in her local United Methodist Church – **“Amazing Grace.”** A strange phenomenon occurred. It rose to the top ten on the charts. She shared how she found in the words and music a power that carried her through the dark days of alcoholism and despair. The words rescued her from the wrong identity and false hopes the world tried to stamp on her. She realized she belonged to God – and God was there to welcome her home from the far country.

THIRDLY, OUR BAPTISM IS OUR ORDINATION/COMMISSIONING TO SERVICE AND MISSION.

In our scripture lesson today we see that Jesus' baptism marked the beginning of his public ministry. The sacrament of belonging/becoming – would not reach its full potential if it did not propel us forward to ministry and mission. In baptism we declare our allegiance to the truth and way of the Christian life.

There is a wonderful story told about Henry Ford. Many years ago there was a machinist with the Ford Motor Company in Detroit who had, over a period of years, “borrowed” parts and tools from the company which he apparently never got around to

returning. While this practice was never condoned, it was more or less accepted by management, and nothing much was ever done about it. The machinist unfortunately had not been raised in a Christian home – or baptized as an infant – or been part of a church family.

However, the machinist had a profound awakening – and presented himself for baptism. It had a profound effect on his life. He took his baptismal vows seriously.

He saw an opportunity to demonstrate there was a new Master and allegiance in his life. One morning he rented a dump truck and returned every tool and part he had ever taken from the workplace. The foreman almost fainted. He called Henry Ford and told him of the workman's action. Henry Ford said, "Dam up the Detroit river and baptize the entire work force!"

Yes, this man learned of God's grace that loved him and claimed him long before he ever knew it and responded to it. God's grace – whether in an infant or adult – is always at work before we know it.

On November 3, 2001, 7 members of our church in Schuylkill Haven and myself were privileged to visit Philippi, Greece, where the Apostle Paul baptized the first Christians on European soil – Lydia, her children, and her servants. It was a holy site. It was not a river – but a stream. After I had shared the devotion I invited all my members – including St. Mary – to come down and renew their baptism. I took water from the stream – made the mark of the cross on their foreheads and said, "Remember your baptism – and be thankful." Immediately, everyone else in our traveling group came forward. In this group were Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Pentecostals, and Southern Baptists. There were people from three different racial or ethnic groups – yet we could all share and rejoice that we were the baptized – the marked ones, the Called Out – the claimed people of God.

The great protestant reformer Martin Luther – in his journey of faith – had constant battles with depression and despair. On more than one occasion he crawled on his knees to the baptismal font and cried out, "**I am baptized – I am baptized.**" That act of remembering gave him renewed strength to respond to the ministry and mission God had claimed him for. He was baptized as an infant.

Today, with full assurance, I take my stand with Martin Luther, John Calvin, John and Charles Wesley, Jonathan Edwards and others who were baptized as infants and also those baptized as adults and how God used them all for his honor, glory, and kingdom.

I pray today – you remember your baptism – whether as an infant or as an adult, and be thankful – and remember who you are – and whose you are.

Amen and amen.

Reverend Eric S. Ritz
January 10, 2010 – preached at both services
All Rights Reserved – Copyrighted 1/10/10

ENDNOTES

¹ Fred B. Craddock, [et. al.], **Preaching Through the Christian Year, YEAR A**, Trinity Press International, Harrisburg, PA, first edition, 1992, page 82.

² Ibid, Craddock, page 81.

³ Words of Rev. Charles Wesley.

⁴ Dr. David Feddes, **“SHOULD BABIES BE BAPTIZED?” The Back to God Hour**, 1/13/2002, page 12.

⁵ Ibid, David Feddes, page 8.

⁶ Ibid, David Feddes, page 9.

⁷ Ibid, David Feddes, page 10.

⁸ Ibid, David Feddes, page 6.

⁹ James M. Boice, **“GENESIS: An Expository Commentary,”** volume 2, Baker Books, fourth printing, 2002, page 595.

¹⁰ Laurence H. Stookey, **BAPTISM: CHRIST’S ACT IN THE CHURCH**, Abingdon Press, 1982, page 51.

¹¹ Ibid, Stookey, page 49.

¹² Ibid, Stookey, page 48.