

## CHOSEN FOR BAPTISM

Baptism of Christ Year B

Gen. 1:1-15; Ps. 29; Acts 19:1-7; Mk. 1:4-11

Tannum Sands 10/01/2020

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A drunk stumbled along a baptismal service on Sunday afternoon down by the river. He proceeded to walk down into the water and stood next to the Preacher. The minister turned and noticed the old drunk and said, "Mister, Are you ready to find Jesus?" The drunk looks back and says, "Yes, Preacher. I sure am."

The minister then took the drunk and dunked the fellow under the water and pulled him right back up. "Have you found Jesus?" the preacher asks.

"No, I didn't!" says the drunk.

The preacher then dunks him under for quite a bit longer, brings him up and says, "Now, brother, have you found Jesus?"

"No, I did not Preacher."

The preacher in disgust holds the man under for at least 30 seconds this time, brings him out of the water and says in a harsh tone, "Friend, are you sure you haven't found Jesus yet?"

The old drunk wipes his eyes and says to the preacher, "Are you sure this is where he fell in?"

In our reading this morning from Mark's account of the gospel, John the Baptist didn't have to go looking for Jesus. Jesus came looking for him. John is portrayed in the gospels as an Old Testament prophet. He dresses like a prophet and eats like a prophet. He is strange and harsh. There was no subtlety with John. He preached like a prophet telling the people who had gathered at the Jordan River that they must repent and prepare for the coming of the Messiah—the One whose sandals he was not worthy to untie.

"Turn away from your sin", the Baptist cried like the prophets before him. "Be baptised as a sign that you are ready for the coming of the Messiah and the kingdom of heaven". John is a pre-Christian prophet pointing to the One who will come after him, in the same way as many of the prophets of the Old Testament era did. He even states that the One who is coming will do more than baptize with water. "*He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit*", he says (Mark 1:8).

And so the people, one by one, came to John confessing their sins and wanting to be baptised. The people who had come out to see this strange man, who were standing on the banks of the Jordan made the decision to heed the prophet's call and step into the water to be baptised as a sign of their readiness to welcome the Messiah.

Then suddenly Jesus appears in front of John. I wonder if John was surprised to see him. He may well have known Jesus—they were cousins after all. More importantly though, he would have recognized Jesus as the person he had been talking about. What may have puzzled him, however, is why Jesus wanted to be baptised. In fact, in Matthew's account, John tells Jesus that it is *he* who should be baptised by Jesus (3:13). Jesus has no sins to confess and he has no need to prepare for the coming Messiah because he is the Messiah.

Then something amazing happens. As John baptizes Jesus we see a shift in what is happening. Now the action no longer focuses on the response of the people to John's preaching but on the response from God to Jesus' baptism. The action shifts from the action of people to the action of God. The heavens are literally *torn open* (reminding us of the tearing of the temple curtain when Jesus died), God has come down to human level, the Spirit descends on Jesus like a dove, and a voice of speaks from heaven, "*You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.*"

Thirty years previously, the angel Gabriel had told Joseph in a dream that Mary's child would be the presence of God among his people—that he will be known as Immanuel which means "*God is with us*". Jesus' baptism becomes the occasion for the testimony of the Holy Spirit that God has come into the world in his Son, Jesus. No longer is baptism just a ritual of human readiness, repentance, or acceptance. The kingdom of God is now "in the midst of you", present in Jesus the Christ.

In the end, it is not John who really baptizes Jesus but the Holy Spirit. In addition, God the Father declares that Jesus is his own very much loved Son. It is much like the way Jesus described Christian baptism to Nicodemus. It's an action of God that declares his love for us and gives new life through water *and* the Spirit (Jn. 3:5).

This scene on the banks of the Jordan not only tells us that Jesus is not just an ordinary man from Nazareth but God's very own Son. Jesus' true identity is revealed. He is one with the Father and the Holy Spirit and is about to begin his work on earth for humans. The yoke he is about to take up will prove to be heavy and difficult to bear, so God speaks words of love

and encouragement to the Son (loud enough for all to hear and attest to) as he begins his work of redeeming lost humanity.

Jesus' baptism tells us that here is God who is ready to be identified with sinful humanity. In just a few short years he will hang on a cross for the sins of every human that has ever lived and will come in the future. He identifies with us totally and completely.

The Good News is that it pleased God to send his Son for us. By baptism into his death we have been made holy, and pleasing to God. Our ungodliness has been swapped for his righteousness. What a great exchange for us. A very uneven trade, it cost God everything; we received it as a gift without cost to ourselves.

And so as we hear again about Jesus' baptism and the journey on which he was embarking, we are reminded of our own baptism when God declared that we are his own very much loved sons and daughters (as he did at Jesus' baptism). He promises to support and help us through the difficulties along life's path (just as he did for Jesus on his way to the cross).

He assures us that his love for us will never cease (just as Jesus' love never ceased even though it would cost him his life).

Baptism is God's work, not ours. Salvation is God's gift, not our achievement. Grace is a gift. So is faith. In baptism, God adopts us as his own. God reaches for us, grabs for us, claims us as his chosen ones, as heirs, as royalty. Baptism occurs, not because we have come to God, but because God has first come to us. The reformer, Martin Luther put it this way in the Small Catechism, *"In baptism God gives us forgiveness of sins, freedom from death and the devil, and life with God forever."* *"When we use God's Word with the water, the Holy Spirit shows God's love for us by washing us clean from sin and giving us new life".*

Note Luther's use of the words *"In baptism God gives...."* What God gives is a gift given without conditions and without any cost on our part. It is what we call "grace. Grace claims us, loves us, saves us, restores our friendship with God, rescues us from Satan's power to kill us, and gives us eternal life. Baptism delivers to each of us personally what Christ did for us on the cross.

In Paul's letter to Titus, he wrote, *"God our Saviour showed us how good and kind he is. He saved us because of his mercy, and not because of any good things that we have done. God*

*washed us by the power of the Holy Spirit. He gave us new birth and a fresh beginning." (3:4-5)*

Just as Jesus baptism was the beginning of his journey to the cross and his service to those who needed God's help, so also our baptism is the beginning of our journey as children of God. Baptism is a once-and-for-all event that while for many happens when we are babies; it takes our whole life to finish. Every day we strive to live out our baptism. Whether we are baptised when we are six months old or sixty years old, from then on we seek to be what God has made us—his children filled with the Spirit, living, saying and doing according to the leading of the Holy Spirit. Even when we fail to live a Spirit led life, daily God renews in us what he began in our baptism.

Daily we are forgiven and refreshed. Daily God turns to us so that we can turn toward God and respond to the Spirit's urging within our lives. In fact, the response itself—our response of faith—is part of the Spirit's work in us. There is no conversion, repentance, good work, or good life, which is not a gift of the Spirit. And daily it is given freely to all.

Because of our renewed relationship with God in baptism, we are called to, as Paul says in Romans, *"offer ourselves as living sacrifices to God, dedicated to his service and pleasing to him" (Rom 12:1)* or as he says later in Ephesians, *"Since you are God's dear children, you must try to be like him. Your life must be controlled by love, just as Christ loved us and gave his life for us" (5:1,2).*

What could be clearer—Through Christ, God has chosen you and me to be his sons and daughters. He has given us the responsibility to be his servants, carrying on Christ's work in our city, our country and in other places in this New Year. He has called us to help others to see that God loves them; that he invites them to also be his sons and daughters; that he wants to be their helper and strength through all the troubles that life in this world can bring.

Don't lose heart when you make a mess of imitating Christ and all you can see is sin and failure. Return to him and hear the Father's approving voice saying, *"You are my beloved child with whom I am well pleased"*.

To him be all the glory, honour and praise. Amen.