

BAPTISM

[An expose written in oral form]

Matthew 3:13-17
Epiphany 1 A

January 12, 2020
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The first Sunday after Epiphany always includes the Baptism of Jesus, *which makes sense, since that is the next step* after Epiphany.

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John the Baptist was preparing people for the coming Christ. He was calling people to repent, and baptizing for repentance.

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The practice of Baptism goes way back, even before the time of Christ. It was a ritual used by numerous primitive religions, some even used animal blood instead of water. Also, baptism was practised in pre-Jesus Judaism, where it was a ritual act for the cleansing / purification of Gentile proselytes.

The Essences sect added the twist of repentance, which John the Baptist proclaimed.

The cleansing / the ritual exercise of washing is significant. It is symbolic and cathartic.

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When someone has been violated and defiled,...they is a strong need to shower / to self purify / to reclaim one's wholesomeness.

I've heard that when someone's home has been broken into, they scrub and clean thoroughly to purge the intrusion.

The act of washing away is cathartic and empowering.

Years ago, when the peace group I was with heard that the KKK were planning a march through town, we wanted to make a counter statement. We came up with a powerful demonstration.

After the 20 or so Klansmen marched by, and before the crowd had left, we followed with mops and buckets of water to clean the street of their presence. It was symbolic!

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The cleansing / the baptism for repentance is a powerful action and statement.

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Subsequently, Jesus asking John to baptize him is perplexing. The fact that this is in the Gospels makes the event very creditable. No one would make this up; it is **that** awkward.

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John is baptizing for repentance, in the Jordan River. Jesus shows up to be baptized, too. John tries to dissuade Jesus, asserting that Jesus should baptize him, Not the other way around. But, Jesus insists, claiming it is proper to fulfill all righteousness.

?//The Cleansing / the demonstration is the right thing to do. ?

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More than likely, Jesus is affirming John's ministry,.... and... modelling the process for all seekers and followers.

He is saying, "John is right and this is right." Repentance comes first,.....and now.....there is more.

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The heavens opened up.

He SAW God's Spirit descend like a dove, that landed on Jesus.

He Heard: God's affirmation and blessing.

It is a beautiful statement: This is my Son, who I love, and I am well pleased with him."

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John expected this "new" addition for baptism.

In verse 11, John said, "Jesus will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."

Jesus' baptism is saying: "baptism is not only symbolic of the cleansing of sins, but it also metaphoric for the death of the old life and the resurrection into a new life. Meaning, it is an act demonstrating a decision to change direction and to fully respond to God's calling.

Baptism is a symbolic demonstration of making A VOW / commitment to do the will of God. The life of Jesus shows us how / shows us the New Life.

In a way, I think Jesus' baptism is a ritual... with power.... that inspires us to mimic / to follow / to do the same as Christ.

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This interpretation seems to be confirmed in the Acts passage where Paul encounters new believers who were baptized with John's understanding. They were given a baptism of repentance, and apparently did not find it adequately meaningful enough... or .... powerful enough..... for their new journey of following Christ.

So, Paul "re-baptized" them with the added symbolism of being Baptized into a new life with Christ.

*I suppose you could say that they were the first ANABAPTISTS, since they were "re"-baptized.*

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As you know, there are number of interpretations of the meaning and method of Baptism.

Some profess it to be a sacrament – where God's grace is bestowed through the very act of baptizing.

While others feel very strongly about **how** the baptism / the procedure is done, declaring that it must be by immersion.

And, there are some Christian groups that do not even practice baptism.

Regardless of the differences, I do not think it should be a point of contention.

I do like our Anabaptist interpretation.

Baptism is an individual choice. It is a personal statement, YET it is done in community. Baptism is a church activity.

It is a way of making a public statement; it is NOT the statement.
In my opinion, Baptism is a **powerful** ritual, but the power follows the action and is not just **in** the action.

I like Believer's Baptism, which publically states a person's declaration of repentance AND decision to follow Christ.
Believer's Baptism is a personal WITH community and God ritual.

I think it is very beneficial and **powerful** to proclaim and Demonstrate ..through Baptism... that a person has chosen to be a follower of Christ,.... and that decision includes repentance.

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We seem to have downplayed repentance, which is asking for forgiveness of sins and changing to be a follower of Christ.  
I fear we may be diminishing our understanding of what is involved in being a follower. We may be devaluing the profundity in choosing God's way. ???

However, some Christian groups begin and end at this experience.

In our tradition, Following Christ is emphasized much more than a "conversion experience".... **because WE put greater weight on God's grace**, than in the power of confessional words meant to Evoke God to forgive us.  
We do not Grab unto Salvation/ we do not "Claim" salvation from God, but rather,.... inspired by the Grace of God....we choose to join into the journey of Salvation.

Nevertheless, our perception of baptism includes John's version and Jesus' way.  
For us, baptism is forward looking.

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One of the biggest decisions we can make in life is to choose to be a follower of Christ, and that decision includes choosing to be in community. Being a Christian is NOT a solitary endeavour.

And,..... we mark that decision with a ceremony / a ritual – Baptism.

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A public ritual and ceremony is NOT a whisper of intent that can be easily taken back, but rather it is a shout for all to hear. It is a strong, declarative covenant.

Baptism is somewhat like a marriage ceremony.  
Two people have already chosen each other – *the first step*, and they may have already made commitments to each other.

But, even if they did, the ceremony Publicly marks / imprints those commitments and it underscores them with a vow.

In a wedding ceremony, two people make vows to each other.  
*We make vows because there may come a **dark time** when we **temporarily** feel differently, .....and we may need to lean on that vow / draw from that vow.... to carry us through in our commitment.*

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During the Baptismal ceremony, we declare “Jesus Christ is Lord”.
That is our public vow to be a follower of Christ, in community with each other.
We may have already decided to follow Christ, but the vow helps cement our commitment, and God receives and responds to our bold and sincere declaration. Recall God's Spirit resting on Jesus.

Marriage requires witnesses, and so does Baptism.
Our commitment to God..... to be a follower of Christ is NOT done alone. Our journey of Faith is done in a community of believers.

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Baptism is a significant ritual.

There is power in rituals that are shared and experienced in community.

Rituals help us to transcend. They help explain and enhance an experience, and ..... they can invite the holy into the moment – God.

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I do want to address the apparent declining interest in being baptized.

Traditionally, Mennonites have associated baptism with a youth becoming an adult.
Baptism was part of our “routine”.
It became a benign expectation: a teenager graduated from youth into young adulthood and church membership through baptism.
It was like a rite of passage for growing up.
Some of the notion and power of the ritual was lost.

These days, young people do NOT become adults at 18. Adolescence continues to approximately age 30.

Youth are correct in being hesitant to declare adulthood at 18, or 20 or 25. The world has changed. No longer do young people have the resources and opportunities to be fully independent.

Therefore, young adults decide NOT to be baptized / not to be a full member in the church / not to be fully engaged and independent, because, in honesty, they cannot be.

The fault is NOT theirs!
The problem is that we did NOT properly redefine the “routine” with THE ritual. Baptism is NOT a rite of passage.

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That old routine has changed in our church.  
Baptism is no longer age based. Baptism is an invitation for all.

Yes, we directly invite youth, but we No longer wait until they are in grade 11 or 12.  
Moreover, we try to impress upon the youth the significance of the decision. If they are not ready, it is NOT a missed opportunity.  
They can be baptised at any time they want to make that decision to follow Christ.

Baptism is a choice--a mature choice, and it is a powerful ritual.

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You may be wondering, "How is it so powerful?"

Baptism is basically telling God, before witnesses, that "I love you."
It is an act of faith that opens up heaven, bringing down God's Spirit like a dove.

Choosing to repent and to be a follower of Christ is saying,
"I love God's way"
"I love the world and want to make it better"
"I love myself... I love those around me--my supportive community"
And,.....God smiles on that step of faith and declaration.

Choosing God's way is statement of love. It is an act of love .and baptism encapsulates that in a wonderful, symbolic way.

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I will add, when I pour the water during the baptism ceremony, I pour lots of water. I want to make sure the person feels it, really feels it. I trust they will never forget it.

That is my way of saying, "We love you and we are well pleased with you."