

January 9, 2022 | Journey Worship Service

TEXT: [Luke 3:15–22](#)

TITLE: **Remember Your Baptism**

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

Luke only uses two verses to describe the baptism of Jesus. It was preceded by about 15 verses focused on John the Baptist preaching repentance to the crowds near the Jordan River. John used very dramatic language to describe the coming Messiah—someone who'll baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire, someone who'll swing his wooden winnowing fork to separate the chaff from the grain; someone whose sandals John wasn't worthy to unlace. After all that dramatic prologue, the baptism of Jesus is a bit understated. Yes, the heavens opened and the Holy Spirit descended—but not with fireworks and flames, but rather quietly, like a dove. And yes, a voice came from heaven, but not one roaring like thunder to frighten us mortals, but one that spoke gracefully calling Jesus “beloved”, with whom God was well pleased.

When I re-read those verses recently, my attention wasn't drawn to John the Baptist's preaching or even the blessing spoken over Jesus from the heavens. I found myself thinking about that crowd of people standing there on the banks of the River Jordan. They were likely all types there—young and old, women and men, curious, skeptical, hopeful—kind of like us, I imagine. And there in the midst of them all was Jesus, apparently waiting his turn like everyone else. According to scripture, there doesn't appear to be any special treatment shown to Jesus—no parting of the crowds, no express baptismal lane or V.I.P. treatment. He was there with everyone else, waiting to step into the waters of Jordan River.

Let's look at this baptism act first from the perspective of the Judaism practiced by both John and Jesus. I'm not an expert, but I do know that Judaism had a long tradition of ceremonial washings, or “mikveh.” There are three primary times you would be submerged in the waters of a mikveh—if you're converting to Judaism, or getting married, or for women after their menstrual cycle is done. Some Jews immersed themselves before the holy day of Yom Kippur; others went in the mikveh before every Shabbat. There's usually a blessing associated with this act of submersion that begins “Barukh ata Adonai Elohenu melek ha'olam” (Blessed are you, O Lord, our God, ruler of the universe.) Now John's baptism undoubtedly built on that tradition. But his baptism was more than just an act of ritual cleansing. It symbolized a new beginning altogether—a new commitment to God and a renewed participation in the community of God's people actively seeking justice and peace and righteousness for all.

So there they were—this crowd of people listening to John and waiting to step into the waters, and in their midst – waiting patiently in line—was Jesus. If we're going to talk about baptism today, I want to start with that image because it gets to the heart of why baptism is so special. Why was Jesus in that line? He hadn't sinned. His relationship with God was perfect; it didn't need an act of recommitment.

Jesus was baptized out of solidarity with us—who do sin, who do need to recommit ourselves to God, who are often less than patient and certainly less than perfect. We talk about how at Christmas God was incarnate on earth in the baby Jesus—God came to be with us in Christ. Well, the same idea is present right here. Christ was so fully one of us that he stood in line with others and was baptized by John like others, so that we would truly see him as our Savior, the way, truth and the life that leads from earth to heaven.

And that is a big reason why baptism is so special. Not because of the way we do it—whether in church or a swimming pool or the Jordan River. Not because of the amount of water we use—whether sprinkling or pouring or dunking. It is special because Christ did the exact same thing. Because of his solidarity with us, that act pulls us into solidarity, into union, with him—literally with his sinlessness, literally with his burial in the tomb and resurrection from the grave, literally into his newness of life that is a foretaste of the life to come.

That's why we talk about baptism not just as a symbol of our faith, but as a seal of our faith. It makes real what the faith is all about. It doesn't set us apart from others or lift us up over others; it grounds us upon a foundation that is the bedrock of all life. It gives us a core identity as a child of God—something that cannot be swept away or denigrated like the world so often does with its divisive categories around race, gender, age, sexual identity or nationality.

That's also why we only do baptism once in our lives. We can reaffirm what baptism means lots of times—that's fine. But that identity, that solidarity with Christ, that happens with the first drop of water and the first words of a baptismal prayer. Like a dove, like the Spirit's gentle breeze, everything is changed in that moment for good—literally, for good.

Over the years I've performed hundreds of baptisms. I've had times when babies have cried and other times they laughed and splashed in the water. I've had one four year old who refused to come forward, who vetoed her baptism, so we waited until she was a bit older and everything went better the second time. I've baptized a 23-year old in the hospital on life support. I've baptized young adults by immersion in a literal baptismal pool.

I don't remember if I've told this story before, but right out of seminary I served a Presbyterian congregation in Zimbabwe, Africa—a church with six preaching stations. The Mhangura congregation had not had regular preachers able to visit them because they were based in a mining community a long way from the city. After I got to know them, I was told that there were about 20 people—infants and adults who had been waiting to be baptized. So one Sunday I went with my colleague and translator—a young man named Japheth Matekenya—to lead worship there. There was no church for this preaching station, so we met in an outdoor school classroom. After the sermon, when it was time for the baptisms, I invited the children and adults being baptized to come forward. I said a few words, which Japheth translated; but then his voice

changed—and he began to speak quite rapidly and adamantly to the group. At which point about half the mothers holding babies left the classroom entirely. I asked Japheth what was going on. He said that he'd noticed tied around the ankles of many of the babies were small glass beads on leather cords. They weren't jewelry but rather charms purchased from the *n'yangas* that some believed had power to protect the babies from harm. Japheth had been adamant with the women that they were bringing their children to be baptized into Christ Jesus—and they needed to put their full trust and confidence in the Lord and not some magical bracelets. Soon the women and babies returned having cut off the anklets—and for literally the next 20-30 minutes, I was busy offering baptism waters in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

I was a stranger to the Zimbabwean culture and a guest in their country. At that moment, I had to trust what Japheth told me and trust his choices. But that day I realized how easily we each can walk up to the baptismal fountains in our own churches. How easily we can put special gowns on our children, snap photos of the sacrament being administered, laugh and smile at the antics of the babies and then forget about the whole thing. But on that day over 30 years ago, baptism meant a real choice—a stepping away from one reality; a stepping toward another reality, an allegiance to the Christ who lived and died and rose again. Those women who came back into the classroom and handed me their babies taught me never to take baptism for granted—not my own, not anyone else's.

In a moment, Kathryn is going to come forward and offer all of us the chance to reaffirm our baptism vows. It involves a series of four questions: Do you turn from sin and renounce evil? Who is your Lord and Savior? Will you be Christ's faithful disciple? Will you devote yourself to Christ's church? If you want, you can reaffirm your baptism by answering those questions. I hope you will think about what is being asked and think about what you're saying in response. And if you're hesitant at all—or unsure at all—hold onto this good news: Remember that Jesus too was baptized. Jesus too stood with the crowds, in solidarity and love, and waited his turn to step into the waters of the Jordan River. The baptism you're reaffirming is not something you do alone. And keeping the promises you've made—the promises you're recommitting to—will not be something reliant on your own ability and faith. Baptism is the sign of what we believe and the seal of what it's all about. Remember your baptism—and the Savior who is with you always—and rejoice this day and always.

AMEN.