

1 Sermon, January 9, 2011

Texts: Joshua 1:10-15, Matthew 3:13-17

Title: "A New Heart, A New Mind"

1. Intro
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1. Intro

It's not often that I preach about baptism, but it's important to talk about. Baptism is one of two sacraments we United Methodists practice, the other is Holy Communion.

A sacrament is an outward sign of something that God is doing in us. A sacrament is based on something that Jesus himself did, that we do in his honor.

Baptism is an outward sign – water is applied to the body on one of several ways: putting a little bit of water on the forehead, pouring a pitcher over someone's head, or immersing someone completely.

No matter what it looks like on the outside, it's a sign of God doing something within. God is claiming us, naming us, cleansing us, giving us a new community, and even a new heart and mind.

Baptism has so many meanings. Today I want to take you through a little historical journey that I hope will make things clearer.

2. God claims you – return to Jordan/ God's promise

The scripture we read today about the Israelites going over the Jordan river indicates how important the river was to ancient Israel. The Jordan was the last boundary to passing into the land that they believed God had promised to them.

So when Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River, there was a sense of it being a return to the roots of Judaism; a return to the promises of God to the people. When Jesus was baptized there in the Jordan, it was the edge, the boundary to something new. The Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus, and he began his ministry. He began it first by wrestling with temptation.

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So baptism is first of all about the promises of God. Baptism says: God has something in store for you. When you step over this boundary of baptism, you will step into something that God has already claimed for you.

It's this sense that we recognize when we call baptism "Christening." You know how you can Christen a boat, as well as a person. Christening is basically *naming*. You are named as one of God's own. You are a child of promise.

God knows you through and through, and God accepts you into his land, and therefore you have a new name – a Christian name. And in that name being given to you, God claims you.

That's all rolled into the first sense of baptism – being initiated into the promises of God.

3. God cleanses you – John the Dipper

The second sense of baptism comes to us in the person of John the Baptist, preaching and baptizing out in the wilderness, dressed in scratchy stuff and eating bugs.

John the Baptist literally means *John the Dipper*, because John would have people come out into the Jordan River, and according to the oldest traditions, would take some kind of pitcher or water vessel and dip it in the river and dump the water all over your upper body.

Now, John the Dipper's baptism attracted people for miles and miles, and it's only recently that scholars have figured out why. It wasn't because of John's marvelous personality.

It was this way: Being Jewish in those days meant following ritual that could only be performed in the temple. If you had a child, you went and bought two animals at the temple and had them sacrificed. One was a dedication offering, the other was a sin offering. Pious Jews took at least three trips to the temple every year, for the Feast of Booths, the Feast of Weeks, and Passover. At each of those times, the family was supposed to make a sacrifice. Much of the temple ritual was supposed to provide purification from sin.

The total cost could get to be very oppressive, with lodging, time away from work, money changing and the cost of the sacrificial animal. You get the picture. It was really expensive, especially in an economy that didn't use a lot of money, but bartered for many things.

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Then along came John, twenty some miles away, offering an alternative. Instead of expensive sacrifices, you could come at no cost and be baptized in the Jordan. It was a ritual that would wash away your sin, and you only had to do it once. John invited people to repent of their sin, and they could be cleansed.

The Apostle Paul wrote in Romans:

"Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ... We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For whoever has died is freed from sin." Romans 6:3-7, NRSV.

That radical sense that you could be cleansed of your sin is still part of the meaning of baptism. God wants to cleanse you, to take away the hurt and pain of sin. God wants to remove from you the desire for things that hurt and restore you to wholeness, to a fuller relationship.

4. God gives you a new community

And then, along came Jesus. John said Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit.

Not taking away from the meaning of John's baptism, Jesus added to it.

For Jesus, it was all about being part of what God was doing, what he called the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom didn't focus on the negative (sin), but on the positive (new life).

He said, "Those who lose their lives for the sake of the gospel will gain their lives."

He compared the Kingdom to seeds that grow and yeast that makes bread dough rise. He likened the Kingdom of God to a net that caught many fish and a treasure in a field. But it was not about material things; it was about God creating new possibilities inside and among us.

As a sign of new life, Jesus created a new community, one that lived and traveled and enjoyed life and ate with strangers and sinners.

When Jesus talked about baptism, he talked about baptizing and discipling all nations — the whole world.

So baptism is about new life and a new community, all inspired by the Holy Spirit.

The Apostle Paul wrote in Romans:

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"Don't you know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. (Romans 6:3-4)

When we are baptized in Christ, it is not just to sanctify repentance from sin; it's also to place our trust in the Holy Spirit to lead us. The Spirit will lead in sharing our lives with others, in a way that brings joy and peace.

5. Since Jesus

Since the time of the New Testament, baptism has been argued about in many ways:

Is baptism only valid if a person is immersed, or is a little bit of water adequate?

More importantly, is baptism really a sign of God claiming us whether or not we acknowledge it, or is it necessary for us to understand and claim it for ourselves?

It is clear that baptism really is a sacrament: an outward sign of something God is doing invisibly inside and among us. So it's a sign of God at work.

But it's not just God doing something *to* us; we have a part to play, too. We need to come to accept what God is doing, try to understand what God is doing, and even *delight* in what God is doing.

And it's important to remember that it is not just an individual thing in one's own head, but a community thing.

So, in a few moments, I will invite you to come forward as individuals who are part of a community of faith. You may come and wet your finger in the baptismal font, and touch the water to your forehead.

In this way you can claim the promises of God, claim God's power to help you overcome sin, claim new life in Christ, and claim the presence of the Holy Spirit here in this community of faith.

Amen.

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"Then Joshua commanded the officers of the people, "Pass through the camp, and command the people: 'Prepare your provisions; for in three days you are to cross over the Jordan, to go in to take possession of the land that the LORD your God gives you to possess.'" To the Reubenites, the Gadites, and the half-tribe of Manasseh Joshua said, "Remember the word that Moses the servant of the LORD commanded you, saying, 'The LORD your God is providing you a place of rest, and will give you this land.' Your wives, your little ones, and your livestock shall remain in the land that Moses gave you beyond the Jordan. But all the warriors among you shall cross over armed before your kindred and shall help them, until the LORD gives rest to your kindred as well as to you, and they too take possession of the land that the LORD your God is giving them. Then you shall return to your own land and take possession of it, the land that Moses the servant of the LORD gave you beyond the Jordan to the east.'" Joshua 1:10-15, NRSV.