

The Baptism of the Lord, Cycle C

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The Church of Jesus the Good Shepherd

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It was a Sunday in June in 1983 and on that evening my family had gathered at Plain Dealing Baptist Church. They had all come together because my brother, sister and I were going to be baptized. I remember it vividly as if it had only happened yesterday. I can remember the nervousness and trepidation that caused my heart to pound. I remember the feel of the white robe against my skin, the kind smile of Dr. Taylor as beckoned for me to join him in the baptistery. I can remember the shock to my system as the water made contact with my skin. Dr. Taylor urged me to trust him, he assured me that he would not let me drown. He placed one hand behind my head and the other arm I held on to as he covered my nose and mouth with his hand. He then began to speak those ancient words that countless men and women have heard over the centuries as they were washed in the waters of baptism. “I baptize you in the name of the Father and the Son...”

Then my head was plunged beneath the water and I forgot about trust as I struggled for life. I fought him as I tried to retake the surface and then he raised me back up. And although I had not physically died I had died to my old self. Through the waters of baptism I had been purified, sanctified, redeemed, saved and adopted. In that moment I had been made a member of the family of God.

Baptism is the first of the Seven Sacraments that we receive and it is known as a Sacrament of Initiation. It is also the most interesting of all the sacraments because it is the only one that can be celebrated by anyone. All that is necessary for a valid baptism is water and the invocation of the Triune God. It can be celebrated by lay men and women, by priests and bishops by non-Catholics and even in some circumstances by non-Christians. It can be celebrated in Cathedrals and tiny churches, in hospital nurseries and upon battlefields and it has even been known to have been celebrated in a grandmother's bathroom on occasion. Baptisms have been celebrated in mighty rivers and with just the tiniest drop

of water and every one of them carries the same grace and accomplishes the same thing. Through the baptismal waters we are purified, sanctified, redeemed, saved and adopted. Through the baptismal waters the Holy Spirit enters into our lives and dwells in the temples of our bodies. And no matter whether we passed through the baptismal waters at a Methodist Christening, an Episcopal baptism, were immersed in a Baptist baptistery or entered through the Baptismal font of the Catholic Church we have all been made members of the family of God.

Today we celebrate Jesus' own baptism and this feast always causes us to ask the question why was Jesus baptized? He was the Second person of the Triune God and was conceived by the Holy Spirit in the sinless womb of the Blessed Virgin Mary so it is evident that he needed no purification. His blood would sanctify all of humanity so it is clear that he had no need for sanctification. He was sent into the world to redeem all of creation so there is no question that he did not need to be redeemed. He is the savior of the world so he didn't need saving and He is the only begotten son

of the father so it was unnecessary for Him to be adopted. So why did he allow the Baptist to baptize him. The answer is simpler than we think. He went down into the waters of baptism in the River Jordan to purify the waters, to sanctify the waters, to redeem the waters, to save the waters, to adopt the waters, so, that the waters of this earth would be worthy to allow us to be purified, sanctified, redeemed, saved and adopted. Just as every action he did was in service to the people He came to save so to was His baptism.

It is fitting that Jesus would choose water as the outward sign of his saving grace, because water had always figured prominently in God's saving action. It was through the waters of the great flood that God would cleanse creation and with the help of the wood of the Ark he would save humanity. When Israel labored under bondage in Egypt God would send Moses to lead them forth from Egypt. Moses would do so with a wooden staff in his hand as he led them through the waters of the Red Sea from bondage into freedom. And after they had wandered in the wilderness for forty years it would be the Ark of the Covenant made of wood that

would lead Israel through the Jordan into the Promised Land. So as you can see water and wood have always been prominent in God's saving actions of His special possession. And so when the fullness of time had come to send the Incarnate Word into the world to save us He would turn once more to wood and water. This time the wood would be the Cross upon which hung the savior of the world at Calvary and the water would flow from his side when it was pierced by the lance.

Because ultimately the waters of baptism would mean nothing to us if they were not linked to the saving action of Jesus Christ upon the cross. Without the cross the waters of baptism would not have the power to purify, to sanctify, to redeem, to save and to adopt us. We are reminded of this in the baptismal rite itself. One of the great privileges of being a priest is that I am the Ordinary Minister of baptism and I have been able in my short time here to welcome many of your children into the family of God. One of the most powerful lines for me is at the beginning of the Rite when I say these words: "I claim you for Christ our savior by the sign of his

cross.” A few moments later me an unworthy servant of the Lord is allowed to pour water over a child’s head and invoke the Triune God.

Each of us are equally privileged every time we enter the wooden doors of this Church and approach the baptismal font crafted from wood. We dip our finger into that holy water that was purified, sanctified, redeemed, saved and adopted by Christ in the Jordan the day we celebrate today. We lift our finger to our forehead and we invoke the Triune God either silently or out loud and we claim these temples of the Holy Spirit, our bodies, once more for Christ. And after we have partaken of the Holy Food upon this altar we go forth and claim ourselves once more for Christ before we go back into the world. Remember that my brothers and sisters as you go forth today. Remember that you have been claimed by Christ through the sign of His cross. And remember with gratitude and thanksgiving that through the waters of baptism you have been purified, sancitized, redeemed, saved and adopted. And let this knowledge change your life.