

Matthew 3:1-17  
Jan 13, 2008

South Plains  
Baptism of the Lord

### Tattoo of God

Early in the year, right around Epiphany, we celebrate the Baptism of the Lord. Baptism has always been for Christians a mark of commitment, a sign that we belong to God in Jesus Christ, and a reminder of God's commitment to us. The water marks us with an invisible tattoo that can never be washed off. It's the tattoo of God.

Several years ago, I was being driven to the airport by a friend who had just discovered that his daughter, a lovely college student named Jessica, had gotten a tattoo of a sunburst on her ankle. It seems that her favorite cousin was about to be deployed by the army to the Middle East. The cousins decided they would both be tattooed as a sign, a reminder of the bond of kinship they felt for each other. Her father was furious and vowed he would have the tattoo surgically removed. Although I could not sympathize with his anger, I could understand why a permanent mark on his beautiful daughter seemed wrong.

The waters of baptism can be wiped away and dried in a moment's time, but we believe the promises of baptism endure forever. We celebrate the baptism of Jesus for what it tells us about him and about us.

This is one of those Bible stories thick with symbolism and packed with layers of meaning. John the Baptist did not want to baptize Jesus, apparently because he didn't think Jesus needed baptizing. Jesus tells John to do it anyway in order to "fulfill all righteousness." If we know anything about Jesus, we know that righteousness meant more than just fulfilling the requirements of some law. Righteousness for Jesus means a right relationship to God and to other people, keeping not only the letter of God's law, but also the spirit of the will of God.

And what was God's will for Jesus? God wanted Jesus to bring forgiveness to the world, to reconcile the world to Godself, to love the people of the world so unmistakably that anyone could be reconciled to the holy and perfectly loving Creator of the universe. The first step in God's plan was for Jesus to identify himself with people who needed forgiveness and reconciliation. Before someone can accept our help, they need to believe we understand their situation. When Jesus steps into the Jordan River to be baptized, he is stepping into all the problems and guilt of humankind. Jesus was saying, "I am a full participant in the needs and desires, the aches and anguish of ordinary people." People came to John the Baptist because they needed forgiveness for their sins. Baptism was the sign of their repentance and God's forgiveness. When Jesus was baptized, he identified with sinners in need.

Our reading from Isaiah 42 has two nice figures of speech to describe the compassion and tenderness of the servant of the Lord whom we identify with Jesus:

A bruised reed he will not break,

And a dimly burning wick he will not quench.

Whether we have been bruised by others or by our own carelessness, the strength of Jesus will support us. When the light of life grows dim, the spirit of Jesus will fan the spark until the flame grows bright forever. Jesus does not stand above us as one who is unaffected by the passions and wounds of life. He is one with us and for us. That is a piece of what his baptism tells us about Jesus.

What does it tell us about ourselves when we are baptized? Just as baptism was Jesus' way of identifying with us, baptism identifies us with him. First of all, it's the mark of a follower of Christ. Just as that ankle tattoo reminded Jessica of her cousin, baptism reminds us of the bond we have with Jesus, the Son of God. We are baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

The sacrament of baptism includes a profession of faith and a rehearsal of the promises God makes to us.

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations....  
And remember, I am with you always....

As many of you as were baptized into Christ  
Have clothed yourselves with Christ....

All of you are one in Christ Jesus.

You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood.

In baptism God claims us,  
And seals us to show that we belong to God.  
God frees us from sin and death,  
Uniting us with Jesus Christ in his death and resurrection.

By water and the Holy Spirit,  
We are made members of the church, the body of Christ,  
And joined to Christ's ministry of love, peace, and justice.

Baptism, then, first, identifies us with Christ.

Second, baptism identifies us with the people of God, other followers of Christ in need of forgiveness. We get in line with Jesus and all the sinners waiting their turn to get into the muddy waters of the Jordan River and be cleansed.

Baptism initiates us into church, the body of believers. Here's where other people get involved with baptism, and here's where trouble starts, because church is imperfect. Church is a living contradiction. We who make up the church of Jesus Christ are at the same time the best reason for becoming a Christian and the worst advertisement for becoming a Christian. Our hypocrisy is as legendary as our compassion. A cartoon shows two

people with halos, obviously in heaven, happily watching TV. The program they are enjoying is clearly about hell where sinners are being punished.

What is church? Church is the community of people who are baptized only once, but who need forgiveness over and over again. One reason I don't like to be asked when I became a Christian, apart from the fact that I really cannot remember the day of my baptism, is because I find myself needing conversion to Christ over and over again.

Despite the reality of so many sinners in the church, it is only within this community of sinners that we are held accountable for our faith, and find the courage to keep following Jesus. Baptism identifies us first with Jesus himself, and second, with other believers seeking to follow Jesus.

In the third place, baptism identifies us with the mission of Christ in the world. Going into the Jordan with those repentant Jews was the first step in Jesus' vocation. We know little of his life before that moment. But, from that time forward, he was a man on a mission. We are baptized into the work of God, baptized to tell the good news of God's love, baptized to share forgiveness, baptized to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit those in prison and heal the sick.

Baptism starts with a very personal moment when faith is confessed and the promises of the gospel are made to each of us as individuals. But, it cannot stop

with the intimacy of belonging to God in Christ. It thrusts us into the church where faith is nurtured into maturity, and then into the world where faith is practiced, where we sometimes find ourselves broken by the world so that the church becomes a hospital not only for other sinners, but a place where we can be made whole again and again. Baptism commissions us for service.

In a few minutes we'll have our annual congregational meeting, a business meeting with discussion of budgets and building plans and even our first ever meeting as a corporation of the Commonwealth of Virginia. We'll perform those visible rituals decently and in order as well as briefly and succinctly. The invisible reality, however, will be the life of a community of believers on a mission. And, that is something we can never forget. We are baptized to do Christ's mission. South Plains is alive with purpose, the purposes of God in Christ

It's been years since I've heard from my friend who drove me to the airport that day. If I should meet a young woman named Jessica, I would want to look discreetly at her ankle for that sunburst. But whether or not the tattoo has been removed, I suspect she has not forgotten her cousin. She is that kind of person. We cannot recognize Christians on the street because the waters of baptism leave no outward mark. We might know them, however, by their purpose, their mission in life. I pray that is how South Plains will be known, as a people together identified with Christ and his mission.

