

**A Day to Remember**  
**Matthew 3:13-17**  
**January 22, 2017 – Baptism of the Lord**

On the day of Jesus' baptism, the Spirit of God descended upon him like a dove; and a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." The day of Jesus' baptism was a special day for him. It truly marks the beginning of his earthly ministry. And the day of your baptism is rightly a very special days for you. It should be right up there with the day of your wedding, the days of your graduations, birthdays and other special days. I might suggest, if you were confirmed, the day of your confirmation should also be on that list; and, as a pastor, I add the date of my ordination to that very special list of days in my life's journey. But the day we were baptized should be high on all of our lists.

Our 2017 confirmation class will begin meeting next week; and, as a preview, one of the things I always ask the confirmation class to do is find out everything they can about the day they were baptized. They should ask their parents or grandparents, aunts or uncles: "Who was there? Who was the minister? What was I wearing? What was the weather like? Was I crying? What was the service like?"

Some of you were baptized as adults or older children; and you have the blessing of truly remembering the day of your baptism, and that's a real blessing. But, within the United Methodist Church, we typically celebrate an infant baptism. We do that, not out of an Augustinian belief in original sin, but rather out of a profound commitment to the doctrine of prevenient grace. We believe that God showers God grace, God's amazing love, on people even before they know it, even before they are capable of knowing it. Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me," and baptism is one of the ways we bring little children to Christ. Of course, one of the "downsides" of infant baptism is the fact that, as adults, we don't actually remember the blessed event. I usually discourage the taking of photographs during worship services. I find they tend to disrupt the service. But I always encourage parents, grandparents, and relatives to photograph or video baptisms; so that, as the child grows, they can be reminded of their baptism.

So what is baptism really all about? Baptism is an outward and physically sign of inward and spiritual grace. We sometimes talk about baptism as the washing away of our sins. Well, yes, it may be symbolic of that; but our sins were washed away 2000 years ago when Christ died on a cross, and no – as United Methodist, we don't believe one needs to be baptized to enter heaven. God loves all people, the baptized and the unbaptized. We sometimes speak of baptism as initiation into the family of God, another powerful symbol. I sometimes have people ask me to do a private baptism which I will only do under very special circumstances. People will call the church and tell me, I'd like to have my baby baptized. I respond, "Well, I'd be honored to baptize your baby. Can you be in

church a week from Sunday?” “Oh, I don’t want to come to a church service,” they tell me. “Can’t you do this on a Saturday morning?” And I explain to them, “Part of the power of baptism is being surrounded by the Christian community.” Every infant baptism we do in this church is followed by the congregational pledge:

“With God’s help, we will so order our lives after the example of Christ, that this child, surrounded by steadfast love, will be established in the faith, and confirmed and strengthened in the way that leads to life eternal.”

Those are powerful words. They are important words. I pray that they are taken to heart every time they are pronounced.

I had one lady once that asked, “Can’t you do a private baptism?” I explained that we don’t do that. As our conversation continued, I asked, “Where do you live?” and she responded “Wellington.” I said, “There are a lot of churches between here and Wellington, why are you calling me?” She said, “I’ve called every church between you and me, and they have all told me the same thing you’re telling me.”

Indeed, the spirituality of baptism has many facets. When I think of baptism, yes, I think of the cleansing of sins. Yes, I think of the reception into the Christian community. But more than anything else, I think of the Holy Spirit descending like a dove. I think of the Spirit of the Living and Loving God wrapping around that child, whether that child be eight days old or 88 years old. I think of that Spirit loving that child, protecting that child, leading that child, teaching that child. But I’m also reminded that I am one of those children. You are one of those children. The Holy Spirit has descended upon us; and the words that were heard when Jesus was baptized are also words for us: “This is my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased.” “This is my beloved daughter, with whom I am well pleased.” Friends, God loves each and every one of us. God doesn’t always love the things we do. But, God loves each and every one of us, this day and every day; and, how important it is that we remember that at all times and in all places.

I mentioned a few months ago that every morning as Martin Luther was preparing for the day, he would look in the mirror, put his hand on his head and say to himself, “You are baptized.” What’s he saying? He’s saying, “God loves you.” I’m reminded of the great twentieth century German theologian Karl Barth. Barth has written dozens of books, heavy volumes of systematic theology. But one day, somebody said, “Herr Barth, can you summarize all of that theology for me?” Barth responded, “Jesus loves me, this I know; for the Bible tells me so.” We all learned that song as children; but, how often we forget it.

So, today, as we remember the baptism of our Lord, we also remember our own baptisms. In a moment, I will invite you to come forward. I will put a drop of water on your forehead in the sign of the cross, and you will hear the words

“Remember your baptism and be thankful.” As you hear those words, remember the love that God has for you. Remember that nothing in heaven or on earth can ever separate you from that love. You are a child of God’s and with you God is well pleased. This day and every day, remember your baptism and be thankful.

In closing, I tell everyone: If you have never been baptized or if you’re not sure that you have been baptized, (whether you’re eight or eighty-eight), I would be honored to administer the sacrament to you. Please don’t hesitate to contact me to arrange for baptism.

Let us pray. . .

Most holy Lord,  
May we this day remember our baptisms;  
and may we remember those words –  
“You are my beloved, and with you I am well pleased.”  
Amen.