

Baptized: Now the Work Begins
Seattle First Baptist Church
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Matthew 3:13-17 (NRSV)

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he consented. And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

We just finished the Christmas season. Last Sunday was Epiphany and the wise people or Magi visited the holy family and brought gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. In her sermon Pastor Anita rightly questioned whether these were the right gifts for a young family living in exile. More likely they were appropriate for a king living in a palace. But Jesus, the king of kings and Lord of Lords, was born in a barn not a palace. And, like many people in our cities today had no place to call home or lay his head even during his active years of ministry.

Well, we are still in this season of Epiphany where we are challenged to explore the new things and perhaps surprising things God is doing in our lives. This Sunday we have to fast forward about 28 years in Jesus’ life. In our text today, Jesus begins his public ministry. We have no idea what Jesus was really like between the ages of 2 and 30. We have a brief story in the gospel of Luke about when Jesus was 12 years old. His family had attended the Passover in Jerusalem and was on their way home when they couldn’t find Jesus. After three frantic days of searching, his parents found him in the Temple hanging out with the religious teachers listening and asking questions.

Mary and Joseph were annoyed and relieved their son was safe, yet Jesus precociously wanted to know why all the fuss. Didn't they know he would be about heavenly things and Divine purposes?

Now, Jesus is all grown up here in Matthew's gospel and is about to step out in faith and embrace the life he was sent to live. Jesus and John were not strangers. Their family connections went way back. Mary, Jesus' mother, went to Elizabeth, John's mother after the angel told Mary she would become pregnant and give birth to the son of the Most High God. As an adult, Jesus was very familiar with John and his work of encouraging people to turn their lives around and follow God's way.

John recognized Jesus' purpose and ministry and was reluctant to baptize him. John said, I'm the one who needs to be baptized by you. John baptized those who were turning from their mean, selfish, lawless, and immoral ways. Baptism was the ritual signaling they were turning toward living lives of love and justice. Jesus was not mean nor lawless, nor immoral, and was already filled with love and compassion. So, John was a bit perplexed as to why Jesus wanted John to baptize him.

As we look into the text we see that Jesus' baptism was not about repentance and sin. It was about submission, obedience, and stepping into his destiny. Even at the beginning of his ministry, Jesus is signaling a new thing. He put new meaning on an old ritual. He flipped the meaning of his baptism. Just because we have done things a certain way for years, doesn't mean we have to keep doing them that way. Jesus put a new spin on an old activity—baptism.

Jesus' baptism was his public declaration of saying yes to walking the path created for him. His coming out if you will. Jesus came to show us a better way to live with our

sisters and brothers and a better way to be in relationship with God. Jesus had a purpose, and at the age of 30 took the first step toward that purpose. That my sisters and brothers is an epiphany—taking that first step toward a new call of God.

Baptism marks a spiritual decision to change one's life and follow God's path. In Baptist tradition, we baptize those who are of the age to know what that decision means and those who purposefully trust God with their whole lives. I was 9 years old when I was baptized. I knew at a young age, that there was a path to God I wanted to take. I knew there was something about the Bible, the word of God, that called to me. So I was baptized at a Sunday night Service in December.

When we say yes to follow the way of Jesus and live our lives for God, we don't do that lightly. Hopefully, serious thought, prayer, and perhaps even fasting has taken place. Following God's purpose for our lives can be scary, hard, confusing, and at times painful. I speak from personal experience.

Being one of the first African American women in the Northwest to be ordained in a mainline denomination in the early 80's had its rough to brutal moments. I was invited to be the woman's day speaker at St. Paul Baptist Church in Boise, ID. In many Black churches, Women's Day is big...almost as big as Easter. So, I didn't know much about the church but was honored and graciously accepted the invitation and looked forward to being the Women's Day speaker. I was seriously taken aback when a music stand was placed on the floor for me to deliver my message. Then, I was told that women were not allowed in their chancel area nor allowed to speak from their pulpit. I was stunned, but God's grace is sufficient. I used the music stand and preached my heart out.

In life's hard moments, we remember our baptism, regain our equilibrium, and steady our focus. And, we call upon God's grace and mercy to keep us on the right path toward our goal and purpose.

In our Baptist tradition, we are baptized once, but our epiphanies may be many. As we gain new insights about God and new awareness of the path we are to take, we experience new epiphanies. Throughout our lives, situations will arise where we consciously must choose to follow the way of Love. And, when we say yes God, I'll follow you. Yes, God I'll trust you. Yes, God I give you my life—that means life is no longer about ***me, myself, and mine***. It no longer matters if I get to sit in my favorite pew in worship. It no longer matters that the new neighbors speak Spanish or Arabic. Yes, we can sing more than just the music I like in worship. After being baptized into the family of God, life is communal. We are our sisters and brothers keepers. The circle of inclusion becomes much bigger.

Being a church member and following the way of Jesus are two very different things. One is about membership and paying dues. The other is about transforming and changing lives. We are baptize to serve not to sit. Baptism is not a badge of membership. It is a call to work.

We do not have many baptisms at SFBC. But this week I heard one person suggest we have a baptismal Sunday where we open the pool and baptize on the spot all who want to outwardly express their decision to follow Jesus.

There is nothing magical about baptism. It is a ritual—an outward sign of an inward spiritual commitment. Baptism won't save anyone from the fires of hell (as some may have been taught). Truth is, one can go into the water a dry devil and come out a wet

devil. Baptism, symbolizes a choice to put God first in our lives. When we do that, the real work begins.

The work of feeding the hungry; clothing the naked; visiting those who are sick and in prison; speaking truth to power; saving the planet; reducing our carbon footprint; voting; housing the homeless; educating all our children; caring for the old; having affordable medical and housing for all, and loving all creatures great and small.

If you are baptized—this is your mandate! Jesus' baptism is mentioned in all four gospels. Undisputedly, Jesus was baptized by John. If we are a people committed to following the way of Jesus our mandate is to be baptized and then get on with the work of changing lives and offering hope in places of despair.

And Lord knows we need hope today. I am not feeling safer in 2020 that I was in 2019. War and hatred are all over the planet. One error in judgement fueled by hatred caused a plane load of folks to parish needlessly this week. We need to be hope when there is no other hope around. We who follow the way of Jesus cannot be filled with despair everyday. Having a bad day is being human. But we know that God can make a way out of no way and God can do anything but fail. If we who know God is real have no hope, who will have hope that tomorrow will be better than today.

Lastly, when Jesus came out of the water, the heavens opened and the Spirit of God descended and touched him. And a voice from heaven said, this is my beloved with whom I am well pleased.

When we take that step of faith, heaven rejoices and we too will hear the heavenly host say, ***You are my beloved. I am pleased with the step you have taken.*** God didn't

stop talking 2000 years ago. God/ Spirit/ Love speaks to us all the time. If we want to hear from heaven, we only have to open our hearts and listen for God and to God.

My invitation to you this morning is this, if you have not been baptized, but have made that spiritual internal commitment to follow the way of Jesus, we would like to honor that commitment by baptizing you. Let me know, or talk with Pastor Tim or Pastor Anita. We will make that happen in the next few weeks. For you are God's beloved and God is pleased with the steps of love and justice you have made. You are my beloved.

And, I will close using the words of Pastor Tim, and today if you hear that voice calling you beloved, do not harden your hearts.

Please join in singing our closing hymn #293 There's a Sweet, Sweet Spirit