

Providence Presbyterian Church
Rev. Dr. David Pettit
January 9th, 2022
Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

In the liturgical calendar, today celebrates the baptism of our Lord. It warrants the question of why? What was Jesus' baptism about? What did it mean? What did it do? In Matthew's gospel, John would protest that Jesus is one doing the baptism, that it is unnecessary and awkward for John to baptize Jesus. And we might agree. So it warrants the question of why, and what it meant or accomplished.

I grew up in a tradition where baptism was of prime importance. Therefore, I was baptized in a swimming pool when I was 15. These were Baptist-types and they were serious about baptism. And if your church didn't have a baptismal pool, that is how you did it. Water. That was all you needed, deep enough to be dunked in. It was Alicia Minard's pool, just up the road from our house. Alicia and I were the same age. We grew up in the church together, spent a number of years in the same school. I had a crush on Alicia Minard from about the age of 4. It was a secret crush. Meaning, I did not speak about it. But that may have been the only secret part about it. I was an awkward kid. Alicia was not.

Nonetheless, I was baptized in Alicia Minard's pool on a Sunday afternoon, in front of the church as they gathered around this chlorinated body of water sometime in July, within the 6-week window when owning a swimming pool in Western NY seemed like a good idea. Believer's baptism, as it was called, wherein the meaningfulness of one's baptism was located in one's willingness to obey the call to be baptized, and in one's public profession of having decided to believe and follow the Christ. Evangelicals, Baptists, and other western thinking believers tend to be squeamish about rituals. Back in Western NY it was clear that part of the reason for this is that we didn't want to be like the Catholics. So, the emphasis was always on obedience, sincerity, belief, decisions, and character. Therefore at age 15, I publicly declared my commitment and affection for the Christ before all in Alicia Minard's pool. I publicly professed what was considered already true. The baptism was an act of obedience that made my commitments public.

As I have traversed across denominational traditions in my journey, and as I have sat in many a theology class, Baptism has often been a topic of debate, and point of difference between traditions. There is always the question of who is more true to scripture, always an enjoyable and charitable conversation (note my sarcasm). But the real question, it seems to me, is this: Is it meaningful in what it reflects, or in what it enacts (or what it brings about)? When I was dunked in the chlorinated waters by Pastor English it was seen to be a reflection of commitments already made. It reflected something. It reflected by faith and discipleship journey. But, even though this wasn't the emphasis there, baptism enacted something for me as well. I was now no longer just a child of church members, but a member myself.

We western thinkers who tend to be low on ritual and we usually emphasize what an act reflects more than what it enacts. Because we don't believe in magic really. We don't think a ritual actually does anything, even though most of us didn't considered ourselves married until an official said, "I now pronounce..."

But in the tradition that John the Baptist is coming from, the tradition where the Jordan River is a boundary to the promised land, where the Jordan valley is this wilderness kind of space, there is a considerable emphasis on what Jesus' baptism enacts, what it brings about, and therefore, suggesting why it is necessary and meaningful. Baptism, for John, and the many who come out to him, and for Jesus when he insists on being baptized himself, reflects their commitments and concerns for God's people, for the covenant, for a faithful people living in the land. But it also enacted a new commitment, a willingness to turn and to be available and to be faithful. After many years of living as an adult and a person of the faith, this baptism reflected and enacted a change in that faith, a new direction.

Furthermore, such a ritual performed in the Jordan River, for a figure like Jesus, may have had an elevated role, more than for the average joe or jane that was baptized by John. Because such a ritual for a rising figure seemed to be a type of rite of passage, a rite that moves one from one status to another status. A rite of passage in the sense that it usually happens in a liminal space, an in-between space, a non-descript space where titles and status are not regarded. You have to go out to this non-normal environment. This rising figure has to be stripped of any status for the moment. This is why John has to baptize Jesus, so that Jesus is lower in status. And by going down, being dunked in the water, and being stripped of status, you then rise up, return to normal spaces, but with a new status, with a new identity.

In the process of Jesus' growing and coming into his own identity, and moving closer to his ministry years, he undergoes this rite of passage. To become and to be seen as an important figure in God's purposes, he must do this. And to undergo this rite, he must go out from his hometown, go out into the Jordan valley. And by undergoing the rite, he is raised from the water with a new identity and status. It enacts something, and what it enacts is proclaimed in part by the voice coming from heaven: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Jesus is becoming something new, though it is still being discerned by those around Jesus exactly who that is, exactly what he is becoming. But this moment marks publicly that there are changes going about in Jesus, and it enacts publicly this shift into a new status, a new identity.

You see, this is part of what we rational western thinkers lose about ritual and rites of passage – the sense of what they enact, both personally and socially. Have you ever gone through some kind of rite of passage? If you have it may have been in an organization like the boy scouts or girl scouts, or the military perhaps. More "traditional" cultures have rites of passage that mark and enact transitions and changes as one grows. The rite of passage enacts a transition. This person is no longer a child or an adolescent, but is an adult. Now an adult may still have moments of acting like an adolescent, but that does not mean they are back to being an adolescent. No, because they have become an adult through the rite.

Rites help form identity. They signify that this adolescent is no longer a child, but an adult. This person is no longer an alien, but a citizen. This adherent is no longer just participating but is a member. Rites of passage. Ritual. They are significant for these reasons. They mark transitions. They help shape identity.

Now as evangelically influenced western believers, we are a little skeptical of ritual and rites of passage. We are more reliant on sincerity and performance, and character and such things. And it

is true that one can prove their status through actions rather than some liturgy or ritual. But the problem is that these require constant performance, constant maintenance. They are susceptible to constant fluctuation, liable to different standards of whether you have measured up or not. If your identity as a follower of Christ is dependent on your performance, then your identity will always be somewhat slippery. It will be always somewhat vulnerable, and fluctuating. You may measure up one day, and not the next. But, if there was a ritual that enacted your place, that enacted your discipleship at some point. Then at least you know something—It is not subject to question in the same way. It is. It is true until some other ritual undoes it. You are a citizen. You are a child of God. You are a disciple of Christ. You are a member. You are loved. You are forgiven.

The ritual enacts something in the view of all, which was just as important for Jesus as everybody else, that he was no longer just a young man of Nazareth, but anointed for a special purpose. That he was not just a child of Mary, but a child of God, not by constant performance, but by pronouncement. That Jesus was anointed by God, not by some accomplishment, but by the virtue of God's calling solidified through the rite, and announced and enacted by the voice that said, "you are my beloved, in you I am well pleased." It is true.

Certain things can't be questioned in the same way anymore. Because the ritual has been performed, like becoming a citizen or member or a minister, or a deacon or an elder. Because a voice outside ourselves has said it is true.

Baptism in our Presbyterian tradition has a different form, but a similar emphasis and an equally valid effect. In our tradition, we tend to baptize people when they are infants, or children. Our kids were baptized as such, even though I was not. For the emphasis in our tradition is that you are declared a child of God by virtue of the ritual, of the rite of passage, even though you may be a squealing little kid and you don't know what is going on. You are baptized and declared a child of God not by your own will, but by the desire and will of God, and your parents, and the community of love and support. So like it or not, you are a child of God. Certain things cannot be questioned in the same way anymore, because they have been enacted. So, whether you turn out to be a saint, or a brat, it matters not. And even on days when I am not impressed with my children's performance, I am reminded that the truths of their baptism still hold, they are loved and cherished, and are children of the most high, and it would be good for my thoughts and comments to reflect that.

Now the part of our Presbyterian tradition that tends to get criticized by the pious is that it creates a complacency. The frozen chosen. You don't have to work for anything, you assume it. And you may not feel it in the same way because it wasn't your decision. Such disinterest or complacency is possible, but not part of the design. Instead, we are supposed to see ourselves as living into our identity, living up to the truths Christ has declared for us and that have been enacted. We are supposed to live in gratitude for the grace extended to us. Is that not central to our faith, that we are living into what God has already granted, not trying to achieve through works and effort?

Now despite the Baptist emphasis in my growing-up years on what baptism reflects, about what is proven true before the public event, as I look back to my own baptism in Alicia Minard's pool, I think it did enact something for me. It was a type of transition from a nominal Christian, or

inherited faith, to a type of clarified identity and commitment. I was now a follower of Christ and I took it seriously, and it has shaped the last thirty years of my life.

I can compare that to my unconfessed affection for Alicia Minard, that forever remained in the realm of nebulosity and confusion. I suspect that she knew I liked her, though she never gave me the slightest hint that she reciprocated my feelings. At least not in a way that an awkward teenager would have discerned or trusted. I don't remember her ever being baptized either. She and her commitments always remained a mystery. She was elusive, the way many unsolidified things remain elusive—like identity, and confidence, and commitments, and affections, and a sense of belonging.

We tend to spend a good deal of time questioning things. Whether we have, can, or will live up to expectations, our own or somebody else's. We question whether we belong, whether we are liked, whether we are loved. And this is where we need to be reminded that certain things are true because they have been enacted and pronounced, not because we have been good enough, or done the right things. It is because a voice has said, "you are my child," "you are forgiven," "you are loved." The voice from heaven declared for Jesus his place, confirmed his new identity, and propelled him to live into that new role.

God has declared your place as well. It is true. So, trust it. And live like it.

And all God's people said...

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

¹⁵ As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, ¹⁶ John answered all of them by saying, “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷ His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

The Baptism of Jesus

(Mt 3:13–17; Mk 1:9–11; Jn 1:29–34)

²¹ Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, ²² and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”