

First Presbyterian Church
Matthew 3:13-17, “Plunged for a Purpose”
by Pastor Matt Johnson 1/8/2023

When I was nearly 18 years old and a senior in high school in 1994,
I contemplated what the next year would entail.

A final summer of exterior house painting,
hanging out with my friends, and then packing my bags
to move to Seattle as a freshman at the UW.

Along with all the excitement of moving from Brush Prairie, WA to Seattle
came some trepidation. Not just about the city, but about my faith.

What would my faith be like in a new community?

How would I grow? What temptations would I face
in a big city away from my parents?

It struck me that I had never been baptized.

I had been raised in the church, believed in Jesus my whole life,
prayed to receive Jesus into my heart as a child,

helped out with leading Bible studies in youth group...
but I was never baptized.

So I joined a class with a number of others at the First Church of God
in Vancouver who met with Pastor Marvel.

(Yes, my childhood pastor was named Pastor Marvel.)

One Sunday after the class, I was in a white robe in a secret room with doors
that opened up to the sanctuary.

And there in front of God and everybody I was fully immersed
in the waters of baptism three times in the name
of the Triune God of grace.

After that, I was finally ready to leave home for Seattle.

Through baptism the church had publicly established my identity
as one who belongs to Jesus. I had been plunged for a purpose.

That is just as true for someone baptized as an infant or at any other age,
whether you were sprinkled, splashed, or dunked.

We have been plunged for a purposed.

If you have been baptized, what does your baptism mean to you?

How does your baptism function in your life today?

If you have not been baptized, have you ever considered why?

Few people join the Presbyterian church because they are in love with the polity (the rules and principles for church life) found in the Book of Order.

But perhaps even fewer people are aware that
there are many passages of striking depth and power
found in this living document which guides our life
together as Presbyterians.

The section on baptism in W-2.3001 notes that...

Baptism is the **sign** and **seal** of incorporation into Christ. Jesus through his own baptism identified himself with sinners in order to fulfill all righteousness. Jesus in his own baptism was attested Son by the Father and was anointed with the Holy Spirit to undertake the way of the servant manifested in his sufferings, death, and resurrection.

(Book of Order W-2.3001)

This gets us into some theological lingo right away (which is in bold above).

To begin with, “sign” refers to the idea that baptism is a *sign* of God’s work in the world.

For an example, think of a sign you might see on the road that says,
“Historical Landmark Ahead – 1 mile.”

This sign isn’t the historical landmark itself.

It just points to the fact that there is a historical landmark up ahead.

In the same way, baptism itself isn’t the important thing—
what *God does* in the lives of his people
is the important thing baptism points to.

And what is it that God does? He gives us a new source of identity:

A communal identity of those entrusted with the mission of God
in the world.

Secondly, “seal” refers to the idea that when this sign of God’s work is present,
then the Holy Spirit has sealed the promises of God to the baptized person.

This use of the word “seal” is like the old stamp of authentication
that a king or queen might put on official correspondence.

Today when we need this we go to a notary public
to get a document authenticated.

In baptism we get God's guarantee that his promise of relationship with Jesus (or "incorporation into Jesus" as the paragraph puts it) is offered to the baptized person. So baptism is like God's notary public. It is a seal that authenticates God's invitation for this person to join his covenant people.

Here are some final words from the Book of Order that nicely summarize what happens in baptism.

The body of Christ is one, and Baptism is the bond of unity in Christ. As they are united with Christ through faith, Baptism unites the people of God with each other and with the church of every time and place. Barriers of race, gender, status, and age are to be transcended. Barriers of nationality, history, and practice are to be overcome.

Baptism enacts and seals what the Word proclaims: God's redeeming grace offered to all people. Baptism is God's gift of grace and also God's summons to respond to that grace. Baptism calls to repentance, to faithfulness, and to discipleship. Baptism gives the church its identity and commissions the church for ministry to the world.

(Book of Order W-2.3001)

Notice that last line, "Baptism gives the church its identity and commissions the church for ministry to the world."

This is the bit that's been taken away from us –
we no longer walk around with a deep sense
of being the baptized people of God.

Instead, baptism is like a picture in an old photo album that we can pull out and get nostalgic about, but it has no impact on our way of being from day to day, our sense of self.

Our identity has been stolen, and it's been replaced
with the burdens of guilt and shame and
needing to be more and do more,
and as a result the life of faith
appears to be much less than it ought.

So what about Jesus and his baptism?

The baptism of Jesus reveals the power and purpose of our own.

OPEN UP THE MATTHEW 3 TEXT.

“Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan River to be baptized by John.”

So begins our reading in the lectionary.

But we miss the whole point of what Jesus is doing there
if we haven't read the verses leading up to this passage.

Jesus' own baptism is prefaced by the ministry of John the Baptist,
who announced himself as one who was preparing the way for the Lord,
making straight paths for God's chosen servant (as Isaiah puts it)
or the Anointed One, the Messiah...and generally
weirding people out with his Old Timey Prophet outfits.

People came to him and were baptized by him and repented of their sins.

Typically, this is where our summary review of 3:1-12 end,
and we feel sufficiently prepared to read about Jesus' baptism.

But what our typical summary neglects is that John
was not just helping individual people,
he was creating a community.

John was not trying to make a difference
one baptism at a time, instead he was laying out the
identity markers for a people.

A peculiar kind of people who (together) would submit themselves to the Messiah,
or the Anointed One of God.

When we come to 3:13-17, we have certain questions:

- Why would Jesus need to be baptized?
- What had Jesus to repent of?
- What promises from God would Jesus need to receive?

Even John has this question. In v. 14, he tries to stop Jesus, and says,
“I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?”

And in truth, Jesus had no need of baptism...as an individual.
But he did need to be baptized as the representative of a community.
The community that John was gathering together
here planned to submit itself to the Messiah -- but here,
the holy Messiah submits to and identifies with
the conditions of the sinful community.
Jesus' baptism brings us face to face with the scandal of the incarnation,
the blasphemous idea that Holy God, the eternal spirit,
would become like us – knowing touch, weakness, and even death.

And so we see here a great reversal of terms,
and a filling full of Isaiah's servant song –
God has not sent a servant to redeem Israel,
but this servant takes on the repentance of Israel
and in so doing establishing the identity
of those who belong to God.

Some of you will have heard of Hudson Taylor and the China Inland Mission.
In the late 19th century many western missionaries traveled to China
to share the story of Jesus, but most of them maintained
their western culture and lifestyle while they were there.

They wore western clothes and ate western food.
They lived among the Chinese people but did not identify with them.
They were more emissaries of Western culture and colonialism
than they were of Jesus.

Hudson Taylor broke ranks. He identified with the Chinese people.
He wore Chinese clothes. He ate Chinese food.
He did everything he could to identify with Chinese people.

In all of this, Hudson had learned well from Jesus,
who didn't come just to give us information,
who didn't come just to perform a salvation magic trick on Easter,
but to *identify with us* and to provide a core identity
for a new community of God followers.

NT Wright: "The primary purpose of baptism is not what it does to the individual,
but how it defines the community." REPEAT.

This is true for us today: We are the people of God
baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
It was true for Jesus. His baptism defined the community
as one that Jesus personally identified with, and as a result,
the life Jesus lived was as a representative of this people.
The people also needed to see that God was at work in Jesus.
And so Matthew lets us in on this amazing moment
that follows the baptism of Jesus.

When he comes up out of the water,
heaven opens up and Jesus sees the Spirit of God descend like a dove,
landing upon him.

And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love;
with him I am well pleased.”

God is not attempting to save us from sin
like a huge game of whack-a-mole.
It’s not stamp out one sin after the next,
and save one sinner after the next,
so that we can all individually conquer sin
and individually know God
and individually help people by being nice.

If that’s what our faith is like, then we’ve had our identity stolen!
No – God is inviting us to join a people
and gain our identity through belonging.

The people who submit to life under the grace of Jesus Christ,
who are marked by the sign and seal of baptism,
who share in the identity of Christ as the beloved children of God.

This is why Jesus was baptized.
So that we might know who we are, and whose we are.
That we might have a strong and clear identity as a community
of faith that helps us navigate through life in every stage.
That we might share in Jesus’ purpose of creating communities
which reveal God’s self-giving love to the world.