

Something Old, Something New
Isaiah 42:1-9, Matthew 3:13-17
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When you read the Gospels, one of the things that is noticeably missing are stories about Jesus from the years between his birth and the beginning of his public ministry which tradition says he probably began at around the age of 30. There is the story that Luke tells about the time when he was 12 and he traveled to Jerusalem with his parents for the Passover festival and got left behind, but that's it. At the beginning of the year, the liturgical calendar follows the pattern of the Gospels so after the birth story that we remember at Christmas and the visit from the Wise Men that is commemorated on Epiphany Sunday, the church calendar invites us to remember Jesus's baptism.

Remembering the story about Jesus's baptism may be easier for a lot of you than it is to remember your own baptism since probably a lot of you were baptized as infants. I do happen to remember my baptism because mine happened when I was around 7 or 8 years old. On the day of my baptism, I remember sitting near the front of the church with my parents and our pastor's daughter who was my friend. I remember standing at the baptismal font, and when I was baptized, I was overwhelmed with a wave of emotion and started to cry. I don't know what thoughts, if any, went along with the emotion, but my spirit was affected in some way. Then, when the last prayer was said and we went back to the pew, I remember that my friend, the pastor's daughter (it's always the pastor's kids), laughed at me because I was crying. I probably felt a little embarrassed at the time, but I don't mind because it's one piece of what helps me remember the day all these years later.

I know sometimes people wish they could, but it is ok if you don't remember your baptism. Just because you don't remember it, it was no less effective or significant. What is important is knowing that you have been baptized, and what it's important to *remember* are two things. One is that God did something real for you at the time of your baptism, and the second is that what God did then is meant to shape the way you respond to God and live your life now. We can remember these things anytime, but we get a special opportunity and reminder to remember them when we have a baptism in church or on this day when we are remembering the baptism of our Lord.

One question that might come up in your mind when you remember Jesus's baptism is the question that John the Baptist asked. Why did Jesus even need to be baptized? If baptism is a sign of repentance and a symbol of the washing of sins, why was it important for Jesus? Part of the answer is that Jesus submitted himself to baptism as a way of identifying with the people he came to save. He came as a true Israelite, and he would represent God's people even as he lived a human life as one of them. God had promised that salvation would come for all people through Israel, through one of David's descendants. This was one reason for his baptism, but there was another. There was no sin that needed to be washed away and nothing from which he needed to repent, but John was convinced to do the baptizing when Jesus told him that it needed to be done to "fulfill all righteousness." When Jesus said that, he didn't mean that his baptism was like a box that he needed to check off so that he could say that he had obeyed all of the rules and requirements of the law – there was no law requiring baptism. Instead, he was referring to the fulfillment of God's saving purposes that the prophets, like Isaiah, had announced hundreds of years earlier. We heard these words in our reading from Isaiah 42 a few minutes ago. "Here is my servant," the Lord said through Isaiah. "I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations." To the servant, the Lord said through Isaiah, "I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness." When Jesus told John that he needed to be baptized by John to fulfill all righteousness, he

was expressing his faith and conviction that God was about to fulfill those promises through him and by being baptized he was showing his willingness to submit to God's purpose for his life. God confirmed that that was what was happening with the sign of the Spirit descending like a dove on Jesus and with the words "this is my Beloved Son with whom I am well pleased." Jesus's baptism marked the formal beginning of his mission and ministry which was the beginning of the new thing that God had promised to do.

Jesus's baptism was unique because Jesus is unique. He is the only Son of God, the only one anointed as the everlasting King and light to the nations, the only one who fulfills all righteousness by becoming a servant, but because *his* baptism marked the beginning of the era of grace and salvation and re-Creation that God promised to bring through God's anointed Servant, each one of us – every person from every nation – has the opportunity to have a new beginning and to participate in the new life that Jesus makes possible. Whether you remember your baptism, how old you were, or where it took place, or the minister that sprinkled you with water, when you were baptized God confirmed that new life and a new beginning are available through Jesus and God confirmed that God wanted you to be included.

Though you may not have a conscious memory of it, this is what God did for you when you were baptized. God claimed and identified *you* as a beloved son or daughter and made you a part of the new family of God. When you were baptized, God gave *you* the gift of the Holy Spirit so that you would be empowered to leave the sinful and broken patterns of this world behind and follow the pattern of Jesus's life. This is what God did for you, and your response to God's kindness was like Jesus's response at his baptism. Like Jesus submitted himself to God's call and purpose for his life at his baptism, you did the same. Now you might say, "I was a baby. I didn't consciously believe, or agree, or submit to anything!" and that is true if you were a baby, but your parents who presented you for baptism believed and agreed on your behalf until you reached an age when you had the capacity to respond on your own. At some point, maybe when you went through Confirmation or at some other time in your life, your faith became your own as did your response and commitment to Jesus.

After Jesus was baptized, he never turned away from his commitment to fulfill his role as the servant to and representative of God's people. When he was tempted by the devil in the wilderness to abandon God's call and serve himself, he didn't turn away. When he faced opposition to his teaching, and faced rejection, and was arrested and falsely accused of wrongdoing, he never failed to remain faithful and obedient to God in all things. Many of us are like Jesus in that we have passed through the waters of baptism which identified us as God's beloved and chosen children and marked the beginning of our new lives and our willingness to submit to and obey God, but *unlike* Jesus, once we say yes to God, we aren't always successful in resisting temptation, and *unlike* Jesus sometimes we get lazy in our pursuit of God's call, and *unlike* Jesus sometimes we are prone to wander off the course that God has laid out for us. It is true, and you probably know from experience, that even the baptized can move away from God, and we are capable of making wrong decisions and behaving in ways that are inconsistent with our new identity and calling. When that happens, what does it mean? Does it mean that God has left us or given up on us? Does it mean that we have lost our chance to be included in God's kingdom? Does it mean that grace is no longer available to us? Shame may cause us to feel like the answer to those questions is yes, but it is in our baptism that we find the assurance that God is faithful to us even when we are faithless.

Going off course and sometimes hardening our hearts and giving in to the urge to resist Jesus and his way is part of being human. Thankfully, God is supremely patient with us when we stumble and lose our way, but this is also why it is so important that we regularly do what this particular Sunday in the liturgical year leads us to do. Our tendency to fall back on our commitment, and to get lazy in our discipleship is why we need to regularly remember the baptism that tells us that we always have been and always will be chosen and loved and that by the grace of God we have been given a new life and the power of the Holy Spirit who enables us to live that new life. Remembering our baptism reminds us that

God's faithfulness to us never needs to be renewed, but our faithfulness and commitment to God needs to be renewed again and again.

On this Sunday that falls so close to the beginning of a new year when we might naturally do some reflecting on who we've been or how we've been living and any changes or corrections that we might want to make, remembering our baptism reminds us that we aren't just living for ourselves or trying to make the life that we want for ourselves. We are reminded that God has made a commitment to us, and in turn, we have made a commitment to God. God has made a commitment to rescue us from sin and darkness and destruction and to give us brand new lives, and we have agreed that to follow and submit ourselves to Jesus in living the way he shows us to live. When we reflect on our lives, and actions, and attitudes, and behaviors, and if we allow the Holy Spirit to search our hearts and reveal to us the places where we are not aligned with Jesus in thought, or word, or deed, we are invited to repent and seek forgiveness and recommit ourselves to Jesus and his way. We are invited to remember and claim our identity as the sons and daughters of God and to recommit to living in ways that reflect that identity and are consistent with it.

When I want to examine myself and my life in this way, one of the places that I go to in Scripture is Galatians where the Apostle Paul contrasts life lived in the flesh- which basically means living how we feel like living without regard for Jesus's teaching and influence – and life lived through the Spirit who lives within us. In Galatians 5:16-21 Paul says, **¹⁶Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. ¹⁷For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. ¹⁸But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. ¹⁹Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, ²⁰idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, ²¹envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these.** That's a good list of things that Jesus has invited us to leave behind, and if we are finding that any of those seem to be a regular part of our lives, we can begin again and recommit to following Jesus and living the life he leads us to live with help from the Spirit. When we are living by the Spirit, we will see more of what Paul describes in the next part of the passage. In verses 22-26 he says, **²²By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, ²³gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. ²⁴And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. ²⁵If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. ²⁶Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another.**

As I come to a close, I'm aware that there could be someone listening today who is here in the room or maybe watching online who is saying, "I've never been baptized. I wasn't baptized as a baby, I haven't been baptized as an adult. I can't remember something that never happened. What does any of this have to do with me?" If you haven't been baptized yet, it isn't too late. It's never too late to make a new beginning. God has already promised that you are loved and that there is a spot for you in God's family and in the kingdom that Jesus brings, and God would love to confirm that for you in baptism. Jesus's invitation to leave old and destructive ways behind and to live a new, Spirit-filled life under his influence and leadership is available to you at any time. Don't wait to embrace and receive God's gifts of love, and mercy, and new life that are available to you in Christ, and if you've already embraced God's gifts but have gotten off track, don't wait to turn back and recommit your life to Jesus. The life that he offers is too good to miss. Amen.