

The Baptism of Jesus: A Transformative Encounter
Sunday, January 7, 2024

I'm sure ministers have plenty of touching and funny stories about infant baptism. I don't know about you but whenever I witness an infant baptism, there is this one tense moment that I sort of hold my breath; when the minister takes the baby from a parent for the baptism. Do you feel it too? Will the baby start to cry? Sometimes they do and that's totally fine! I heard a story about a tiny cherub of a baby, wrapped in a fluffy white christening gown. The transfer from parent to minister went well but just as the minister was preparing to pour the water over the forehead, the baby, with impeccable timing, decided it was the perfect moment for a world-class giggle fit and 'baby laughter reflex.' Maybe you've seen that; arms and legs thrashing about uncontrollably and the most infectious giggles ever heard. It's like the baby knew this baptism gig was the ultimate baby spa day! And of course the whole congregation laughed right along.

Amidst the laughter, a truth emerged: even the youngest among us, in their innocent joy, can teach us something profound about the transformative encounter we're here to explore today. So, with that adorable baptismal giggle echoing in our hearts, let's dive into the Baptism of Jesus—a journey of joy, laughter, and, of course, a sprinkle of divine humor.

Several years ago, in a small town not unlike our communities, there lived an elderly fisherman named Ernest. His weathered hands told stories of a lifetime spent fishing in a small boat just off shore, and his eyes held a wisdom that only the rhythm of the waves could provide.

One chilly morning, as Ernest prepared his boat for another day's catch, a stranger approached him. This stranger, a wanderer with a cloak worn by the elements, carried a quiet presence that intrigued Ernest. In the course of their conversation, the wanderer shared stories of distant lands and adventures on the open sea. But what captivated Ernest the most was the wanderer's insight into the transformative power of the ocean—how the ebb and flow of the tides mirrored the rhythms of life.

The water becomes a canvas for the divine to paint a picture of renewal and transformation. The dove, a timeless symbol of peace and the Holy Spirit, descends—anointing Jesus for the ministry that lies ahead. The voice from heaven, resonating with paternal love, affirms Jesus' identity and sets the stage for the transformative journey that will follow.

In the Baptism of Jesus, we find not just an event in history but a living symbol of our own journey—a journey of cleansing, renewal, and the revealing of the overwhelming love God has for God's children. Remember that just as Jesus emerged transformed, so too can we - through our encounters with the divine.

Baptism, as we see it in the New Testament, is not a novel concept but finds its roots in the ancient Jewish traditions of ritual purification. In the Old Testament, water was often used as a symbol of cleansing and renewal. The people of Israel participated in various purification rituals, using water as a means of preparing themselves to stand in the presence of the Almighty.

John the Baptist, standing at the crossroads of the old and the new, continues this tradition. His call for repentance aligns with the age-old understanding that cleansing paves the way for a closer relationship with God. In the Baptism of Jesus, we witness a profound shift—from ritualistic cleansing to a transforming encounter with the divine. John, the voice crying out in the wilderness, played a pivotal role in this transitional period. His ministry wasn't merely about water. He preached repentance—a turning away from the old and an anticipation of the new. His baptism symbolized a readiness for the Messiah, a preparation of hearts for the divine presence.

Consider the crowds that flocked to John, seeking a baptism of repentance. Picture the anticipation in the air as people, burdened by the weight of sin, embraced the hope of a fresh start. Little did they know that in the midst of their collective repentance, the very embodiment of redemption—Jesus Christ—would step forward to be baptized.

Consider the ripple effect of a stone cast into a pond. In a similar way, our individual baptisms create ripples that touch the lives of those around us. As a community of believers, we are called to support, encourage, and witness each other's journeys, recognizing that God's power knows no bounds. Today, as we reflect on the transformative power of baptism, may we embrace the humility, obedience, and identification with humanity exemplified by Jesus. Let us recognize that the waters of baptism are not just symbolic; they are conduits of divine grace, ushering us into a life of continual transformation—a journey where we become, day by day, more like the One who emerged from the Jordan, forever changed.

Each of us carries a unique narrative—a story of encounter, surrender, and ongoing transformation.

Our Baptist friends practice baptism by immersion and I'd like to share a couple stories of adult baptism.

A man retells his own experience:

"There I was, standing at the edge of the baptismal pool, wearing what I can only describe as a 'holy jumpsuit'—an outfit that made me look more like a wannabe superhero than someone about to take a spiritual plunge. As I stepped into the water, I couldn't help but think, 'Is this really happening?' I was lost in thought and I lost my footing, slipping and finding myself drenched BEFORE the minister was ready! Well, after a good chuckle, we proceeded in good order. But, let me tell you, the moment I emerged, it felt like I shed not only my wet clothes but also the weight of every bad decision and wrong turn I'd ever made. It was like a heavenly spa day for my soul.

Since that hilariously humbling day, my life has been a wild rollercoaster of transformation. God took my clumsy entrance into the water and turned it into a daily journey of stumbling, learning, and growing. Baptism, for me, wasn't just about getting wet; it was about diving headfirst into a life of surrender and laughter, embracing the joy of transformation."

Last week, Bob encouraged us to consider six questions to help us begin to take action as we enter the new year. I went through each mentally and checked off each as considered and done. But when Linda sent out her weekly email and included these six questions, I found myself in deeper reflection and reopening the email to reconsider my response to each of the questions. At the risk of giving us all too much 'homework,' I'm posing another question:

How do we practically live out the baptismal covenant in our daily lives? This question is central to our journey of faith. Here are a few practical ways:

Daily Devotion: Cultivate a habit of daily prayer, Scripture reading, and reflection - Allowing the Word of God to shape our thoughts and actions.

Community Engagement: Actively participate in our faith community. Engage in worship, fellowship, and service. The community becomes a nurturing environment for continued transformation.

Service and Compassion: Let the love received at baptism overflow into acts of kindness and compassion toward others. By serving those in need, we embody the transformative love of Christ.

Repentance and Forgiveness: Embrace a lifestyle of repentance. Recognize our shortcomings, seek forgiveness, and extend forgiveness to others. This ongoing process is integral to our journey of transformation.

The more I thought about Bob's questions and today's message, the more I realized that these questions - about living out our baptismal covenant in our daily lives and Bob's questions about taking actions in faith - these questions compliment each other.

For those who haven't taken the plunge into the waters of baptism, consider this an open invitation to begin a journey of transformation, a journey where you are not alone. The God who knows you intimately invites you to step into the cleansing waters, to embrace a life marked by love, purpose, and continual transformation. Baptism is not about having everything figured out. It's about stepping into the unknown, trusting that the One who calls us by name is faithful to guide our steps. So, if you've