

## Sermon, Jan 12, 2020 - Jesus' Baptism

### **Matthew 3:13-17**

<sup>13</sup>Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him.

<sup>14</sup>John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" <sup>15</sup>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. <sup>16</sup>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. <sup>17</sup>And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

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Today we celebrate the Feast of the Baptism of Christ.

Christmas is over and the beautiful decorations are gone. Do things seem bare? I miss the lights.

But **now**, and for the next 6 Sundays, we are into a new season, the season of Epiphany. Epiphany is the season of revelations, or showings; God showing us what God is like. We don't celebrate Epiphany as we do Christmas, do we? Maybe we could leave a few candles or lights around to remind us of Epiphany?

Many of us associate Epiphany with the Wisemen. God was making himself known to outsiders. *That was radical.*

The story of the Wise Men is just **one** epiphany, one of God's showings. But the life of Jesus is a **series** of epiphanies, a series of showings where God in Christ reveals who he is.

Jesus' Baptism, which we celebrate today, is another *very* important Epiphany or 'showing'. Jesus' Baptism is now celebrated on the Sunday *after* January 6...which is **today**. If you don't remember celebrating the Baptism of Jesus years ago, it's because we **didn't** celebrate it. It has been added to the new church calendar to recognize this important epiphany or showing.

But there is a question which I have wondered about. And maybe you have wondered about it too. The question is '**Why was** Jesus baptized'? John's

baptism, was for the forgiveness of sins. We know that Jesus was without sin. Yet, Jesus asked John to baptize him. Jesus was acting as if he were a sinner. John was reluctant to baptize Jesus. He said

“I need baptism from **you**, and yet you come to me!”

Why did Jesus want it?

Why didn't Jesus begin right then with his new baptism? He could have really impressed them.

But no.....Jesus remained quiet...he simply joined the throngs; waiting his turn in line like the others.

What Jesus' baptism showed was his radical solidarity with us; with all men and women. By choosing a sinner's baptism, he demonstrated what 'God with us' means. 'God with us' means that God, joins with us, walks with us, even into the dirty, painful places that our imperfections take us. He does not stand removed on a mound, preaching to us, he joins with us on our difficult journey and enters our human experience...he becomes one of us and accepts the label of 'sinner' without deserving it. In doing this, he reveals to us something about what God is like. God is not only a support from 'on high', but God is *with* us, right in the thick of the struggle...God is not afraid to get his feet and hands and body wet in the process. And God is not afraid to get his feet and hands and body wounded either; to lose the very life from his body, giving it all up.

Jesus' baptism is a **landmark**. It is the **beginning** of his ministry. Announced as a sinner, wholly one with our condition, it is then that Jesus is hovered over by the spirit of God. It is then that He is blessed by the Father who sent him. The Father says to Jesus and to all of us who share his flesh:

“You are my beloved, in whom I am well pleased.”

We replay this scenario whenever one of us is baptized...we are baptized to begin a new life, with the presence of the Holy Spirit and the blessing of the Father. Just as Jesus came of age when he was baptized, we come of age when we are baptized.

One of the finer films of the last thirty or so years is Bruce Beresford's "Tender Mercies". The film chronicles the story of Mac Sledge, a country-western singing

star whose life later dissolved into a fog of alcohol and shiftlessness. Divorced from his wife and estranged from his only daughter, Mac staggers through life until one night he collapses onto the porch of a small, lonely little motel and gas station out in the middle of nowhere on the Texas prairie.



The motel is run by Rosa Lee, a young widow who is raising her boy, Sonny, and trying to make ends meet. Even though Mac is a shipwreck of a human being, drunk, and despairing, Rosa Lee takes him in, sets him to work for her, and through this, transformation comes to Mac's life. Over time he kicks his drinking habit, becomes a kind of father figure to young Sonny, ends up marrying Rosa Lee, and begins to attend the Baptist church in which Rosa Lee is a member of the choir.

In one lovely scene, both Mac and Sonny are baptized one Sunday morning. After the pastor dunks him into the waters of baptism, Mac stands back up, blinking and drenched, water dripping down off his balding head and glistening on his beard. It's a portrait of grace.



After the service, while driving home, Sonny says, “Well, we done it. We got baptized.” “Yup, we sure did,” Mac replies. “You feel any different?” the lad asks. Chuckling, Mac says, “I can’t say I do, not really.”

But we as viewers know the truth: *Mac is different*. Deep down on the inside, Mac is a changed man. But outwardly it’s true: the baptism doesn’t seem to change much, and it surely doesn’t make life necessarily any easier. In the course of the film Mac manages to have a kind of reconciliation with his estranged daughter, now 18. But soon after this good thing happens, the daughter is killed in a terrible car accident. Near the end of the film, still grieving, Mac stands in the middle of a vegetable garden and tells Rosa Lee that he doesn’t understand life. He can’t understand the tender mercies of God that led him to Rosa Lee and to the transformation his life so badly needed. But then, he can’t understand why his daughter had to die. We often hear people pondering why bad things happen in life. Mac is honest enough to admit to being equally flummoxed by the good things.

Grace can be as arresting as tragedy.

Mostly, though, grace and tragedy, the good and the bad, co-exist in this life. Yet as Christians journeying through this world, we say that the one thing that makes the difference for us is the one thing that, by all outward appearances at least, seems like it could not possibly make any difference: baptism. Baptism is a watery sacrament. It is literally watery, of course, but some people today would regard it as watery in the symbolic sense of being insubstantial, thin, colorless. In a world so full of problems and tragedies, evil and dread, how could baptism make a dent?

But it does. Even Jesus’ baptism didn’t look like much. John the Baptist himself seems to have been a little disappointed. But as readers of the gospel, we know the truth!

By the way, in the film—after first meeting up with his estranged daughter for the first time after many years—Mac sings a song he had sung to her when she was a baby. And it’s about Jesus’ baptism. I am going to play it for you now! Enjoy!

Nothing catches this better than the film's unusual closing sequence. Mac has returned from his own daughter's funeral (killed in a car wreck eloping with a shifty drummer in her mother's band), and he has brought Sonny the gift of a football. And there the film ends, a new (and deeply grieving) father and a lost boy throwing a football on middle-of-nowhere Texas plains while from a distance Rosa Lee, herself an angel of sorts, watches in silent approval. And on and on it goes, quietly recording the delight of two lost boys, one aging and worn (though now renewed) and the other just starting, both having finally giving themselves, themselves having been found and loved. In the background lies Rosa Lee's little motel, a small central building and gas pumps embraced by two diagonal buildings of rooms, indeed arms of welcome and enfoldment that renews people and, truth be told, the whole of the world.