

January 10 2010

Baptism of the Lord (First Sunday in Ordinary Time)

OT: Isaiah 43:1-7; Psalm 29; Acts 8:14-17; Gospel: Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Hymns & Anthem: #72 "*When Jesus Came to Jordan*"; Anthem # 326 "Sprit of God, Descent Upon My Heart"; #514 "*Let Us Talents and Tongues Employ*"; #492 "Baptized in Water"

Most wonderful God, friend of the foolish and the fallen, we thank you for sending Jesus, to stand with sinners in the baptismal waters of the river Jordan and for continuing to place him in our midst.

Encourage us to delight in his presence, to adore his glory, and to receive his grace which washes away our sins and draws us together as one body. For your name's sake. **Amen!**

<http://www.bruceprewer.com/DocC/C10baptj.htm>.

"The Water, Naming, Calling, Blessing, and Fire of Baptism"

I wonder if you remember your own baptism. Since we baptize infants in the Presbyterian Church, you may not remember. My mixed Presbyterian and Jewish parents decided to let me make my own religious decisions. I attended what we called "Communicants' Class" back in those days. We call them Confirmation Classes now. Our minister, Dr. Simril F. Bryant taught the class at the First Presbyterian Church of Tuscaloosa. Meanwhile billboards around town carried the words, "I believe" and featured drawings of an unrelated Bryant walking on water. Apparently that Bryant was having some degree of success in the area of athletic leadership. I'll have to look his sports team up on the Internet some day and see if anything ever became of them. Dr. Bryant never walked on water, but I do remember the feel of the water that he put on my head in worship that Sunday as he baptized me at about age 13 on the same spot that I received my ordination at twice that age.

Perhaps my reminiscences will remind you of your baptism, or at least of some memorable ones you may have attended. For example, Mark Scott, the Organist and Minister of Music at St. Stephen Presbyterian Church in Fort Worth tells of a church with an immersion baptistery above and behind the choir loft. One day a particularly large baptizee slipped on the first step, fell into the water, and totally drenched both the pastor and the choir in the ensuing tsunami.

Even if we remember the personal, family, community, social, and sometimes humorous events surrounding a particular baptism, the spiritual meaning and impact may elude us. If someone asked you to define Presbyterians, you might call us an open-minded, Protestant church encompassing a broad range of theological tolerance,

moderately liturgical, with a high view of scripture, emphasis on such Reformed traditions as the Sovereignty of God, a governance with equality between clergy and elders, and also sacramental. Ah, sacraments; we find baptism there in a small group that also includes only communion. We have only those two, because, to qualify as a sacrament the Gospels have to say that Jesus both engaged in it himself and commanded us to do likewise. Without that second qualification eating fish might have become a sacrament. Jesus ate fish, but the New Testament doesn't say that Jesus commanded us to eat fish.

A sacrament needs at least one visible, tangible element— and bread and wine for communion. The visible, tangible element for baptism—water—carries deep, primitive significance for all of humankind. Across vast stretches of time and place water represents both our conscious and our unconscious parts where our innermost selves relate to God spiritually. When Jesus walked on water he showed his mastery over both the physical and the spiritual world. Water, of course, cleanses and it makes life possible. The hydrogen in water may soon provide us clean energy, but more future conflicts may rage over water than over petroleum. Most of you may remember a couple of years when we tried various ways to remember the water of baptism in weekly worship—pouring water into the baptismal font at the beginning of worship, touching water on the way to communion. I still find those practices spiritually enriching, and I look forward to dipping my finger into the water from the fountains at the Presbyterian Mission Center and at various churches, then touching that refreshing coolness to my forehead. Both Luke's description of Jesus' baptism and our brief reading from Acts draw that exact connection between the water of baptism and the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Perhaps we have been learning that lesson anew. Historically we have made baptism a pre-condition for admission to communion. In recent years we have found out that allowing enquirers to partake of communion nourishes them spiritually toward a baptismal commitment. Our constitution hasn't caught up with that practice, but I expect that it will do so as more and more new believers journey from the communion table to the water of baptism.

Luke's account also tells us—in very compressed form—of Jesus' naming calling, and blessing. Echoing the lines we heard from Isaiah, "I have called you by name, you are

mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you,”² the voice of God, accompanied by the visible manifestation of the Holy Spirit as a dove, said, “You are my son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” Then Jesus began his ministry.

At baptism we, too, name and bless children and declare people being baptized at any age united into the household and family of faith. Remember, as well, that whenever God calls anyone by name in the Bible, a commission to do the work of God immediately follows. We call the words and order of worship a liturgy, but liturgy means the worship and the work of the church. Even so, in our own baptisms, God has named and blessed us and has called and empowered us into a community of faithful service and worship.

Long before Moses knew of God’s presence in the guiding pillar of fire and in the burning bush, fire has indicated epiphany, God in the midst of us. We don’t even have to know that or to think of it consciously for fire—even the fire of our candles—to represent the real presence of the Holy Spirit with us.

We do not need to repeat our baptisms, but we do well to remember them. Although we will not be reciting the renewal of baptism vows from the front of the bulletin today, the words can remind us of the cleansing, the redemption, the union with the community of faith in the Body of Christ, the renunciation of sin, and the commitment to discipleship that baptism brings. Therefore, on this Baptism of the Lord Sunday, let us come and celebrate once again at Christ’s table of grace, going, at least in our spirits and in our hearts, through the *Water, Naming, Calling, Blessing, and Fire of Baptism*.

Pastor R2