Sermon, March 13, 2022

Matthew 3 Baptism Roots

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

How many of you were baptized here at St. Paul’s? Where are some other places you were baptized if not here? Raise you hand if you remember your baptism date. When I first came here, I thought it was very cool that you put everyone’s baptismal date in the bulletin along with birthdays.

It’s a good reminder for us. I told the Friday Bible study that I was baptized on April 20. I thought it was either the 2nd or the 12th but I contacted my home church in Shippensburg and found out the right day. I knew there was a two in the date. I looked it up again after our study and found out that it was actually on April 2nd. At least I’m still correct that there is a two in the date! And makes me glad that churches keep records to help out my date challenged brain.

Not only is it good to remember the date, it’s important to remember that baptism is central in our Christian faith. As Lutherans, we have a different way of looking at baptism than some other denominations. Today and next week, we’ll take a look at our understanding of baptism through our Lutheran lens. This morning, our sermon could be entitled “Baptism Roots.” Next Sunday will be “Baptism Wings.”

The Israelites knew how important water was. As a desert people, especially when they were wandering in the wilderness for 40 years, they viewed water as a precious gift.

But they also knew that water could be dangerous and uncontrollable. Water was something that often needed to be passed through to continue their journey. But when water ran deep and fast, they needed help from God.

This morning’s reading from Joshua may remind you of another time when the Israelites needed to cross a large body of water. With the Egyptians on their tails, they faced the great Red Sea. Moses struck the water with his staff and the waters parted, a wall of water on each side. Israel crossed with dry feet, while the Egyptians drowned when the waters ran back over them.

As they were on the way to Jericho, the Israelites are once again blocked by water. The Jordan River was in its springtime flood stage, where the waters would have been deep and fast. Joshua instructs the priests what to do.

Carrying the Ark of the Covenant, the priests who cared for it, brought it to the water’s edge. They dipped their feet into the rushing waters. The waters upstream ceased to flow, piling up in a huge heap behind an invisible barrier. The waters downstream continued to flow, making the land between dry.

The priests stood with the Ark in the middle of the river as all the Israelites passed with dry feet. God had controlled the waters while they found safety on the other side. God was in the midst of them, there with the Ark of the Covenant, as they passed through the water.

Water, especially floods, was a part of the understanding of God for the people of Israel. Where waters could be very productive, in supplying people, animals and plants, or very destructive, in flooding lands and destroying boats on the sea, God was not just in the midst of the water. God was above the waters. God’s power was greater than any flood or wave.

Walking through such waters showed God’s power and protection to the ones in the midst of them. Water was death, but it was also life.

The Jewish people had a form of baptism before the arrival of Jesus. If you were a proselyte, a person who wanted to convert to Judaism, you would have to be baptized. The purpose of the water immersion was to cleanse from the impurity of idolatry and the restoration to purity, according to the Jewish encyclopedia.

The Essenes, the community John the Baptist was part of, practiced baptism as a call to repentance. This was not a one time and done kind of baptism, but could be repeated whenever the person felt the need. People would come to the river where John was not only baptizing but preaching a repentance of sins.

We find John in our gospel text this morning, preparing the way of the Lord. He must have been quite the character, with his camel’s hair tunic and leather belt. As an Essene, he would have very long hair, as they were not allowed to cut it. Maybe he had a pocket or bag full of locusts to snack on.

Despite what we may think of his appearance, John drew a big audience. Matthew’s gospel tells us that the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were coming out to hear him. Not only did they hear his message, they were moved by it to be baptized.

One day, Jesus shows up. His intention is to be baptized by John. John isn’t very willing to baptize Jesus. Jesus is the one he has been preparing for. Jesus is the one who is greater than John. Jesus should be baptizing him.

It may seem confusing to us that Jesus would be baptized by John. In the ELCA document that I mentioned last week, and will refer to again over this series, The Use of the Means of Grace, this is the reason we are baptized. It says….

In Holy Baptism the Triune God delivers us from the forces of evil, puts our sinful self to death, gives us new birth, adopts us as children, and makes us members of the body of Christ, the Church.

Wasn’t Jesus sinless? Where was his sinful self that needed put to death? Wasn’t he God’s Son? Why would he need to be adopted? He is Christ, so who could he be part of the body of Christ?

The Use of the Means of Grace explains it this way. Baptism was given to the Church by Jesus Christ in the "great commission," but also in his own baptism by John and in the baptism of the cross.

We have the account of Jesus' own baptism at the River Jordan . While Jesus is the eternal Son of God, all who are baptized into him are adopted as beloved children of God. With Jesus all the baptized are anointed by the outpoured Spirit . Because of Jesus we are, through Baptism, gathered and included in the life of the Triune God.

Baptism is a gift from God, first ushered in by Jesus’ baptism. We are not just washed in the water after confessing our sins and repenting. Baptism is an assurance of forgiveness, but it is more than that.

When Jesus speaks of baptism in other texts, he speaks in relation to his impending death, not the washing he experienced at the hands of John the Baptist. While we see baptism as giving new life, including eternal life, we also die. Our baptismal liturgy says…by the baptism of his own death and resurrection your beloved Son has set us free from the bondage to sin and death.

As we pass through the waters of baptism, we, like Christ, die but rise again to new life. We are cleansed from the bondage to sin and death. Jesus gives us the gift of baptism by his example. His example is not just the act of water washing by John, but the act of dying and rising he would accomplish. That is what we are joined with in baptism.

Our Sunday School class is currently studying the book of Acts. For the past couple of weeks, we’ve read about the rather explosive expansion of the church. Three thousand people hear Peter speak and are baptized. Then five thousand hear Peter and John and they are baptized.

More groups and individuals in the Acts will be baptized. Through these stories, we learn more about how baptism worked in the early days of the church. These were the first Christians, so they did not have parents or grandparents who were baptized before them. At least not the kind of baptism that Jesus gave as his baptism was with the Holy Spirit.

It was the heads of households who were baptized. Then all in their household would be baptized as well, including children and servants. One of my favorite stories in the Bible is that of Lydia, a woman who sold purple cloth. She had her household baptized with her. This is pretty great considering she was a woman head of household, but that’s a story for another day.

The only thing we can assume about these first baptisms is that they were done in the name of the Father and of the Son and the Holy Spirit. This is from the instruction that Jesus gave his disciples just before his ascension.

It is not until about the early 3rd century, that we have a written liturgy for the service of baptism. It was written by Hippolytus, one of our early church fathers. As more people were now second and third generation Christians, the service for baptism took on more structure.

Adults prepared for baptism with a three year class. However, if you were a person of good standing in the community, you could bypass that requirement. I think confirmation kids would be really well behaved if they could bypass confirmation classes on good behavior.

Baptisms were usually performed at the Easter vigil, a night perfect for the image of dying and rising with Christ. The candidates for baptism gathered by a spring or flowing body of water. They would then take off all their clothes. Children were baptized first. Then the women, who had let down their hair and removed all jewelry. Finally the men would be baptized.

As the person went into the water, the one baptizing him would put his hand on him and ask…do you believe in God the Father Almighty? The person would say….I believe. He would be baptized one time. Children who were not able to answer for themselves had their parents or someone else in their family answer for them.

Then he would be asked two more questions from an early version of the Apostles’ Creed and baptized two more times. “Do you believe in Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who was born of the Virgin Mary, and was crucified under Pontius Pilate, and was dead and buried, and rose again the third day, alive from the dead, and ascended into heaven, and sat at the right hand of the Father, and will come to judge the living and the dead?”

And finally, “Do you believe in the Holy Spirit, in the holy church, and the resurrection of the body?” The newly baptized would then be allowed into the church where they would receive their first Holy Communion. After they got dressed in a new white robe, of course.

Our Lutheran liturgy for baptism hasn’t changed all that much. Thankfully, we allow candidates for baptism to come fully clothed.

Recently, the words said at baptism came under fire. Maybe you heard about the priest who had baptized hundreds, if not thousands, over the years using what some termed “the wrong word.” Instead of saying, “I baptize you,” he said, “We baptize you.” This stirred quite the controversy.

The reasoning for the uproar was that the person baptizing someone is acting in Jesus’s name, so the “I” is the voice of God, only spoken by the priest. To say “we” changes the focus to the priest and the congregation.

Lutherans do say….I baptize you….but I don’t think any but the most critical would say that a baptism using the word “we” was invalid. Baptisms are done in the context of worship, which always includes at least two or three who are gathered in Jesus’ name.

More importantly, we deem baptism one of our two sacraments. Sacraments are commanded by Jesus and use an earthly element. I’ll talk more about this biblical text next week, but Jesus’ command is to “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

Jesus himself does not give us the words we use today. He commands us to go and baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. He does not give us the liturgical form we are to use.

Even Hippolytus only records the questions that are asked of baptismal candidates. He does not provide the words said as the person is immersed.

Baptism is offered as a gift from God. Would God really say, no, you can’t have this gift because the priest or pastor used “We” instead of “I?”

Whether a person uses I or we, I believe baptism is valid not because of a law about the correct words, but because we do it in the name of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. That is what Jesus said to do. And we do it.

Baptism is a gift that we can remember every day. In his Small Catechism, Martin Luther suggests this routine to start our day.

When you get up, make the sign of the cross and say…In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. This is a reminder of the cross of Christ that was placed on your forehead at your baptism.

Then you may repeat the Apostles’ Creed and the Lord’s Prayer. He includes his morning prayer:

I thank You, my heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ, Your dear Son, that You have kept me this night from all harm and danger; and I pray that You would keep me this day also from sin and every evil, that all my doings and life may please You. For into Your hands I commend myself, my body and soul, and all things. Let your holy angel be with me, that the evil foe may have no power over me. Amen.

Luther concludes his instruction with….Then go joyfully to your work, singing a hymn, like that of the Ten Commandments, or whatever your devotion may suggest.

Luther started his day, and invites us to start our day, remembering our baptism. He will also conclude his day with a similar evening prayer and the sign of the cross.

I often have talked with children about baptism and begin by asking them how they used water that day. From showers to brushing teeth to flushing the toilet, water is a big part of our lives. Every time we use or see water, we can remember our baptism.

Luther made it a kind of battle cry. When he was down or faced with problems or his enemies were encroaching, he would say….I am baptized!

Today, remember your baptism, even if you can’t remember the right day. Remember what baptism does…it delivers us from the forces of evil, puts our sinful self to death, gives us new birth, adopts us as children, and makes us members of the body of Christ, the Church. Remember you are baptized, a child of God. Go joyfully into this day. Amen.