

The Rev. Dr. Jan C. Heller
First Sunday after the Epiphany, The Baptism of Jesus
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Saint Barnabas Episcopal Church, Bainbridge Island, WA

Let me start with a question this morning: How many of us were in the Episcopal Church in 1979, when we officially began using our current Book of Common Prayer? If you were, I suspect you remember very well the controversy surrounding its introduction—and if you weren't, you can be glad you missed it. Our current Rite One services represent a compromise for those of us who love the traditional language of the earlier 1928 prayer book, but still many individuals and some congregations left the church over it. I was confirmed in the Episcopal Church in 1981 and then ordained in 1982, and in all my years as a priest I have had to lead only one service from the 1928 prayer book. It was in my first year after ordination, and the long-suffering congregation merely chuckled at my confusion as I stumbled through morning prayer during the main Sunday service (some of you will remember the days, as well, when Morning Prayer was used in place of Holy Communion for the main service).

In any case, what many of us may not remember is that the liturgical changes that were introduced in the 1979 book were actually *not* new. Oh, I know they *felt* new, and the language was for the most part updated, but the structure and practices of the services themselves had been recovered from the study of ancient church practices and manuscripts in the 20 to 30 years before 1979. And, most importantly for our service today—to get to my point—many of the changes in the 1979 prayer book that we now take for granted were based on the rediscovery of the centrality and the importance of Holy Baptism.

For centuries before, many or even most baptisms were done privately, that is, outside the main Sunday service, and communion was withheld from children and even some adults who had been baptized but not yet been confirmed. But, again, we then recovered the church's original understanding of baptism. First, it is a public service of and for the community as a whole, and so it is best done in the main Sunday Eucharist or on other specially designated feast days—like today, for instance. Second, as one rubric of the current prayer book states, baptism “is full initiation by water and the Holy Spirit into Christ's Body, the Church,” which means that any baptized person is not only a *full* member of Christ's Body, but is also immediately welcomed to communion without being confirmed, regardless of age or understanding. A third point can also be made—it is less controversial, perhaps, but still worth noting for those of us who, like myself, come from Evangelical backgrounds. Another rubric states that the “bond which God establishes in Baptism is indissoluble” (BCP, p. 298), which is to say that Christians cannot lose their salvation *and* that we need be baptized only once in our lives—“One Lord, one Faith, one Baptism.”

So, it's hard to overstate the importance of baptism for the Christian faith. By it we are baptized into the death and resurrection of Christ; we become members of his body, a new family that may or may not be related to our family of birth; we symbolize with the water of baptism a return—the original meaning of repentance, as in Israel's return from exile—a return from our old life of slavery to sin to a rebirth into a new one of freedom; and, though we don't talk about this enough, we are also given a *vocation* in baptism, that is, we are called in the baptismal promises we make to live our new life as a follower of Jesus in this world. Finally, if all that is not enough, we also are baptized because, in our

baptism, we imitate Jesus in his own baptism, which we celebrate today. But now, having said all this, it may be interesting to explore how his baptism is both like and unlike ours.

Some of you may recall from past sermons that Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist presented the early church with a bit of a challenge. John's baptism was clearly stated to be one of repentance, which the Jews of his day and we in our day undoubtedly need but, presumably, Jesus didn't. Also, when Jesus "submits" to John's baptism, it seems to suggest that he (John) is superior to Jesus. (The gospel writers solved this problem in ways that I won't go into this morning, but if you're interested, read the accounts of Jesus' baptism in the order they were written: Mark, Matthew, Luke, and then John. You'll see a progression in which Jesus increases and John decreases, which is what John the Baptist actually says should happen in the Gospel of John.)

But New Testament scholars think something else actually may have been going on for Jesus. It appears that Jesus probably went to John before he began his public ministry in order to take instruction from him and, initially at least, to become John's disciple, his student. At some point after John was arrested, Jesus begins his own ministry that, at first, sounds very much like John's: "repent, and be baptized, for the kingdom of God is at hand." Later, though, Jesus seems to find his own voice and broadens his message and ministry, he begins to live a life somewhat less austere than John's, and he even calls some of his own disciples from among John's disciples (elsewhere in the Gospels, we learn that some of John's disciples continued to follow John's teaching even after he was beheaded, and were at times a bit confused and perhaps even resentful of the direction Jesus took).

All of that being said, it seems John's baptism was extremely important to Jesus personally. For John, the baptism not only signified repentance of sins, but as the Jews went across the Jordan to hear John and then were baptized, they reemerged on the west bank of the river as members of a renewed nation of Israel. Their baptism symbolized that they were being called out from other Jews who were seen as indifferent or as collaborators who had been corrupted by their interactions with the Romans. Again, recall that repentance is better understood in that day as return, and Jews who were baptized by John were literally and figuratively reenacting the Exodus and entry into the Promised Land by going through the water of baptism into Israel with renewed determination to be faithful to God's covenant with them, and all this in preparation and expectation that God's kingdom was very much "at hand."

For Jesus, then, John's baptism probably meant all these things as well, but perhaps even more. We get a sense of this in today's collect, where we are told that, at his baptism, Jesus is anointed by the Holy Spirit and proclaimed as God's beloved Son. Here, "beloved Son" does not mean the second person of the Trinity (though later Christians would read it this way), but is instead a royal designation, a not very subtle suggestion that Jesus is being proclaimed king. This is reinforced by his anointing, which is what the word Messiah means in Hebrew and Christ in Greek. Anointing was how kings and prophets were marked out in ancient Israel for a special vocation. Taken together, in his baptism Jesus is likely being proclaimed as the Messiah or the Christ, though Jesus himself is very careful throughout his ministry not to claim this title directly—he typically refers to himself by the more mysterious title, Son of Man.

So, both we and Jesus are baptized by water and the Holy Spirit, and through it we enter the new family of God, the Church, while *Jesus* entered a renewed Israel, which he may also have understood as a new family. Jesus would not have been baptized with a Trinitarian formula (that is, the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), but both we and Jesus enact and symbolize with our baptisms a return from the exile of the old life to the acceptance of a new identity and new vocation in the new life given us in baptism. Jesus is anointed as God's beloved Son and we are accepted, in Jesus, as beloved children of God. His mission, as he came to understand it, was similar to John's, namely, to inaugurate the kingdom of God; our mission is, if anything, a bit more daunting. It is to pick up where Jesus left off and to fulfil our baptismal calling to be ambassadors of this kingdom, working throughout our lives to see it fully realized—"on earth as it heaven." As I said earlier, it is hard to overstate the importance of Holy Baptism. Amen.