

Epiphany 1B (Jesus' Baptism)
January 8, 2012
Hymns: 16 - 89 - 294 - 299

SLIDE 1 *You are all sons (and daughters) of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. Amen. (Galatians 3:26-28)*

MARK 1:4-11

JESUS' BAPTISM....AND OURS.

Because of their age and relative inexperience, children and young people rarely get asked for advice by adults. This is sad, since the young tend to have amazing powers of observation, as well as the free time to ponder the strangeness of human nature. Here is a sample of their wisdom:

"You can't trust dogs to watch your food." -- Patrick, age 10

"You can't hide mashed potatoes in your hat." -- Chris, age 9 (You have to wonder how he knows that.)

"You should not be the first one to fall asleep at a slumber party." -- Katie, age 12

And this final thought from Laura, age 13: "No matter how hard you try, you can't baptize a cat!" I can't speak from experience, but I imagine that is true. Of course, it is not always easy to baptize humans, either.

Slide 2 **Baptism is a sacrament of the church.** That is the first thing we need to see. Baptism belongs to Christ's Church. No matter how it is performed, baptism is at the heart of our faith. Every Christian tradition has its own approach to baptism, but every major Christian body recognizes the importance of Baptism. It is a holy rite even in the humblest of circumstances. And, if at all possible, it is a celebration of the whole body of Christ. We all participate in it. There are circumstances which may require a person to be baptized in a private setting, but this should be an unusual circumstance. This is a celebration of the entire church. That's the first thing to be said about Baptism.

Slide 3 **Here's the second: Baptism is a sacrament, instituted by Christ.** Jesus Himself received a form of Baptism at the hand of John the Baptist. John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. The Jews observed a number of baptisms that symbolized forgiveness of sins and / or consecration to God. Jesus, of course, had no sin. In submitting to baptism Jesus was identifying with the message of repentance that John preached. Jesus later preached that repentance was necessary in order to live the kingdom life.

Jesus was baptized by John, but John knew that really he should be baptized by Jesus. He was baptizing the Son of God. Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, John saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on Jesus like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: **Slide 4** ***"You are My Son, Whom I love; with You I am well pleased."*** The other people on the banks of the Jordan River that day had no idea of the significance of this event. Christ's true identity was still hidden from them. But John knew, and even more important, God knew: "You are my Son, Whom I love"

Jesus' Baptism identified His familial ties with His Father, the first person of the Trinity. **Slide 5** **Our own Baptism is a sign that WE belong to Christ.** In a sense there is a voice that comes from heaven whenever anyone is baptized that says: "You are My child, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." It doesn't matter that we are not sinless as Christ was. Because of what God has done in Christ, we are made spotless, sinless in our heavenly Father's eyes through the blood of Christ. We are God's beloved. No matter how the water is applied, baptism is sign and seal that we are no longer our own. We belong to Christ – and God.

Some of our churches have the custom of creating a banner for each of the children who are being baptized. On the banner is the child's name, the date of the baptism and the phrase "Christ's Own Forever" on it. It's a nice custom. On one occasion family and friends of a newly baptized child went to a party at the parents' home. As the child's mother entered the house, she took the baptismal banner and put it on a tack outside the front door of their home. That same afternoon, friends who

lived nearby and who had been out of town for a few days drove by the house. They saw the banner bearing the child's name. The banner also bore the date and the phrase "Christ's Own Forever."

An hour later in the middle of the party, the phone rang. It was the voice of the neighbor who had driven by and seen the banner outside the house. "I'm so sorry to trouble you," she said. "I feel awful asking you this, but has something terrible happened while we've been out of town? (This was followed by an awkward silence). Then the voice on the other end of the line asked, "Did your son die?"

Well, in a sense there is some truth to that. St. Paul in his letter to the **Slide 6** Romans, chapter 6, verses 3 & 4 writes: *Don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? We were therefore buried with Him through Baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.* In Baptism the old Adam is to be drowned within us along with all his sinful lusts and desires, and a new man arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.

That we are not automatically made perfect Christians after Baptism makes it all the more important that we have Baptism to wash all our sins away. It is said that whenever Martin Luther found himself ready to give up, whenever worry for his own life and the life of the Church he loved overwhelmed him, when his troubled conscience bothered him, he could look to what he had written out in large letters of a wall plaque in his study – "I am a Baptized child of God!" Baptism is a sacrament. Baptism is a sign that we belong to God.

Slide 7 Baptism is also a statement of where our ultimate allegiance lies. In presenting ourselves or our children for Baptism we are making a statement about who we are and what is important in our lives. A non-Christian tells of a time in 1960, when he attended a Lutheran worship service in East Berlin, only a short time before the Berlin Wall was constructed. There were not many people present for the worship service, because church attendance was viewed with suspicion by the state. The East German Republic had developed secular alternatives to replace all of the rituals of the Church. Nonetheless, a young couple came to the worship service and presented their child for Baptism. This non-Christian was amazed, and wondered why this couple would jeopardize their future and that of their child by insisting on this ancient ritual of Baptism when a secular alternative was available.

He later wrote, "I, of course, question why the couple would do something like that! Their very act of bringing their baby to the church is a public statement of their priorities. They engage in significant risk because of their faith. In the face of their quiet, public courage I feel unworthy." This couple wanted to make a statement: our child will be made a child of God and belong to Him, and nothing--even the power of the state--is going to deter us.

One of our pastors recently conducted a Bible Class entitled, "Total Commitment." Trouble was – some members missed weeks of the course. Maybe we could say, they were auditing the class. Trouble is - a lot of people would like to simply audit the course on total commitment to God rather than doing the real thing. When we understand the significance of Christian Baptism, however, we see the folly in that. Christ did not audit the course that took Him to the cross. He took the real thing. When we live out our Baptism, we live out His purpose for our lives. Baptism is a sacrament of the Church. It is sign and seal that we belong to God. It is a statement of where our ultimate allegiance lies.

You see: **Slide 8 Baptism is a sign of our new life in Christ.** There is a delightful story about a three-year-old named Joey, who did not enjoy baths. Seeking to overcome his objections, his mother said, "Don't you want to be nice and clean?"

Joey replied, "Yes, but can't you just dust me off?"

Is that what a lot of us would like when it comes to baptism--a simple dusting?

One man said that at a certain point in his life he considered joining a Baptist Church. He was even willing to be totally immersed in order to make this move. Luckily, he knew a minister in that faith, having dated the minister's daughter. Or, maybe having dated her was the unlucky part: He asked

the good pastor if he would consider performing the service of baptizing him. The Baptist pastor paused a minute or two, gave him a long thoughtful look and said, "If you're serious about this, a mere dipping just won't do for you. We'll have to find a place to anchor you overnight."

Would being anchored for a while be enough to get rid of all the sins of any of us?! We need to remember that Baptism is that Sacrament by which we are washed clean. It is not simply a sign that we are going to try our best to quit sinning, as noble and as necessary as that might be. **Slide 9 Baptism is a symbol that we have already been accepted by God and that in God's eyes we have already been made clean by Christ's sacrifice on the cross.** Therefore, since this has happened, we in thankful faith respond by taking up every effort to live our new life in Christ.

You hear the distressed cry of your child and look up: Your precious daughter has fallen face first in the mud, and now runs toward you, tears streaming through the dirt. Here she comes, with mud on her clothes, her face, in her hair, her eyes, her ears, her mouth. What do you parents do? Do you say, 'Don't come near!' Do you say, 'You made your mess--now clean it up!' To an older, responsible child, you might say that. But not to one who can't clean herself. You take her in your arms, soiling your own clothes; you comfort her, then gently clean all the sand and dirt and refuse from her eyes, ears, nostrils, mouth. You love her, clean her, and comfort her. That child has come to you, in effect saying through her tears: 'I am a mess. I can't clean myself. If you are willing, you can make me clean.' And you are willing.

That is what God has done for us in Christ Jesus. Baptism makes Christ's righteousness our own. Baptism is a sacramental transferring to each of us that which has already been done in our behalf. We belong to God. Baptism gives us faith – or strengthens our faith. It furthermore shows where our allegiance lies – as a child of God and member of His family. By its very nature it speaks to our seeking to live a new life in Christ. Before you leave this room, you might want to pause for a moment, and say a quiet private prayer of thanks, "Thank You, Jesus – that I am a baptized child of God! Strengthen me through Your Holy Word and Your other precious Sacrament – the Lord's Supper – to live up to the reputation You have given me in my Baptism." Amen!

Slide 10 (God) saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit Whom He poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior...so that, having been justified by His grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life. This is a trustworthy saying. Amen! (Titus 3:5-7)