

First Sunday after the Epiphany, Year A  
The Baptism of Jesus ~ January 13, 2008  
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## *Baptism and Being the Family of God*

**W**e've just heard a brief account of the baptism of Jesus, by John in the Jordan River. It's a familiar story. But we may not be aware of the fact that baptisms were taking place, among the people of God, a thousand years before John came on the scene. And here we are, two thousand years after John's ministry, and people are still getting baptized. I like the notion that, when I am baptizing someone, I am standing in a stream of tradition that extends back for three thousand years! However, what baptism meant for John and Jesus, was different than what it meant for their ancestors. And it means something different for us today. So, although we're standing in the same stream, the water has changed. And I'd like to talk about how it has changed, and the implications for the people of faith today.

In the Old Testament, there are a lot of references to men and women going through a process of ritual cleansing. Sometimes, it was merely rinsing the hands or feet. But frequently it involved a total immersion of the body. (Of course, this is the most basic meaning of "baptism," an immersion into water.) And it always took place before the people of God were going to have some sort of interaction with God. But, even though we're talking about baptism as a religious practice, it seems to have had its genesis in the secular world of everyday life. Somehow, and perhaps simply through the process of trial and error, people had learned that it was a good thing to wash up before preparing, serving, or eating a meal. But they also observed that people who practiced good hygiene, who washed up regularly, were generally healthier than those who did not. And they also observed that people whose health was poor, could be helped if they began to observe good hygiene practices. So, washing up was seen as a preventative, as well as a restorative. Finally, someone came to the conclusion that, if it was a good thing to wash up before meals, it's probably equally as important, if not more so, to wash up before the act of worshiping God. All of which led the people of God to the conclusion that, if washing had physical benefits, it probably also had spiritual benefits. (All of which leads me to the conclusion that the old adage, "cleanliness is next to godliness," has deep roots.) So, we begin to see references to people who had become ritually unclean – perhaps they had come into contact with a corpse, or perhaps it was a woman who had gone through childbirth – who are told to go through a process of ritually cleansing themselves by immersing their bodies in water, in order that they might resume their relationship with God. The bottom line in all this is that the ancient ancestors of John and Jesus, believed that baptism had real, physical, restorative powers.

However, by the time John is baptizing people in the Jordan River, the emphasis or meaning surrounding the ritual had changed. The baptism that John was providing, was intended to be a public sign of a person's decision to follow God. It was a way for a person to declare, before God and these witnesses, that they were following a new path. In other words, the baptism that John was administering wasn't seen as an *agent of change*, but merely a sign that *a change had already taken place* – that the person being baptized had already examined their lives, they had seen where they had gone wrong, and they had decided to turn over a new leaf. (Now,

knowing this, helps us understand some of the disputes John had with many of the religious leaders of his day, people whom he described as “white-washed tombs.” They wanted all the benefits of baptism, without having to first go through the work of personal examination, repentance, and conversion, and John didn’t like that.)

But, about thirty years later, when St. Paul is teaching and preaching, baptism seems to have gone through yet another change in its meaning and significance. St. Paul writes that a person was baptized “into Christ,” into union with him, into possession by him, and into all the benefits (*e.g.*, justification and sanctification) which flowed from being linked to Christ. In other words, baptism became a rite by which a person identified with Christ, and joined themselves to Christ “for better or worse.” I get the sense, when I read Paul’s letters, that the person being baptized was declaring that, whatever Christ had to go through, I’ll go through as well. If Christ had to suffer, then I’ll suffer with him. If Christ had to die, then I’ll die right alongside him. And if Christ was raised from the dead, I’m confident that God will raise me as well. Now, ideas like this may seem foreign to us in the twenty-first century, but for the members of a young church, who lived in a time when being a Christian often meant being persecuted, these new ideas about baptism gave real meaning to any suffering they might have to endure.

You and I live in a time and culture where personal hygiene is easy to come by, and where being a Christian doesn’t necessarily mean that we will be persecuted. And we’ve had two thousand years to study the teachings of Jesus, and the writings of the early church leaders, and we see things like baptism in a new light. So, it makes sense, and it shouldn’t surprise you, that baptism has undergone yet another shift in its meaning and purpose.

Today, our Prayer Book describes baptism as “full initiation by water and the Holy Spirit into Christ’s Body, the Church.” Although there are things that we need to renounce before being baptized, and things we need to affirm, the greater sense that I get from our Prayer Book is that baptism is the doorway through which we pass in order to become members of a community.

So, during the course of the last three thousand years, we’ve seen baptism change from a ceremonial rite of cleansing and purification, to being a sign of a person’s conversion and repentance, to being a way of helping persecuted Christians find meaning and hope in their suffering, to what we have today in the Episcopal Church, a rite of passage, a sacrament of belonging, a means of welcoming people into the family of God. Thinking about baptism, and how it’s changed over the years, has given me a new appreciation for how we think about baptism today.

In the eighteen years I’ve been a priest, the one thing I’ve enjoyed most is baptizing people. And though there have been many high points in my career as a priest, the highest was probably being given the opportunity to baptize my two daughters: holding them over the font, sprinkling the “living water” of baptism across their foreheads, and hearing the congregation say to them, “we receive you into the household of God.” It doesn’t get much better than that!

Over the many centuries of its history, God's family, the church, has had more than its fair share of highs and lows. But I think what's kept us together during the lows, is the fact that we are a sacramental church, and that baptism is one of our most important sacraments. Whether we were baptized as infants or as adults, it has been important to our unity and strength that we have a rite that not only welcomes us into the family of God, but also celebrates the fact that we are, indeed, and by the grace of God, a family.

Let us pray: We thank you, God, for welcoming us into your family. We thank you especially for the love, comfort, and companionship we derive from being a part of this body. Strengthen the bonds of our unity, and enable us to look beyond our differences and find, instead, all those things which draw us together in you, and in your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.