

At this time, Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. The moment he came out of the water, he saw the sky split open and God's Spirit, looking like a dove, come down on him. Along with the Spirit, a voice: "You are my Son, chosen and marked by my love, pride of my life."

Just two sentences sum up the entire Gospel this morning in Mark. Sure, there are many chapters yet to go, many adventures and reversals, including torture and death on the cross. All the Gospel is vitally important, but here in the beginning of the Good News, Jesus came to be baptized. And when that happened, God's Spirit descended on Jesus, marking him as the promised hope of humankind and creation. Think of that--the entire Gospel and its message are summed in those two sentences.

We tend not to think of the baptism of Jesus as the core of the Gospel. I think there's a reason, not a simple one, but a central cause—when contemporary people think of baptism, we commonly think in terms of an act of initiation or of cleansing or of making a family commitment. We don't think of baptism as the sign of Jesus being chosen by the Holy Spirit to lead us to life.

Let me take a moment to explain. Think about how you hear people talk about baptism; when we baptize someone, what do people think is happening? In my own family, despite everything they've heard me say about baptism over the years, several of the adults feel their children "need" to be baptized. You can hear the operative term in there, can't you, that children "need" to be baptized. What does it mean to need baptism? Even in everyday talk, there can be more than one real need for baptism.

For example, there are people who think children, even infants, "need" to be baptized because if they are not, the children will be sent to eternal perdition. I've heard that said, or at least implied, so many times that I'm tempted by my mother's imprecation: "if I had a nickel for every time I heard that, I would be a millionaire!" And my mom, in this case, would be right. I find myself wondering if anyone stops and thinks what is implied by this so-called "need?" That there's an improbably angry God that would condemn to Hell even infants and children if not sprinkled with water. Ah, no, that makes no sense. That would not be a loving God but a tormenter on a cosmic scale, and I say, why would we hope for any goodness from such a god? Baptism for infants isn't a stamp of certified safety applied to their heads—plainly baptism's much more and much better than that.

There are kinder heads that prevail in many traditions (ours I should hope) that believe God doesn't punish infants or children for their parents' failure to get them baptized. But still these same kind people insist that if someone hasn't been baptized, they can't share in communion, in the Holy Eucharist. Thinking about the Gospel, when Jesus is baptized, does anyone think that prior to that baptism he was in danger of eternal perdition? I doubt it very much.

Then you might wonder, did Jesus get baptized in order that he can take communion? Hardly, for as we will find out at the Last Supper, Jesus is communion, the flesh and blood that feeds us. I understand people's reservations about inviting the unbaptized into communion but if we stop and think, at no point in the Last Supper did Jesus ask if all the disciples had been baptized.

There's one more, a third reason, that people insist that people "need" to be baptized. If you're not baptized, you can't join in the life of the church. And to that I respond as I did with communion—if Jesus is in fact in his entirety communion itself, how much more is Jesus also in his wholeness the entire church? Again, the disciples at the last supper weren't invited to join the Fourth Church of Chattanooga; they were invited to share in Christ's body, in communion, and in the church of his resurrected body.

Plainly, as far as the Gospel is concerned, baptism is nearly everything, all that we need. But what is it that we need? If we turn back to John's preaching about baptism, we hear him talking about the need to repent. While we can see that the repentance John preaches is surely about sin, that's not all. The term, repentance, is in Greek, "metanoia." I tell you the Greek because thanks to software companies, "meta" has become part of our everyday language. We now know that metanoia means change, as in the kind of change when you elect to go in a new direction. When you mean to change and live life differently. Undoubtedly, John wants people to be cleansed from their sins but far more than that he's emphasizing changed lives. Whatever you've been doing that makes you sick at heart and soul, stop, and live another way. It's as plain as that.

And that's where Jesus and the Spirit comes in—Jesus IS another way, a way of life that can lead to compassion, forgiveness, joy, and love. Jesus was baptized not because he was a sinner or because he had longed to join a church here in Bend—he was chosen as God's beloved so that we can know without doubt that there is another, better way to live. And if Jesus is chosen, so then are we—we can follow Jesus into baptism, empowered by the Holy Spirit and wonderfully enough, despite trials and tribulation, we will be brought into hope and joy. Amen.

The Rev. Jeff Bullock

