

Through the Water

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast

Olentangy Church

Columbus, Ohio

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Scripture Readings

Genesis 1:1-5 (Psalm 29)

Acts 19:1-7

Mark 1:4-11

Sermon

Today is the first Sunday in a new season. We call it Epiphany. Epiphany is from a Greek word that means *to show up* or *to make an appearance*. The Epiphany season is about Jesus showing up in this world. Especially, it's about those occasions when the curtain was pulled back a bit and Jesus appeared in glory. On the First Sunday in the Epiphany season, we remember the Baptism of Our Lord and how his glory appeared in the wilderness at the Jordan River.

For today, there's one thing to notice about Jesus' baptism. Notice that, when Jesus was baptized, something happened.

JOHN THE BAPTIZER HAD BEEN expecting it. He had been expecting someone. Who exactly, he wasn't sure. But he had been expecting someone, someone important, someone John himself wasn't even worthy to serve.

John had been drawing good crowds to his *River's Edge Crusade*. For weeks they had been making their way to him. From the Judean countryside, they came to John. From Jerusalem itself, the center of all things Jewish, the center of the religious life of Israel – from Jerusalem, too, they went out to the wilderness to meet up with John.

And there he stood, in the middle of the shallow river. There he stood, looking the picture of a prophet, looking like the great Elijah himself! There he stood, leading people through the water to transformation, baptizing them with *a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins* (Mark 1:4), baptizing them into a time of renewal.

Repentance and *forgiveness*, those were the key words. If you wanted to find John on the first century internet, you would google *repentance* and *forgiveness*. That's what John was all about.

REPENTANCE AND FORGIVENESS ARE BIG WORDS, full of significance. Big words, bigger than what happens with any one of us. Big words, all about God turning things around, all about God doing a new thing. John went into the wilderness to prepare the way for all that. And people got themselves ready for what God was about to do by going through the water in baptism.

Through baptism, people declared their allegiance to God and to God's coming kingdom – allegiance to God, not to Caesar and not to any other ruler or leader; allegiance to God's kingdom, not to Rome and not to any other realm or system.

With all the other people, Jesus too went out to the wilderness, to the Jordan River. He came to John and was baptized by him. This was Jesus, declaring his allegiance. God was about to do a new thing. God was about to turn things around. God's kingdom was at hand. And Jesus was ready to be part of it all.

SO JESUS WENT DOWN TO JOHN. Jesus went through the water. And something happened. Jesus was baptized, and something happened. That's the one thing to notice today.

What happened? Something that happened to no one else. What happened? The sky split open. What happened? A pathway was made from God in heaven to Jesus on earth. What happened? The Holy Spirit came upon Jesus, came down like a dove, gliding closer and closer, coming to rest on him.

This was the moment! This was the anointing! This was Jesus being made the Messiah, the Christ, the Anointed One! And so God spoke from heaven, God whose kingdom was coming – God spoke from heaven and said to Jesus, *You are my dear Son* (Mark 1:11).

Son of God. That's a title. It means, *This is the king!*

God's kingdom was coming. That's why John was standing there in the wilderness, in the river. God's kingdom was coming. That's why crowds of people had flocked out to John. That's why they had gone through the water in baptism. God's kingdom was coming.

God's kingdom was coming, and every kingdom needs a king. At his baptism, Jesus the Messiah, Jesus Christ, was anointed to be God's king.

JESUS WAS BAPTIZED, AND something happened. It's not a surprise really. Things happen when God and the Spirit get around water.

In the opening sentences of the Bible, there is God, there is water, and there is the Spirit, God's breath, God's wind. And there is darkness. Only darkness. Until God speaks.

God speaks. God sends his Word into the world. God speaks, and there is light. And from that beginning, the entire story of God and the world unfolds.

Psalm 29 pictures God enthroned over *waters* (v. 3), over *mighty waters* (v. 3), over *floodwaters* (v. 10). The Lord rules over those waters. And things happen. Earthshaking things happen. Literally. The ground jumps and quakes. Forests fracture and flame.

When Elijah waited to hear from the Lord, he found that the Lord was not in the wind, not in the fire, not in the earthquake (cf. 1 Kings 19:11-12). But in the beginning, God is in the *wind* (cf. Genesis 1:2) And in the wilderness and in Lebanon, God is in the

earthquake and in the fire (cf. Psalm 29:5-8). God is not always easy, not always safe. But with God – the Lord who is enthroned over all the waters – with God, things happen.

The foundational story for Israel, the story on which the entire Old Testament is built, is the story of the Exodus. Through the water went the family of Jacob. And something happened. Something happened, because a nation came out the other side, a people called Israel.

With God, things happen. Especially when God and the Spirit get around water.

When Paul the Apostle came to Ephesus, he found a group of disciples there. Those disciples had gone down to John at the Jordan River. There they had gone through the water. And something happened. They had changed – or they had been changed. Their lives were now lives of waiting, waiting for what came next. And their hearts were now open, ready to embrace what came next.

What came next, what came after John, was Jesus. And what came after Jesus was the Holy Spirit. And when those disciples in Ephesus went through the water, through the water of baptism, something happened. Not only did they embrace Jesus, they also received the Holy Spirit.

They received the Holy Spirit in a way that left no doubt, in a way reminiscent of Pentecost, with other languages and prophecy. There was no pentecostal fire. But they had just gone through the water. And we usually don't have water and fire together. (I know, I know . . . There was the Cuyahoga River. And the Great Lakes Brewing Company does make *Burning River Ale*. I know.)

The point is, we have the water, we have the Spirit, and we have the word of God in the apostle's proclamation of the Gospel. And when we have all of those things together, when God and the Spirit get around water, something happens. Something is bound to happen. And it does.

WELL, NOW IT'S TIME TO ASK, what about with us? We have gone through the water ourselves. We have been baptized. Is that an empty ritual in our case? Is it something we do, from which God is absent? Do we have the water, but not the Spirit? Do we have the water, but not the word of God?

I suppose that might be the case, if we regarded baptism as an empty ritual. I suppose that might be the case, if we didn't ask for and didn't expect the presence of the Holy Spirit. I suppose that might be the case, if we didn't accompany baptism by the proclamation of the Gospel. I suppose that might be the case, if we reduced baptism to a private practice, to something we do in a corner, away from the church as a whole.

But that's not how we practice baptism. That's not how we were baptized.

It's only an exceptional case when someone is baptized away from the gathered church. It could be a struggling newborn in the NICU. It could be an old man ending his days at Kobacker House. But those exceptions prove the rule. Baptism for us

happens when the church is gathered, gathered in the name of Jesus Christ, gathered in the assurance that Jesus himself is with us, as he promised, with us by the Holy Spirit. Baptism for us happens along with the proclamation of the Gospel, the proclamation of the kingdom of God. Baptism for us happens not through mist, but through water. The floor was quite wet up here after Mikhail was baptized not long ago.

DO WE REGARD BAPTISM AS an empty ritual? Not if we believe the Gospel. And not if we stand in our own tradition.

When Jesus was baptized, something happened. He went into the water a craftsman, the son of a craftsman. He came out of the water the Messiah, the Son of God, the King! After Jesus is baptized, after Jesus is anointed by the Spirit, he is called the *Christ*, the *Anointed One*. Our Catechism reminds us that we are called *Christian* because *we share [Christ's] anointing* (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 32).

When we are baptized, when we go through the water, something happens. We might not feel it at the moment, whether we're baptized as an adult or as a baby – we might not feel it at the moment, but through the water we receive a new identity. Something happens to us, and we aren't any more what we were before.

Brothers and sisters, this is who we are: We are a family. Together we are children of God. Together we are Christians. Our first allegiance is to God and to God's kingdom. Our king is Jesus Christ, the Son of God. And our life-force is the Holy Spirit of God.

THE ENTIRE COURSE OF CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP, from baptism on – the entire course of Christian discipleship can be understood as living out the meaning of our baptism.

From the moment of his baptism, Jesus embarked on the path that would take him to the wilderness of temptation, to Galilee, to Judea, and finally to Jerusalem and the cross. Something happened when Jesus was baptized. He was anointed, anointed not just to have a title, a label affixed to his name, not just to be called *Christ*. He was anointed to be the Savior of the world.

Brothers and sisters, we too are anointed. But not anointed just to have a label, not anointed just to be called *Christian*. No, we are anointed to be kingdom people, to be people who make it our life's work to find out what God's kingdom is about and to live for that kingdom with everything we have.

And that's a calling we can't neglect. Not when it comes to how we spend our time and our money. Not when it comes to our choice in friends and in entertainment. Not when it comes to our attitudes toward people we don't like. Not when it comes to our politics. Not when it comes to our practice of prayer. And not when it comes to our worship and our hunger for God's word and for the bread and wine of the sacrament.

To live for God's kingdom with everything we have is a calling we can't neglect, not and be properly called *Christian*. And it's a calling we won't neglect – we won't neglect it, will we? – it's a calling we won't neglect because, when we go through the water, something happens. Something happens, and we can't ever be the same again.