

Remember Your Baptism

Matthew 3:13-17

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It's Remembrance of Baptism Sunday. I wonder, if you can remember yours?

That's a loaded question, isn't it? Especially if you were baptized as an infant. But even that doesn't always mean we can remember our baptisms, at least not with any sure detail.

When I was still a teenager in Sunday School, my Sunday School teacher was Janet Saxby — a seventy-year old, retired educator who was born and raised in Shreveport, Louisiana who, even though she'd lived in my hometown in Wyoming for the last thirty years still had a southern drawl. One Sunday, she asked us that question: do you remember your baptism?

She read the story of Phillip baptizing the Ethiopian eunuch in a puddle on the side of a dirt road from the book of Acts, and then she looked around the room at the eight or so of us in attendance and she asked, "Do you remember your baptisms?" We all sort of looked at each other, because we all knew full well that she had been in attendance at all of them.

She'd been a member at First Southern Baptist Church in Rawlins, Wyoming longer than any of us had been alive. She'd stood as a witness at every single one of our baptisms. We knew she remembered them. So, being the reluctant leader of the youth group, I raised my hand and said, "Um, Miss Janet." (She never let us call her Mrs. Saxby. She said it made her feel old. That was her mother-in-law's name, not hers — so we settled on Miss Janet.) "Um, Miss Janet," I said. "You were at our baptisms. Surely, you remember them."

"Oh, yes," she said. "I was there for every single one of them. I remember most of them very well."

Then she said this: "Funny thing is, I remember yours better than I remember my own... I know I was baptized when I was eight- or nine-years-old, and I know I was baptized at Billy Graham Revival. But there were hundreds that day who accepted Christ and went forward. I have some vague memories of being pushed along in that crowd of people, but I don't have any specific memories. No memory of the water. No memory of praying with anyone before it happened. Just that crowd. I was just one in a hundred."

She continued, "It really bothers me that that's all I remember. I wish I could remember more — like the date or what was said that pulled on me to make me get up and go down front to be baptized. I doubt that Ethiopian eunuch ever forgot being baptized in a puddle by Phillip on the side of the road. I wish I could remember... which is why I'm asking you now, because I wish somebody had asked me before I forgot. Hundreds of

well-meaning Christians and pastors have asked me *if I've been baptized*, but in the sixty-some years since I was, but nobody has ever asked me if I *remember* it."

"So," she said, "It doesn't matter if *I* remember your baptism. The question is: do *you*?"

Today, we don't just remember our baptisms. We remember Jesus' baptism, too — the day when God declared him to be God's son, and he got busy being about his Father's business.

Each of the gospels tell the story a little differently. Mark tells it with urgency: *immediately* after Jesus came out the water he saw the heavens *torn* open and the spirit, like a dove, descending upon him.

In Luke's version, Herod puts John the Baptist in prison just before Jesus' baptism, so there's no mention of John the Baptist being anywhere near Jesus when he's baptized.

The fourth gospel is so defensive about Jesus' purity that it does not mention his baptism at all. It might give us the wrong impression, you see, to show Jesus being washed alongside all those ordinary sinners.

That's the problem, isn't it?

While the gospels tell varying accounts of Jesus' baptism, what they all agree on is that John the Baptist's baptism was a baptism of *repentance*.

That is the problem: Why did Jesus submit to a baptism of repentance?

John, the Baptizer, storms out of the wilderness demanding repentance from everyone, warning of the wrath to come. "The ax is lying at the root; every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown in the fire. I baptize you with water, but one is coming after me who will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with *fire*. You better repent. Repent and be baptized."

If Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ, the Anointed One, the one for whom John is preparing the way, then why did he submit to John's baptism of repentance?

If John's baptism was for the washing away of sins, of what sin did Jesus need to be washed?

And if even thinking about that question makes you uncomfortable, then you are in good company.

Some scholars are... *polite* with their words about Jesus' baptism. They say it's "perplexing" or "puzzling" or "challenging." But New Testament scholar and Christian historian, John Dominic Crossan, doesn't beat around the bush. He simply says that Jesus' baptism was an "acute embarrassment" to the early Church.

And you can see that embarrassment in the way that each gospel handles it. Mark simply ignores it. Luke puts John the Baptist in prison before Jesus is baptized, so as to remove the tension of it being a baptism of repentance. And John's gospel flat out avoids his baptism and jumps straight to the part where "the Spirit descends from heaven like a dove" (John 1:32).

But the writer of Matthew does something different. Rather than ignore it or avoid it, he confronts the question head on. It is only in Matthew, that John resists Jesus' request to be baptized. In other words, only in Matthew do Jesus and John have a theological debate about why Jesus might submit to a baptism of repentance.

Imagine it if you can:

There is a river full of sinners — people who steal to keep from going hungry and people who've grown fat from having too much; people whose shameful past keeps them up at night and people who are still in the process of building their shameful past; people who know real hurt and who people know how to numb their hurt; divorced people; hung-over people; hypocritical people; proud people.

There must be dozens of them, if not a hundred standing on the edge of that water — dozens of no account sinners. I am standing there. And so are you. We see each other and accidentally make eye contact. We both look away from each other as quick as we can, because, frankly, we're both a little ashamed to be seen here. Because, to be seen here means that we know that we have sinned and need to be washed clean.

John stands hip-deep in the muddy waters of the Jordan River and calls us out into the waters with him to repent and be forgiven. And one by one, we walk out to him, you and me and — don't look! — but even the person sitting next to you right now. And one by one, we're dipped and washed, made clean, made whole, set on a new path with a new lease on life.

Thank God for the Jordan. All our sins, all our impurities washed off by its water. But as we come up out of the water and look down river, we have to wonder what damage we might be doing to the ecosystem downstream from us. How polluted is that water now that all of our sins have been washed off in it? They must be floating on its surface like an oil slick.

And then someone catches John's eye. For the first time that any of us can recall since he stormed out of the wilderness, John seems speechless. He's staring at man, someone we don't know, but that he seems to. The man wades out through that sin contaminated water to where John is and stands face-to-face with him.

"Jesus," he says, "You should baptize *me*. I should not be baptizing *you*."

The man says, "Leave it alone, John; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness."

And with that, the one who should have been doing the baptizing was baptized. And two thousand years later, we are still left wondering, "Why?"

It seems to me that there is something about Jesus putting himself under John's authority that is both critical to Jesus' mission and powerful in its very nature. Dale Bruner calls it the "Miracle of Jesus' Humility."

He says, "The first thing Jesus does for the human race is *go down with it* into the deep waters of repentance and baptism... It is well known that Jesus *ends* his ministry on a cross between thieves; it deserves to be as well known that he *begins* his ministry in a river among sinners" (*Matthew: A Commentary*, 101).

Too often, we look to the miraculous to as an indicator of Jesus' identity. We jump to the part where the heaven's are torn open and the Spirit descends as a dove and a voice comes from heaven saying, "This is my Son, my Beloved, in whom I am well-pleased."

Let's be honest. It's hard to argue with that. If we had watched that scene unfold and heard those words come from heaven, we would undoubtedly look at each other and say, "Ok. We know who this guy is now. This guy is *God's* son."

Isn't it interesting, though, that we rarely have a problem with the part where the heavens are torn open and the voice of God speaks; but where we get our theological panties in a knot is that Jesus was baptized with us sinners?

To be fair, there is a great deal of mystery in what Jesus means when he says that he is to submit to a baptism of repentance in order to fulfill all righteousness. But no matter how you slice it, it does make one thing abundantly clear: Jesus' baptism is a symbolic act that tells us that our God will stop at nothing in order to be in relationship with us, even if it means stepping into water that's been sullied with our sin; even if it means being baptized into a family of sinners.

No matter how you cut it, it points to a God who is always, always, always moving toward us. One commentary I read this week said it like this: we should change the lyrics of that beloved children's song so that it sings, "Jesus loves me, this I know, for his *baptism* tells me so."

Will Willimon tells this story:

"I was visiting a man as he lay dying, his death only a couple of days away. I asked him there at the end what was he feeling. Was he fearful?"

'Fear? No,' he responded, 'I'm not fearful because of my faith in Jesus.'

'We all have hope that our future is in God's hands,' I said, somewhat piously.

'Well, I'm not hopeful because of what I believe about the future,' he corrected me, 'I'm hopeful because of what I've experienced in the past.'

I asked him to say more.

'I look back over my life, all the mistakes I've made, all the times I've turned away from Jesus, gone my own way, strayed, and got lost. And time and again, he found a way to get to me, showed up and got me, looked for me when I wasn't looking for him. I don't think he'll let something like my dying defeat his love for me.'

Willimon says, "There was a man who understood his baptism" (*The Best of Will Willimon*, 78-79).

Our God is relentless in finding ways to us.

St. Augustine famously said, "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You."

I have known that quote for at least 15 years, but it wasn't until this week as I wrestled with why Jesus would submit to a baptism of repentance that I realized the opposite is true, too. Not only have we been made for God, and our hearts are restless until they rest in God, but time and again God also says to us, "I have made you for *myself*, O child, and *my* heart is restless until I rest in you."

The Baptist historian, Bill Leonard, tells this story:

"Our daughter, Stephanie, is a person with special needs, learning and motor skill disabilities. Concepts do not come easily for her. Because of that I supposed that she might never receive baptism since she cannot meet all the conceptual pre-requisites demanded by many baptists.

But on the third Sunday of December, 1991, on the way home from church, Stephanie, age 16, announced to her mother and me, "I think it's time for me to be baptized." We talked about it and she was resolved, so we went to see our pastor, and he was everything a pastor should be for such a moment. He did not speak to her of what she had to KNOW, but what she wished to BE. "If you receive baptism, Stephanie," he said, "you are saying that you want to be a follower of Jesus. Do you want that?" She said yes and we prayed together.

And on Christmas Eve, Stephanie entered the baptistry of the very church where her father had taken the spill years before. "Profess your faith," the pastor said. "Jesus is Lord," Stephanie replied. And under she went in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, in the presence of a congregation that had nurtured her to faith throughout her 16 years."

And then Bill Leonard says this, “We are all special needs persons, you and I. In some of us, it is just more public than in others. Not one of us can ever conceptualize enough to make us worthy of God’s love” (“The River,” *Day1.org*, January 9, 2011).

It’s not about right or wrong. It’s not about pure or impure, saint or sinner. When Jesus stepped into those waters and put himself under John’s authority, he was telling us that God will always, always, always be moving toward us — because God’s heart, even more than our own, is restless until it rests in you.

Amen.