

Sermon on Matthew 3:13-17
CCRC, 4 February 2024
"Remember Your Baptism"

Dear Friends of God,

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I'm here today to tell you to remember your baptism. Baptism gives us our identity and purpose in this world. Baptism gives us the answer to those two questions we all ask ourselves, * "Who am I?", and, * "What is my purpose?".

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We see this as we remember Jesus' baptism. Jesus' baptism declares who he was and what he was called to be in this world.

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As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

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We'll start with the last part, with the voice from heaven that told him who he was: You are my beloved son. What you are doing pleases me.

Jesus is the Son of God. That is, he is the unique Son of God—the only Son, the one begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, who with the Father and the Spirit is worshiped and glorified. No one else can claim that status. All other religious teachers were human teachers, they were born, they taught, they died. But Jesus was from before the creation, through him the creation came to be, and he reigns in highest heaven for all eternity. In the mystery that is the Trinity, he is the eternal Son of God. He is God in the flesh. The voice from heaven confirms it.

This tells us that Jesus is uniquely qualified to do what he is about to do. He has to be fully human because human beings sinned, so human beings must pay the price of that sin. And he has to be fully God so that by the power of his divinity he can bear the weight of punishment for our sin and earn for us and restore to us a restored relationship with God.

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And then we see his purpose. On the wings of a dove the Spirit came down and landed upon Jesus. In this symbolic and physical way, the Spirit anointed Jesus to his purpose on earth. In the Bible, whenever people were anointed, they were either anointed as a prophet, a priest, or a king. Jesus was anointed to all three. The Spirit anointed him to be our prophet. Jesus, the Word of God, began his ministry of speaking the word after that day. He taught and backed up his teaching with healing and miracles. He fully revealed to us the secret counsel and will of God concerning our deliverance. The Spirit anointed him to be our priest. In his time on earth, he knew he had to go to Jerusalem. At the right time, he steadfastly made his way to the cross where he knew he had to give up his life so that we could be free from our sin. He stood in between us and God, praying for us and setting us back in relationship. The Spirit also anointed

him to be our king. He is the one who had authority over the creation, over sin, even over death. He revealed himself as the leader we can follow without fear.

So here in his baptism we learn Jesus' identity and purpose in this world. Jesus is the anointed Saviour sent to join humanity to bring us back into a relationship with God. Jesus is our prophet, priest, and king. We learn this all this from this one act of baptism.

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Jesus never forgot those affirming words and that Spirit-anointed mission in this world. In the very next sentence we read,

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Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.

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He was sorely tempted. Turn these rocks into bread. Throw yourself down. Worship me. He did none of that. I read somewhere that about 2000 years ago the fate of the world depended on a rock staying a rock, two feet staying firmly put, and two knees staying unbent. The fate of the world depended on Jesus remembering who he was and what he came to do. It depended on him choosing the path we rejected and doing for us what we couldn't do ourselves. Praise God that he did not forget who he was. He was the Lord's anointed, the Messiah, God's only begotten Son, sent to present in deed and word the coming rule of God. No plot of Satan could tempt him away from that. No lures of false power and false glory could make him forget who he was and whose kingdom he came to declare.

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In the strength of this victory and the firm knowledge of his identity and mission, he began his public ministry on this earth and followed that calling to the end. He took on the mission of compassion, obedience, and re-creation. His life, teaching, death and resurrection inaugurated the coming rule of God.

When we are baptized into him, we gain an identity. God says to us, "You are my beloved child. I am pleased with you."

That's because we are baptized *into Christ*. We are adopted into his family and are now right with God only because of his righteousness on our behalf, going all the way to death on the cross. We don't have to do anything to gain God's favour—it's already there because of Christ. We are simply God's beloved children because of Jesus.

When we are baptized into him, we join him in re-creation. Romans 6 says that in baptism we die with Christ and are raised with him in newness of life.

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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.

Romans 6:3-4

Our old selves are put to death and our new selves are set free to live according to the way of God. We speak about the hope we have of all things made new.

This is what happens to us in baptism. When we are baptized, God says, “You’re mine. I love you. You’re washed.” And it calls us to a new life. In Galatians 3:27 Paul says

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for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.

We have clothed ourselves with Christ. We start to look like him. We start to wear his love, his kindness, his compassion, his power, his grace, his service. These things shape us.

When we are baptized, we are placed into a church that shares this mission. As baptized people we are part of something bigger than us. We are part of a great, sweeping plan of salvation that encompasses all of history and the future. God has not left the world in its sin, and he is not destroying it with a flood again. But out of the waters of Christ's baptism begins something new, something redemptive, something that embraces you and me. Jesus came to create something new and to re-engage the world toward God’s dream for the world. This is where we learn how to forgive, how to show grace to each other, how to stand up to against the powers and principalities, how to live with hope, how to love, how to show something of the coming kingdom in our homes and lives.

When Paul opens his letter to the Christians in Rome, he describes them this way:

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To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be his holy people - Romans 1:7

You can take that as speaking to you. You are loved by God and called to be his holy people.

Will you remember that whenever you think of your baptism?

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We went to the rebaptism of someone who had been baptized as an infant in one of our churches. In her testimonial she said that because she didn’t remember her baptism it wasn’t meaningful to her. That kind of stung. How was it that she could grow up without a sense of her identity in Christ? Yet it had to have been meaningful. It gave shape to the way she was raised. It placed her in a church where on Sundays where she heard the gospel, where people were faithful to the vows they made to her. It placed her in a church that told her that she was a child of God, adopted into the family of God, and that she is called to follow Jesus. But she didn’t see that, and opted to go for the full immersion believer’s baptism. I suppose it gave her something tactile to remember in her body—the feeling of going down under the water into the death of Christ and of coming out of the water in the resurrection of Christ.

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I have the same hope for her now that I had before she was rebaptized. I hope that she remembers who she is and what she is called to be in this world. And I have that hope for all of us: that we remember it even if we don’t remember feeling our baptism. Remember that you

are a beloved child of God, called to follow Jesus, called to be a living sacrifice of thanks, called to strive against evil and to point to Christ's kingdom in this world.

It's important to know this about ourselves because we live in a world that keeps confusing us about who we are. Advertisers on TV and social media give us the simple and strong message that we are consumers; that our identity comes from what brands we wear and what things we have. It's so easy for us to identify ourselves by what we do: I am an electrician, an engineer, an educator. We sometimes fall into a trap or we experience something in life so devastating that we begin to identify ourselves with it: I am an addict, I am a cheater, I am a victim, I am my disease, I am my past, I am my sexuality. We sometimes engage in identity politics: I am defined by this political party, or that flag, or that cause, or that commentator on social media, or that news outlet. Maybe you use a label that reflects your enneagram: I am a 1, or a 2, or a 9. Perhaps you use an astrological sign.

Who are you letting define who you are?

As powerful as these identifiers can be, they are not the most powerful, nor do they have the final say of who we are.

It is God who gets to tell us who we are. It is God who gives us our deepest identity and our highest purpose. In baptism he does just that. You are my beloved child. I have called you to follow Jesus. As Len Vander Zee puts it,

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Baptized people have a new identity, a new name. Your identity is no longer merely your family, ethnic identity, or culture. Your most fundamental identity is the name of the Triune God.

- Len Vander Zee

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No matter how old you are, it matters that you remember that the waters of baptism flowed over your head. Maybe you're like me and you don't remember what that felt like because it happened when you were a baby. But it doesn't matter. As a pastor, I want you to remember the meaning, the significance, the power of that baptism. Live into that identity and find the freedom, the truth and the refreshment that it brings.

In baptism you have been enlisted in the mission of Jesus from an early age. In baptism you are called to be different: to be light in darkness and salt in blandness. It calls you into a life of kindness and compassion, of praise to Jesus for his obedience on your behalf, of following the law of love, and to live into the new creation he is making. This is gift of God for you already at the beginning of your life.

To have this identity at the core of who you are will help you like it helped Jesus face Satan in the desert. As you go into wilderness places, go through hard times, suffer from doubt, lose a loved one, you will face these things with strength and courage. I am a beloved child of God. When Martin Luther felt discouraged or afraid, he'd often splash water on himself and declare,

“But I am baptized!” John Calvin advised readers depressed by evil to “reflect that they are still on the way” to the “complete victory” that God promises in baptism.

Melanie Weldon-Soiset shares this story after she lost her position as pastor of a church in China:

When I was in my own spiritual desert, I felt exposed and alone. False identities had been stripped off of me, and I didn’t know what was left. In that desert, God offered me a better garment: “Melanie,” God said to me during some of the lowest moments of my life, “you are my beloved child.”
Melanie Weldon-Soiset

Those words shocked her because she hadn’t actually believed them in her heart. But when she surrendered and began to place them at the core of who she was she began to heal and live into who she was in Christ.

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That’s the power of baptism. At the core of who you are you are a person who is loved and called. Nothing can take that away.

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Remember your baptism and follow Jesus.

Let us pray

Prayer:

We give you thanks, O God, for entering our world in Jesus. In the river Jordan, John baptized him, and your Spirit anointed him. You declared him to be your beloved Son in whom you are pleased.

Thank you for his anointing to be our prophet, priest and king. He is the Word made flesh who spoke your word and revealed you to our world.

He is our sacrifice who frees us from sin and death and opens the way to life everlasting.

He is our Lord, our King, our Leader who has all power and authority.

We thank you, O God, for the gift of our baptism.

In the waters of baptism you confirm to us that we are buried with Christ in his death, raised to share in his resurrection, and are being renewed by the Holy Spirit.

You clothe us with Christ and give us a new identity

Help us to put on Jesus and to know deeply who we are in him.

Help us to confess his name.

Help us to offer our very selves as a sacrifice of gratitude

Help us to put on Jesus and strive with a good conscience against sin and evil. Pour out upon us and on your whole church the gift of your Holy Spirit, so that all who have passed through the waters of baptism might be dead to sin and alive to God in Jesus Christ.

Help us to know deeply you love us and what you call us to be.

To you be all honour and glory, dominion and power, now and forever, through Jesus Christ our Lord, in whose name we pray. AMEN