

# THE BAPTISM OF OUR LORD, A MODEL FOR OUR BAPTISMS

A sermon for Sunday, January 7, 2018, by the Rev. Dr. James Mutayoba

THE FIRST SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

Gospel: **MARK 1:4-11** John Baptizes Jesus

<sup>4</sup>“John came baptizing in the wilderness and preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. <sup>5</sup>Then all the land of Judea, and those from Jerusalem, went out to him and were all baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins. <sup>6</sup>Now John was clothed with camel’s hair and with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. <sup>7</sup>And he preached, saying, ‘There comes One after me who is mightier than I, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to stoop down and loose. <sup>8</sup>I indeed baptized you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.’

<sup>9</sup>It came to pass in those days that Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee, and was baptized by John in the Jordan. <sup>10</sup>And immediately, coming up from the water, He saw the heavens parting and the Spirit descending upon Him like a dove. <sup>11</sup>Then a voice came from heaven, ‘You are My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.’”

**Prayer:** Lord, make us simple and down to earth people. Help us to grow in faith by renewing our baptismal vows daily. **Amen.**

An inspector from the Fire Department was making a routine annual checkup on public buildings. He came to a certain church and asked the pastor, “*Pastor, Do you have a sprinkler System in your facility?*” The Pastor, himself a Baptist preacher, answered, “*Officer, We are Baptists, we don’t sprinkle, we dunk.*”

Mark’s text celebrates the Baptism of our Lord. We are told Jesus came all the way from Galilee on foot down to the Jordan River to be baptized by John. Here he was, *the Lord of lords and king of kings*, coming down to the Jordan **as a down to earth person** -- He didn’t puff up, brag, or elevate himself -- He didn’t put on a show despite his status as *the Beloved Son of the Most High God*. Jesus came to be baptized **joining others who were seeking this water, this life-giving experience** at the banks of the Jordan **to inspire us to seek humility and simplicity** just like him.

The River **Jordan had historic and symbolic significance. The Israelites (led by Joshua)** crossed the Jordan as the **threshold** into the ‘*Promised Land*’. At this entry point, the Israelites, freed from slavery in Egypt, felt free indeed entering the Promised Land. Crossing the Jordan symbolized entrance into the Kingdom of God. For us the **Baptismal Font is our Jordan River** -- our entry point into the Kingdom.

## Why Baptize with water?

**Water is the most basic element of life.** Jesus was baptized in water. He commanded his disciples to baptize with water. Three quarters of the world’s surface is made up of water. Our bodies are 75% water. Before we are born, we live in a watery ocean called the womb. **Birth may be compared to ‘crossing the Jordan’ from our mother’s womb, and the Font** in the sanctuary -- the place where **we are ‘born again’ into God’s Kingdom** -- the **heavenly Promised Land.**

Is it any surprise that God chose to use this water, to infuse it with the Holy Spirit during creation? At the beginning of creation, God breathed His Spirit over the waters to bring forth life. We baptize in water because life started in water. *Water upon which God's Spirit was breathed.*

## Is Baptism the Rite of Christening?

Immediately after his baptism, Jesus rose up out of the waters. The heavenly curtain was split, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him. A voice from heaven declared, *"You are my Son, the Beloved one, with you I am well pleased."*

Friends, considering what happened to Jesus after his baptism, we know that **baptism** is more than **simple cleansing with water** -- it is **more than a rite of passage by which we become part of God's family**. It is **an entry point into God's Kingdom**.

Baptism is a gift of God's grace. Through Baptism God declares that we are God's sons and daughters. **We do not only belong to the church but to God**. Baptism does not only create for us the **sense of belonging, but also a sense of security**. We are **secured and forgiven** of our sins through baptism. We are also **assured of God's Spirit** dwelling in us, and are promised eternal life. Baptism is a once and for all rite of passage because it symbolizes the death and resurrection of Jesus (*Romans 6:1ff*).

**More than being a member of a local congregation, we become part of the Universal Church, the Church Catholic** (meaning universal) **through Baptism**. We are part of the **larger family -- the church universal**. We have brothers and sisters all over the world who do not necessarily **share our culture but share our faith**. Ours is a membership that **transcends doctrinal beliefs, geographical boundaries and denominational groupings**. Your **church cannot claim you, only God can claim you** through Baptism.

## What Type of Baptism Should We Administer?

Baptism, which is a gift of grace is also a point of contention among Christians. During his last days on earth, the Lord commissioned his disciples to go into the world to baptize and teach. He himself was baptized as an adult and was immersed in water.

**Tempers flare as different denominations argue what type of Baptism we should administer or whether infants** should be baptized.

- Some churches baptize infants and adults alike because Jesus said, *"Let the children come to me, do not hinder ... for to such belongs the Kingdom of God."* (*Mark 10:14*). Others don't!
- Some immerse candidates in water.
- Others sprinkle water on the heads of catechumens invoking the name of Trinity or the name of Jesus that does the magic.

Later in His ministry, Jesus gives yet another dimension of Baptism, comparing it to His death. The two brothers, James and John, asked Him to be seated next to Him in eternity. *Jesus' reply referred to **the baptism with which he would be baptized,***

***namely, the cross, (saying) “you will be baptized” (Mark 10:39).*** To be baptized in Jesus’ baptism is to follow him into his death and ultimately his resurrection.

**Theologically, the question is not how much water *but how much Spirit.*** The Lord’s gift of forgiveness and the Word of promise, which work the miracle of rebirth do not depend on the amount of water to effect this rebirth but only the Spirit of God. It is the Spirit descending on Jesus after His Baptismal rite that worked this miracle.

Surely, water symbolizes the washing and drowning of our sins but the Holy Spirit does the rebirth. When we sin we need to repent which amounts to a daily renewal of our Baptismal vows -- not daily rebaptism. **We Need to Be Born Again.**

The term “to be born again” is used in America today to refer to **a deep religious conversion experience.** However, we know that being born again is not **a deep human experience.** It is a divine, spiritual experience graced to us by God. So, may the Baptismal rite, or the renewal of baptismal vows, give us the assurance that by our own baptisms we have received salvation; been adopted into the family of God; and are forgiven and accepted as God’s children.

**Amen.**