

"Like a Dove"

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Let's join our hearts together in prayer. Let us pray: **Gracious and loving God, open our hearts to receive your Word and be filled with your Holy Spirit. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.**

Before baptising their child, I approached the young couple and solemnly asked, "Baptism is a serious step. Are you prepared for it?" "I think so," the mother replied nervously. "We've made a delicious lunch and have some really nice deserts for our guests." "Oh, I don't mean that, I mean, are you prepared spiritually?" "Oh, yes," replied the father, "we've got lots of good wine."

Soon after Jesus' baptism, the gospel according to John describes the first miracle of Jesus' ministry: turning water into wine at a wedding in Cana. He helped to prepare them spiritually!

The baptism of a child is like a wedding: both require lots of preparation for the big day at church and lots of preparation for the reception. A wedding joins two people in a blessed relationship together, and baptism joins a person to Jesus in a blessed relationship together. Both are not events for a day, but commitments intended for a lifetime.

John the Baptist was a well-known person at the time of Jesus; written about by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, as well as by the Jewish historian Josephus. John the Baptist led an important movement within Judaism that called for a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. He exhorted the people to an inner moral reform that was symbolized by the washing away of sins through baptism in water. The incentive for repentance is John the Baptist's warning that the day of judgement is drawing near. One more powerful than he is coming after him; one who will baptise with the Holy Spirit.

Understanding the baptism of Jesus is important. It's important because Jesus told his disciples to "make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." The disciples baptised people, as did the apostle Paul and countless clergy that followed them. Baptism is one of two

sacraments that we observe in the United Church (the other is Communion). It's important to understand the baptism of Jesus so that there is meaning in our own baptism.

So why did Jesus want to be baptised by John the Baptist? The simple answer is that it marked the beginning of Jesus' ministry. The gospel according to Mark starts out: "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" and then Mark starts telling us about Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist. Luke also tells us about Jesus' baptism and then tells us: "Now Jesus himself was about thirty years old when he began his work." Jesus' public ministry began with his baptism.

At this time in Jewish history, water baptism served one of three main purposes. First, there was the "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" that was preached by John the Baptist. But the birth narratives tell us that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and presumably he didn't need to repent because he hadn't sinned.

The second kind of baptism was for people who wanted to convert to Judaism; a baptism of conversion. If you were a gentile who wanted to convert to Judaism, you were publicly admitted to the Jewish faith and baptised in water. At the time, Jewish people immersed items purchased from the gentiles in living water to cleanse them. The Jewish people were accustomed to the idea of baptism being associated with cleansing. But Jesus was born Jewish and didn't need to convert.

Third, in the Jewish faith, priests were also baptised. The Law dictated that especially the High Priest was to be "washed with water." In Leviticus 8, we're told that God commanded Moses to bring "Aaron and his sons forward and [he] washed them with water." Later in the ceremony, Moses "poured some of the anointing oil on Aaron's head and anointed him, to consecrate him." This cleansing and anointing ceremony, initiated Aaron's priesthood; Aaron's authorization as God's representative.

After Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist, God anointed Jesus with the Holy Spirit that descended on him like a dove and God declared: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." This was the beginning of Jesus' ministry – God's baptism and anointing of our High Priest.

Baptism with the Holy Spirit was an entirely new concept. Mark uses a very violent Greek word to describe the heavens being torn apart. It's as if God is released from heaven and God's Spirit descends like a dove. Our translation reads "like a dove *on* him," but the Greek actually means "*into* him." Something dramatic happens where heaven and earth are connected: Jesus looks to the heavens with love, God calls out to Jesus with love, and the Spirit moves freely between them in this love, like a dove. The Holy Trinity comes together in Jesus at his baptism and it's symbolized like a dove; like the dove at the back of our Sanctuary, painted by Bob Montgomery.

Jesus' baptism is a dramatic new beginning for humanity. Through Jesus, God is no longer hidden in heaven, but present in earthly life, to be seen by us, to be heard by us, and to be in relationship with us. It signifies the beginning of a new reign of God, through Jesus and through all who are baptised in Jesus' name and filled with the Holy Spirit.

I'd like to share two true stories about baptism. First, many years ago, well-known radio and TV commentator Paul Harvey was asked to write a personal testimony for Guidepost Magazine. In the article, Paul told how he "had achieved everything for which a man could ask." One summer while on vacation near Cave Creek, Arizona, Paul and his wife noticed a small church on an isolated hilltop and on impulse one Sunday morning, they decided to attend the service. Only a dozen or so people were present. When the preacher got up, he announced that his sermon was going to be about baptism. Paul said, "Inside, I yawned." But as the preacher started talking about baptism, Paul started to focus. The preacher talked about the symbolism behind baptism as "the outward expression of your inward commitment ... an act of obedience, a sign of total submission to God." Paul Harvey thought he believed in Jesus, but he had never publicly acknowledged it or been baptised.

Paul said he surprised even himself when he stood up and walked to the front when the preacher offered an invitation to be baptised. Paul describes what happened as follows: "The preacher had said there was nothing magic in the water. Yet as I descended into its depths and rose again, I knew something life-changing

had happened. A cleansing inside out.” After the ceremony, Paul says he cried like a baby. He says “the change this simple act made in my life is so immense as to be indescribable. Since totally yielding to God through the symbolism of water baptism, my heart can’t stop singing ... an inner peace which passes all understanding.” The Holy Spirit had descended like a dove into Paul Harvey.

Now, the second story. Jeffrey Dahmer was an American serial killer, sex offender and cannibal who raped, murdered, dismembered and ate some of his young male victims. It’s sickening; you can’t get more heinous than the crimes of Jeffrey Dahmer. He was given 16 life sentences. While in prison, Jeffrey Dahmer started to read the Bible. He also successfully completed a Bible correspondence course. He met with Roy Ratcliff, a minister with the Church of Christ in Madison, Wisconsin, turned his life over to Jesus and was baptised in a prison whirlpool.

Soon after Jeff’s baptism, people began to notice a Christian spirit in him. His letters and the testimony of Roy Ratcliff, who visited weekly with Jeff, leave little doubt about the sincerity of his baptism.

Jeffrey Dahmer was beaten to death by a fellow inmate six months after his baptism. His baptism was an act of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, like that preached by John the Baptist. But Jeff was baptised in the name of Jesus Christ and he received the unmerited gift of the Holy Spirit who changed his life. Many people, including Roy Ratcliff and Jeff Dahmer himself, thought that he should have been executed and not given a second chance in life because he didn’t deserve it. They’re right - he didn’t deserve it. We are all forgiven by the grace of God.

Jesus’ baptism inaugurated Jesus’ ministry, an incredibly important few years in the history of the world. The Hebrew Bible, including Abraham, Moses, and the prophets; and John the Baptist all prepared the way for Jesus. And then, the Disciples and the Apostle Paul and ministers over the past two millennia have continued to help prepare the way for us through baptism. Repentance, the forgiveness of sin, and the gift of the Holy Spirit, descending like a dove into us. Thanks be to God. Amen.