

Deacon John Riherd – Sunday, January 12, 2025

Biblical scholars have long sought an answer to the problem, “Why did Jesus go to John to be baptized”? The baptism offered by John was a baptism of repentance, and it is the church’s conviction that Jesus was without sin. Why then did he offer himself for this baptism? Although there is no way to know exactly, there is broad consensus on this explanation.

In the life of every person there are certain definite stages, certain hinges on which her or his whole life turns. It was so with Jesus and every now and again we must stop and try to see his life as a whole. The first hinge for Jesus was the visit to the Temple when he was twelve, when he discovered his unique relationship to God. By the time of the emergence of John the Baptist, Jesus was about thirty. That is to say at least eighteen years had passed. All through these years he must have been realizing more and more his own uniqueness. But still he remained the village carpenter of Nazareth. He must have known that a day would come when he must say good-bye to Nazareth and go out upon his larger task. He must have waited for some sign.

When John emerged, the people flocked out to hear him and to be baptized. Throughout the whole country there was an unprecedented movement towards God. And Jesus knew that his hour had struck. It was not that he was conscious of sin and of the need for repentance. It was that he knew that he too must identify himself with this movement towards God. For Jesus the emergence of John was God's call to action; and his first step was to identify himself with the people in their search for God.

But in Jesus's baptism something else happened. Before he could take this tremendous step, he had to be sure that he was right. And in the

moment of baptism God spoke to him. Make no mistake, what happened in the baptism was an experience personal to Jesus. The voice of God, his Father, came to him and told him that he had made the right decision. But more—far more—that very same voice mapped out his future course for him.

God said to him, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased." That saying is composed of two texts. "*You are my beloved Son*"—that is from Psalm 2 and was accepted by the Jewish people as a description of the Messianic King. And "*In whom I am well pleased*"—that is from Isaiah and is from a description of the suffering servant of the Lord whose image culminates in the sufferings and death of the Messiah. Therefore, in his baptism Jesus realized, first, that he was the Messiah, God's Anointed King; and second, that this involved not power and glory, but suffering and a cross. The cross did not come on Jesus unawares. From the first moment of realization, he saw it ahead. The baptism shows us Jesus asking for God's approval and receiving the destiny of the cross.

The Spirit comes upon Jesus while he is praying. Prayer is a key theme throughout Luke's gospel. Nothing important happens for Jesus in this gospel apart from prayer. Prayer must accompany the disciple's ministry as well. Prayer opens the disciple's eyes and ears so we can recognize Jesus when he appears disguised in the clothes of the ordinary people and events of our day.

Luke emphasizes the role of the Holy Spirit in Jesus' baptism. While the actual baptism is briefly mentioned, Luke focuses on the Spirit's descent and the divine voice proclaiming Jesus as the "beloved Son" in whom God is well pleased. This marks Jesus' anointing for mission, a mission shared with us through the Spirit. As Paul reminds us, the Spirit

prays within us, even when we cannot find the words ourselves. Through the Spirit, we encounter God's presence within and around us.

The Spirit not only empowers us for prayer but also sends us on mission. Like Jesus, we are called to heal the sick, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and visit the imprisoned—all in his name. These acts may not make headlines, but they reflect the Gospel lived out in daily life.

For Luke, prayer is central to Jesus' life. Before every major event—choosing disciples, announcing his passion, the transfiguration—Jesus prays. In the Acts of the Apostles, Luke shows how prayer empowers the disciples with the Spirit to serve God amid challenges. Prayer integrates faith into daily life, sustaining us in hope and mission as we await Jesus' return. Is prayer at the center of our lives as disciples?

Through Baptism, we are not only united with Jesus but also joined to a community of faith and mission. Following Jesus is not an individual endeavor but a shared journey of proclaiming the Gospel together.

At our baptism we were baptized with water “in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit”, and we were sealed with Holy Chrism oil, marked with the sign of the cross on our forehead, with the words “you are sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ's own for ever.”

The prayers blessing the baptismal water and consecrating the Chrism remind us that baptism commissions us to announce the good news of Jesus Christ to the world. The voice from heaven identified Jesus as “Son” and “Beloved,” sending him to proclaim and embody God's reign. This mission of proclaiming good news and hope was central to Jesus' ministry, guided by the Spirit given to him at his baptism. We, too, are

called to be heralds of good news. Through baptism, we share in this call to reconciliation and mission, empowered by the same Spirit.

Our Catechism tells us that we receive “new life in the Holy Spirit.” So, is our baptism a “one and done” experience? The answer is both “yes” and “no”. Yes, we only need to be baptized one time. For example, a person like me baptized in another Christian church does not need to be baptized when we join this church. Once is enough. But no, a baptism is not an action that means we are “done”. Baptism is union with Christ in his death and resurrection, birth into God’s family the Church, forgiveness of sins, and new life in the Holy Spirit.

But this new life, like all life, must be nurtured if it is to grow and bring fruit. In the words of Garrison Keillor, the humorist of Lake Wobegon fame, “you do not become a race car sitting in a garage any more than you become a Christian sitting in a church.” We must work on our relationship with God through growing close to the Holy spirit. The Holy Spirit teaches us how to pray, to talk with the God who loves us. The Spirit helps us to grow into the likeness of Christ. But the Spirit does not act on its own. We initiate the growth when we live our lives as Jesus taught us: to love the Lord our God with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our mind, and to love our neighbor as ourselves.

It seems that these tasks can get easier the older we get. I think we can approach the goal of growing in faith because we have fewer external pressures and obligations. Our families are grown, we are retired, we have more time for ourselves, and we can use our time for prayer and reading scripture and spiritual books, and we have time for helping others.

Although our baptism did not lay out for us a road map for our lives that end in the Cross and Resurrection like Jesus’ did, our baptism does

confer an obligation to grow in faith and love. Our baptism gives us a new relationship with God. It is a personal relationship with the One who created us, who formed us, who says we are his, who says we are precious in his sight and that we are loved.

At his baptism, Jesus prayed, expressing his dependence on God and identifying fully with humanity. Like those at John's baptism seeking renewal, we also look for a fresh start as we begin the new year. We hope for a stirring of the Spirit within us to live out our baptismal identity as disciples of Jesus, bringing good news to those in need.