

## **“Remember Your Baptism”**

**Matthew 3:13-17**

Preached by

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Today, we join Christians around the world who are remembering the baptism of Jesus. The first three gospel writers tell us about this event with varying details.

Mark, the earliest gospel writer, sets up the baptism by introducing his readers to John the Baptist, the last Old Testament prophet and forerunner of Jesus. Mark described John as a simple, humble man who lived the life of a poor Bedouin.

Luke did not even mention John when he informed his readers of Jesus’ baptism. This is because Luke has John in prison by the time he writes about Jesus’ baptism.

Matthew includes John in his account, along with the brief dialogue which took place between John and Jesus while standing in the Jordan River. It seems John was reluctant to baptize Jesus, but Jesus insisted he do so to “fulfill all righteousness.” By the way, these are the first words Jesus speaks in Matthew’s gospel.

What all three accounts have in common, however, is the descent of the Spirit upon Jesus at his baptism and the words of a proud Father, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

All this leads to a question that has been debated for generations. **Why was Jesus baptized?** Barbara Brown Taylor believes the Christian church has never been comfortable with Jesus’ baptism. John’s baptism was a baptism of repentance. For what did Jesus need to be forgiven? We know of nothing.

**So, why was Jesus baptized?** Some will tell you he was baptized to set an example for his followers, showing them what he wanted them to do. Wouldn’t it make more sense for him to baptize John if this were the case? I think so.

Others believe Jesus' baptism was a commissioning service. He was changing careers from carpentry to clergy, and this was a divine blessing upon that decision. I see the logic in this explanation.

Some say he stood in line with others to be baptized as a way of identifying with them by walking in their shoes. Since Matthew points out that Joseph was told by the angel to name Jesus, Immanuel, which means, "God with us," I can see how they would come to this conclusion.

Was there more to his baptism than this? I believe there was.

**It seems to me Jesus' baptism was his response to God's call upon his life to make the world better for all people.** Matthew's use of the word, righteousness, leads me to this conclusion.

Righteousness, seeking and doing the will of God, is a major theme in Matthew's gospel. From the outset of Jesus' public ministry, Matthew makes it clear this was Jesus' objective, and he was willing to pay a high price to achieve it.

If this meant closing the carpenter's shop, leaving the comforts of home and setting out on a journey which would make him completely dependent upon the mercy of God and the goodness of people he had never met, he would do it.

If doing God's will meant walking dusty Palestinian roads to listen to people's stories, reaching out to help those who were marginalized and speaking truth to power, he would do it.

If responding to God's call meant putting his life in danger even as those close to him saved theirs by abandoning him, he would do it.

If speaking on behalf of God meant upsetting religious leaders because he would expose their hypocrisy and deceit and call them to repent, he would do it.

If being faithful to God's call upon his life meant dying on an old rugged cross at the hands of his enemies who insisted on silencing his criticism, he would do it.

Jesus' baptism symbolized his willingness to embrace a journey which God himself would make if He walked among us, which helps us better understand why he was given that name, Immanuel. At his baptism, Jesus offered God all his time, talents, resources and influence

to be used to advance His kingdom and make earth more like heaven. As he yielded to the water in the Jordan and let it envelope him, so he yielded to the will of God and let it guide him.

**Do you remember your baptism?** What did it mean to you? Did it symbolize the end of a process commonly referred to as salvation or confirmation or the beginning of a life-long journey to seek and do the will of God?

When I was baptized at age nine, I am not sure I understood this journey motif and the high level of commitment needed to follow Jesus. I saw baptism more as receiving something, salvation, than dedicating my life to making the world better for all people as Jesus did.

Over the years, I have come to understand that baptism symbolizes receiving God's gifts of forgiveness and eternal life, but it also symbolizes joining a fascinating and frightening journey with a God who loves me unconditionally, and a God I can completely trust. Now my baptism symbolizes my desire to seek and do God's will at all times and in all places, and my gratitude for God's grace when I fail. For me, baptism is not the end of a process but the beginning of a journey where each morning I offer God everything I have to be used as He would if He were walking in my shoes.

In some traditions, as Christians enter the sanctuary today they will be greeted by an usher holding a bowl of water. As they dip their finger in the water, they will be told to remember their baptism.

What if we remember our baptism each time we touch water as we go about our daily lives? What difference would it make in our decisions and the way we treat those around us?

Water changed Helen Keller's life. Because of a devastating childhood illness when she was nineteen months old, Keller was left blind and deaf. At the age of seven, her parents arranged for a twenty year-old, visually impaired teacher to work with Helen. Using sign language, Anne Sullivan spent months "spelling" words into her hands so she could learn to communicate with those around her. Everything Helen touched, everything she ate and every person she encountered was spelled out in her hand by Sullivan.

At first, Helen did not understand what her teacher was doing. Those random motions being pressed onto her palm did not compute, but Sullivan did not give up.

Helen's breakthrough occurred as her teacher pumped water over her hands and spelled once again the word, water, onto her palm. Suddenly, Helen realized what her teacher was doing and spelled the word, water, on Sullivan's palm, the first of many words to be identified in the months and years to come.

Water changed Helen Keller's life. What happened the day her hands were baptized under that primitive water pump was the beginning of a fascinating and fulfilling journey she could have never imagined.

I believe this is what God longs for each time a person is baptized. He hopes every candidate will come out of the water eager to seek and do His will as Jesus did. What a journey awaits those who do!