



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church  
Asheville, North Carolina  
8 January 2023  
Sermon: Waters of Baptism  
Rev. Dr. Richard Coble

Matthew 3:13-17

**Matthew 3:13-17 (NRSV)**

3:13 Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him.

3:14 John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"

3:15 But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented.

3:16 And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him.

3:17 And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

What associations do you have with Baptism? Perhaps memories of your own Baptism, or, more likely, Baptisms you have witnessed in this sanctuary and others, times when we claim God's promises for each of us. I asked this question to our Bible study group on Wednesday, and, along with such comforting memories, a few participants also lifted up some anxiety around Baptism, as an initiation, as an act of separating,

those in and those outside the church. They also talked about disagreements among denominations about the *right way and right understanding* of Baptism, and noted that some churches do not recognize the Baptisms of other churches. Some even require re-Baptism. What associations do you have around Baptism?

In my late teenage years, I took an introduction to the New Testament by the Biblical scholar and skeptic Bart Ehrman. As a skeptic, Dr. Ehrman approached the New Testament for a historical point of view rather than the viewpoint of faith. As a teenager raised in the Southern Baptist faith, I didn't realize there was a difference between the historical point of view and the viewpoint of faith; I thought they were one and the same, so you can imagine I had a difficult time that semester. I'm still proud that I eked out an A- for the class, proving for me once and for all, the truth of what Paul says in the book of Romans, that "the Spirit helps us in our weakness" (8:26).

The historical point of view, says Dr. Ehrman, asks what in the New Testament is more likely to be a historical fact rather than an invention or an embellishment by the Gospel writer. He introduces three criteria to help determine an event's historicity:

- First is independent attestation: can multiple sources, without relying on one another, agree that a specific event in the bible happened?
- Second, contextual credibility: does the event conform with the general social and historical context in which it is said to take place?
- And last, the criterion of dissimilarity: does the event reflect the bias or agenda of the author or does it contradict it? In other words,

is it the type of thing the author would make up to serve their wider point?<sup>1</sup>

Overwhelmingly, historians of the New Testament believe that Jesus was actually and historically baptized by John – I know, we were all holding our breath on this Baptism of the Lord Sunday.

In terms of independent attestation, the first criterion, Jesus' Baptism appears in every one of the gospels along with other sources:

- In those days, Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan (Mark 1:9)
- Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove (Luke 3:21-22).
- And John testified, 'I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him' (John 1:32).

For contextual credibility, John's Baptism fits in a long line of Jewish and Ancient Near Eastern water rituals for cleansing, preparation for worship, and repentance.

And finally, and most interestingly, historians believe Jesus being baptized by John does not reflect the bias of the gospel writers. In fact, it might have been a bit of an embarrassment for early Christians. In Dr. Ehrman's words from his New Testament textbook,

Is this a tradition that a Christian would have made up? Most Christians appear to have understood that when a person was baptized, he or she was spiritually inferior to the one who was

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<sup>1</sup> See Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 202-207.

doing the baptizing. This view is suggested in the Gospel of Matthew, where we find John protesting that he is the one who should be baptized by Jesus, not the other way around. It is hard to imagine a Christian inventing a story of Jesus' baptism since this could be taken to mean that he is John's subordinate. It is more likely that the baptism is something that actually happened. The story that John initially refused to baptize Jesus, on the other hand, is not multiply attested (it is found only in Matthew) and appears to serve a clear Christian agenda. On these grounds, even though the story of John's reluctance cannot be proven to be a Christianized form of the account, it may be suspect.<sup>2</sup>

And there you have it, Christian anxiety about Baptism goes all the way back to the Gospel. "Most Christians appear to have understood that when a person was baptized, he or she was spiritually inferior to the one who was doing the baptizing." Do we rank our spirituality, so that one person's piety dominates another's? Was John's baptism of Jesus a way of showing dominance over Jesus?

Another early Christian worry that Ehrman does not name, but other scholars do, is the worry about the reason Jesus was baptized by John: "I baptize you with water for repentance," John says in v. 11 to a group of Pharisees and Sadducees. Did Jesus come to John for a baptism of repentance? Did he need to repent?

Call it Baptismal anxiety. Going all the way back to the earliest Christian reports about the Baptism of Jesus, there is this hint of anxiety, about what Baptism says about one's worthiness and faith. What does it even mean that Jesus was baptized?

Does this anxiety carry over to us, to you? I think it does for me. Raised as a Southern Baptist, baptism was all about making a decision for

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 205.

Christ. And that brought with it questions of if I was ready, if I was worthy, was I right enough with God to be Baptized?

For Presbyterians, Baptism holds a different meaning, but I wonder, when we talk about baptism, or more generally, when we talk about being a part of the church community, I wonder if you might still worry: am I not enough? Or that your faith is not sure enough, that your life is not pure enough, that your past or your station, your reputation or your secrets make you unworthy, make you unfit for these waters, or this thing we call church?

Call it Baptismal shame – the feeling of not being worthy of love and grace, a feeling that lives as much in the body as it does in the mind; it is a piece of a wider, and much greater thing that we could call church shame: everything that places like this have done to make you feel like anything other and less than a beloved child of God, up to an including the church's Baptism, which sometimes makes us feel like we need to change, because we are not good enough as we are, for these waters.

So, given these anxieties, for what was Christ baptized? Jesus explains in v. 15 that it is “to fulfill all righteousness,” but what does that mean? The answer comes in each of the Gospels immediately after the act of Baptism: “And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him 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, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased’” (Matthew 3:16-17; Mark 1:11; Luke 3:33; John 1:32). In Baptism, Jesus hears the Spirit speaking to him, naming him as a Beloved Child of God.

In this way, he gives us an example of what the church is supposed to do in these waters. That is why we repeat the promise that Jesus heard from the Spirit every time we go to this font and Baptize. Every time after the water is poured in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; Creator, Redeemer, and Sustain, we put the sign of the cross on the forehead of

the one baptized, and we give a baptismal blessing. I, and many Presbyterian ministers, say these words, “Child of the Covenant, you are sealed in the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ’s own forever.” In other words, we echo those words of the Spirit, saying “this is God’s beloved child, with whom God is well pleased.”

In the Presbyterian Church, we proclaim this grace is free; it is not earned. God claims you as God’s beloved child before you can ever know God, before you can ever respond, certainly before you can ever repent. It is not about being worthy. It is about being Beloved. That is one reason why we baptize infants along with adults. It is not about a change that we need to make in order to become worthy. It is about claiming our belovedness, even and especially at the beginning of our lives.

And if there is any reason for this thing we call church, it is to proclaim that promise over and over again: that you are a Beloved child of God, that everyone is a Beloved child of God. When we say ‘remember your Baptism,’ that is what we mean: remember that Christ claims you as a Beloved child of God, sealed in the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ’s own forever.

So, on this Baptism of the Lord Sunday, remember Christ went before us so that we too can claim this promise:

Remember your Baptism.

Remember your Baptism.

Remember your Baptism.

Remember your Belovedness.

And for that we say, thanks be to God.