

First Presbyterian Church
January 8, 2012
The Baptism of our Lord

In the lesson from Acts it says: "John baptized with the baptism of repentance...." And in the Gospel lesson it tells us that John proclaimed "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."

Jesus came to John to be baptized. Why? Was he so burdened with sins that he needed forgiveness? That would certainly contradict many of the creedal statements that we make about Jesus. Perhaps the act of repentance in and of itself was needed so that he could now turn his face away from the usual life of people and commit to live his life in radical and devoted obedience to God.

There is a Jewish liturgical prayer book called "Gates of Repentance." Within the Yom Kippur liturgy it says this about repentance.

"Now is the time for turning. The leaves are beginning to turn from green to red to orange. The birds are beginning to turn and are heading once more toward the south. The animals are beginning to turn to storing their food for the winter. For leaves, birds and animals, turning comes instinctively. But for us, turning does not come so easily. It takes an act of will for us to make a turn. It means breaking old habits. It means admitting that we have been wrong, and this is never easy. It means losing face. It means starting all over again. And this is always painful. It means saying I am sorry. It means recognizing that we have the ability to change.

These things are terribly hard to do. But unless we turn, we will be trapped forever in yesterday's ways."

"It means recognizing that we have the ability to change. These things are terribly hard to do." Out of obedience to God and for our sakes Jesus did those things that are "terribly hard."

The story as told by Mark has Jesus being baptized and immediately thereafter the Spirit "drove him" into the wilderness where he suffered 40 days of hardship and temptation. Then John was arrested and Jesus returned to Galilee to begin his public ministry. His baptism – his public act of repentance – was literally the turnaround point in his life.

I don't want to get into a discussion about infant baptism versus adult baptism. Since Calvin the Reformed branch of Christianity has taken its stand for infant baptism. I do want to ask how seriously we take the vows made at infant baptism; how seriously we take teen confirmation, which is the act of confirming those vows taken on behalf of the teenager when she was an infant; and how often we celebrate the reaffirmation of our own baptismal vows?

When a child is brought to baptism, we welcome that child into the fellowship of our Christian community AND we mark that child through the power of the Holy Spirit as a child of God. It is the rebirth of a human, the moment at which that citizen is entered into the rolls of the

kingdom of God through the grace of God. It is the eighth day of creation.

In that sacrament we mark the child with the sign of water and, with the authority passed down to us from Jesus, we call the Holy Ghost to enter into the very soul of the child. That's pretty serious stuff.

One of the scriptural verses frequently used in the baptism is from Romans 6: "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life." "Newness of life:" that means life in God's new creation; living in the eighth day of creation!

How often have you sat here and witnessed an infant baptism? Have you thought about the vows that you – as members of the congregation – promised to fulfill? "Do you, as members of the church of Jesus Christ, promise to guide and nurture this child by word and deed, with love and prayer, encouraging *her* to know and follow Christ and to be a faithful *member* of Christ's church?" When was the last time you prayed for a child whose baptism you have witnessed?

And then we say a prayer that recalls the ways in which water has been significant in the relationship between God and us. It even references

those first few verses from Genesis that we read this morning: “We give you thanks, Eternal God, for you nourish and sustain all living things by the gift of water.

In the beginning of time, your Spirit moved over the watery chaos, calling forth order and life.”

After that we seem to take all of those very serious words for granted until the child reaches the early teen years, and then we enter them into the process of confirmation. *“In that service the church shall confirm them in their baptismal identity. They shall reaffirm the vows taken at Baptism by*

- a. professing their faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior,*
- b. renouncing evil and affirming their reliance on God’s grace,*
- c. declaring their intention to participate actively and responsibly in the worship and mission of the church.*

They are commissioned for full participation in the mission and governance of the church, and are welcomed by the congregation.”

Parents seem to push harder every year for the process to take place at a younger age. I’m not sure why. It’s not a ritual rite of passage. It’s a very serious sacramental step in which the teenager repents, affirms their living faith in Christ and commits to taking an active role in the life of the church. How’s that working out for you?

Some congregations make a practice of celebrating a reaffirmation of our baptismal vows on a regular basis. Some do it whenever the Lord’s

Supper is served. Some do it once a year at the Great Vigil in that time between the crucifixion and the resurrection. For some it is never thought of again until the reading of these words: "Especially we thank you for your servant Jim, whose baptism is now complete in death."

In baptism we experience the reality of the eighth day of creation: life in God's new kingdom. The grace given that infant in that moment is sufficient to lead them into a life of devotion to Christ, and we vow to guide and nurture their life so that they grow in Christian maturity.

Every time we approach the font – and it should be often – we should come forward in an act of repentance, *"and this is always painful. It means saying I am sorry. It means recognizing that we have the ability to change. These things are terribly hard to do. But unless we turn, we will be trapped forever in yesterday's ways."*

For us, to be trapped in yesterday's ways means to be trapped in the old creation. Through repentance we accept the responsibility to change. It is terribly hard to do, but the grace we received in our baptism is sufficient to provide us with the wisdom and strength to enter the new creation; to enter the eighth day.

Amen.