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Epiphany 1 A – The Baptism of our Lord – Jan. 8, 2023

“The Water that Brings a Beginning”

Matthew 3: 13 – 17 Memorize Matthew 3: 13

Water has been in the news a lot recently, some as snow and ice, while the rest of it has just been water. Winter storms and snow literally stopped traffic in many parts of the country, including ours. Water is part of the drama of our life. It brings life, but not enough or too much can bring destruction. This week we’re focusing on very familiar water, the water of baptism.

There are two different ways to think about baptism. The first one recognizes the time of baptism as a saving moment in which the person being baptized accepts the love and forgiveness of God. She or he may grow in the faith through the years, but they will always recall their baptism as the time when their life changed.

The second approach wouldn’t disagree with any of what I just said, but adds one factor. It affirms baptism as the time when God’s love and forgiveness are experienced as a time of change. Tonight/this weekend we baptized little Hattie Hilton.

Some of the changes Mom & dad might be looking for are a ways away. She’ll still need her diapers changed; she’ll still cry when she needs to be fed and put to bed. Mom and dad promised to introduce her to Jesus and help her to grow in the faith. They’ll bring her to church, as little as she is, and to Sunday School when she’s old enough. As she grows in faith, many changes will take place.

So what’s the difference between the two approaches? The first sees the day of baptism as the high point, while the second sees it as the beginning of a life-long process. It is true that in the waters of baptism God laid claim on our lives; it is also true that we spend the rest of our lives trying to figure out what that means.

Sometimes people think they have to clean up their lives in order to get baptized. They think by doing that they become worthy of baptism. Whereas God calls us to the waters to help us clean up our lives. Unfortunately, some who delay, never were baptized, missing out on the joy of life in Jesus.

They would not believe that God wanted them as they were, so He could help clean them up. Don’t make the same mistake. Baptism is not something we earn, nor is it a sign that we have found all the answers. Nothing could be further from that truth.

Baptism is a beginning, a start, not a destination. Baptism reminds us that we were separated from God by sin. God had to bridge that gap. By baptism we are joined to Jesus and His death and resurrection.

Jesus' baptism represented the beginning of His ministry. We love to hear the story of His baptism. Hearing how the heavens opened, imagining the dove descending and hearing God's blessing on His Son. We'd love to think that something like that happens when we are baptized. Perhaps, more important is that we think of baptism as a preparation for the journey of faith that we will take, just as Jesus did after His baptism.

Here are some ways to understand more about our baptisms: first of all, baptism is about a beginning. It's a fresh start. For Hattie it probably won't be as clear as if she was an adult. She won't remember what life was like without Jesus. Whereas, for an adult it might be very striking. So that is part of mom, dad's and our responsibility to help her understand. We all promised to do that, remember?

Paul says that we emerge from baptism to walk "in newness of life" in Romans 6: 4. There are two ways to make something new. We can start with nothing and make something new, or we can start with what we already have and make that new. Baptism transforms our lives in the ways we think, speak, live and act that present to the world the image of Christ.

What does that look like? Baptism transforms stinginess into generosity, narrow-mindedness into thoughtful consideration and prejudice to love. It transforms our fear of one another into a desire for true community. We hear that in the affirmation that we will support her in her life.

Baptism transforms groups of people into churches. Gatherings of individuals into a family of brothers and sisters in Christ and church services into times of worship of the great God who joins us to Himself in the waters of baptism. God continues to work in our lives to bring about the transformation He desires for all of us through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit.

In Ephesians 4, we are shown what this new life looks like. We are urged to lead a life worthy of our calling. Here's what such a life entails: humility, gentleness and patience. We are to bear with one another in love and make every effort to maintain unity in the body? Sound familiar? Kind of like that covenant we ask members to commit to.

Yet, who among us has mastered those things in our relationships with our sisters and brothers in Christ. We know the kind of trouble that is caused by thinking of ourselves too highly and not regarding others with the kind of appreciation they are due.

True humility is not something very many people spend their days trying to achieve. We know what happens when we try to bulldoze our way through every meeting and every conversation. It seems to get our point and agenda across better than when we're being gentle, yet at what cost?

In short, humility, gentleness and patience are sometimes in short supply, but not so among those who are engaged in this lifelong process of growth. We are continually about the business of deepening our spiritual lives by being transformed by the newness which Christ's presence in our lives guarantees.

The second part of baptism is the good news that we've been included. We are incorporated into the body of Christ, we become a member of Good Shepherd which is part of the body of Christ. It is a result of a love that was determined to draw us to Jesus.

Long after the act of baptism, that love holds us together without ranking us as more or less important. It allows us to disagree without being disagreeable. It leads us to use our gifts without comparing them with another's.

For those who think baptism is personal, it is. But it is not private. That's why we do baptisms at worship. The waters of baptism cleanse us from sin, but also has the power to break down barriers between people. I may not always agree with you, but when we are baptized, I can never be anything other than your brother in Christ.

It is easy to see how transformation is necessary in order to live with all who have been included in God's love. As we are transformed, we are more likely to expand the circle of our love to include others as full partners in the church.

Finally, Baptism was the commissioning of Jesus. It was His call to begin His ministry. We are also commissioned to serve in the name of Jesus Christ. God has called us to particular work that will utilize our gifts in building up the body of Christ and making the world better.

Now I'm not saying you became a pastor, but you do become a minister of the Lord Jesus Christ and His church. Too often we view ministry as what the minister does. Ministry is the work of all baptized believers, everyday disciples, who are responding to the call and claim of God on their lives.

When I was growing up many people thought that you couldn't serve until you were confirmed. I think we have come to see things differently. When Hattie feels God's call in her life, I believe we should do everything in our power to facilitate that, just as we would for anyone else.

I'm not trying to get out of work by saying that. That actually is my work: helping you use God's gifts in the service of His ministry. That's always been our goal. By that we strengthen the body of Christ, letting people explore and grow in the joy of ministry.

I love Garrison Keillor's story of Larry the sad boy. Keillor writes, "Larry the sad boy was saved twelve times, which is an all-time record in the Lutheran Church. In the Lutheran Church there is no altar call, no organist playing 'Just As I Am,' and no minister with shiny hair, manipulating the congregation. These are Lutherans, and they repent the same way they sin, discreetly and tastefully."

He continues, "Granted, we're born in original sin and are worthless and vile, but twelve conversions is too many. God didn't mean for us to feel guilty all our lives. There comes a point when you should dry your tears and join the building committee and start grappling with the problems of the church furnace, the church roof and make church coffee and be of use."

I love those last few words that we need "to be of use." We are called to serve God by serving others. Just look around. You'll find plenty to do when you open your eyes and you'll see what God is calling you to do.

Count me in: With whom will you share your joy of new life in Jesus?