

So today, we have to returned to our annual January ritual in which we hear the powerful story of Jesus' baptism in the River Jordan, by John the Baptizer.

Now, before we go any further, I am just going to name it and claim it and say that the sacrament of baptism is bizarre.

I don't mean that in a negative way, because lot of religions throughout history have had cleansing rituals that involved water, but Baptism is strange because while it feels like it's within reach, it's just beyond our grasp.

We think we know what it is, and why we do it, but it's also this sacred and holy mystery, which is beyond explanation.

And yet, while many rituals in our church and wider culture feel like they are losing their significance, Baptism still retains its power in the life of our church.

Even non-active folks who haven't darkened the door of a church for years, they still bring their children to be baptized.

Maybe it's because they think it's the right thing to do or because they are fulfilling a family obligation, but I think it's more than that.

It's human nature to want to belong, to want to fit in, to have an identity that we can claim.

This is one important lesson that this morning's story has to teach us, that Baptism is about committing to being a lifelong member of the Body of Christ, and likewise, being welcomed and celebrated with open arms, knowing that you are now part of a beloved community that will always love you, support you and celebrate you for exactly who you are.

That brings us to our second important lesson, which might be seen as the shadow side of this warm and fuzzy aspect of baptism.

Yes, baptism is a beautiful moment in which we are claimed as a beloved child of God, created in God's image, just as Jesus was.

But it's also a high calling, which comes with a lot of responsibility.

It's not a one-time ritual to be checked off the list of life's milestones, it's a promise to commit our lives, day in and day out, to this Body of Christ.

Or as Martin Luther wrote in one of his catechisms, *"A truly Christian life is nothing else than a daily baptism once begun and ever to be continued."*

Martin Luther reminds us that Baptism is our promise to remember each day, who we are, and whose we are, and how beloved we are, and to live our lives accordingly.

We know that one of the most important premises of baptism is community, precisely because Jesus was baptized by someone else, in community, with a whole bunch of other folks who were baptized as well.

If anyone qualified to baptize themselves and leave the messy religious system behind, it would have been Jesus. But that's not what happened, because Jesus isn't a lone ranger and you can't be a Christian, or Jew for that matter, in isolation.

Jesus was in community with others and showed his commitment to the community by living with and for the people.

Now, I am pretty easy-going and flexible when it comes to people participating in the life of our church, and doing what I can to empower people to participate in ways that are meaningful for them.

I do my best to help foster whatever rituals or sacred moments I can, to collectively celebrate important events in our lives.

However, when it comes to Baptism, I am a little more of a stickler.

When a family comes to me wanting to get their child baptized, one of first things I ask them is to really think about whether this is the community of faith in which they want to raise their children.

Is this the place where they want to be active participants, who will allow us the opportunity to shower love and blessings upon their children as they grow up and move into adulthood?

Some parents aren't pleased with this perspective, presumably because they didn't think they'd be asked to make such a commitment.

That's not the response they were expecting.

They thought they'd be able to meet with the pastor once, set up a date, put the baby in a nice outfit, invite the extended family with cameras in tow, have a nice reception and off they go.

This request that I make, I know it's beyond the scope of what some people are willing to do, isn't easy for me.

Because I want to take advantage of every opportunity the church is given to spread God's love with the world, and I don't want to deny people the opportunity to have their children baptized here.

But I also have a responsibility to this community, to all of us.

And we have a responsibility to that family and that child, and I can't ask you all to surround those newly baptized children of God with your love and support if you don't, and will never have the chance to, know them.

And if that family has no intention of coming back here, that's what I'd be doing, asking you all to make a false promise that you wouldn't be able to fulfill and I can't, in good faith, do that.

Baptism is the beginning of a life-long commitment and the church where you choose to be baptized or where you choose to have your children baptized plays a large role in that commitment.

Because while you or your family (on your behalf) is saying, "Yes!" to God, the church in return is saying "Yes!" to you, to loving your children.

The church is saying “yes” to being the embodied community of Christ-followers where your children will grow up and be reminded week in and week out that they are loved, that they matter and that they will always have a place where they belong.

Even Jesus was baptized in community with other people in that river, the same people who would be integral to his ministry.

I also think people have this expectation of baptism being a one-off kind of thing, because we have traditionally upheld the interpretation that being baptized is kind of seal of approval from God.

It means the person is on the right side.

Set for life.

Headed for heaven.

Inoculated against sin and death for eternal life.

We think of baptism as properly aligning us to receive God’s blessings.

But I think that interpretation gives us humans a little too much power.

I am pretty confident that no sacrament or sacred ritual that we perform,

even if all the right words are said and elements are used and the person who leads it has all the right credentials,

has the power to speak on behalf of God.

Or, as Marilynne Robinson writes in her book entitled, Gilead, baptism *“doesn’t enhance [our] sacredness, but acknowledges it.”*

And because we have this new awareness or acknowledgment, it compels us to live more intentionally, rooted in God’s calling for us.

We are asked live into that calling everyday of our lives, as Jesus-followers, as people who signed up and said yes, by participating in that holy sacrament.

We commit to living a life to and for and with God, which begins with being part of a community of faith where your belovedness is acknowledged and celebrated through baptism.

If you aren’t convinced, and you still think that the purpose of Baptism is primarily to absolve of our sins and secure our spot in heaven, just look at the life Jesus led.

Baptism hardly led him to an easy life or a comfortable life on a moving sidewalk to paradise.

The Gospel tells us that after being baptized, Jesus was sent to the wilderness to survive temptation for 40 days.

Then, it was back to civilization and new challenges.

He was to give up building houses and furniture to build the realm of God.

That led to stories of his hometown congregation trying to run him off a cliff, being denied by his friends and betrayed by his associates.

His baptism led to his being killed by capital punishment.

This hardly seems like the glories of heaven, the blessing of a good life of prosperity and comfort.

And Jesus's challenges all seem to begin with that baptism, at the holy River Jordan, when we're told the voice of God declared, *"You are my beloved. With you I am well pleased."*

Jesus went into the waters of the Jordan as a carpenter and came out as a Messiah.

He is the same person, but he has changed direction.

Now in our time, we who come to be baptized humbly accept that God has joined us to one another.

We participate together in the new thing God is doing.

We share in being named and claimed by God.

This isn't primarily to fill our need to feel accepted and loved, though it certainly does that.

When we forget our baptism, we forget who and whose we are.

The world insists that we belong to ourselves, our employer, our family, our children's school or sports team, or the government of our country.

As Christians, all those claims of ownership come second to God.

We belong to God, through the body of Christ.

Through Baptism, we are joined to Jesus in his ministry today, doing what he did, but in our circumstances, today.

It is a mark of our calling, to embody God's love and grace in the world today.

It is a commitment to submit our lives to God.

To give up control.

Day in and day out.

To live with compassion where it is most needed.

To show people a universal God of unconditional love, come what may.

It is an every day process, not just a once in a lifetime ritual, that is neat and tidy, in a pretty church, with gifts and cake.

It's an altered life, in real time, each day.

Being the body of Christ, and what a blessing it is. Amen.