

January 08, 2023

IT'S A BIG DEAL!

Matthew 3:13-17

Which one of you remembers the date of your baptism?

Year after year, there are some important and significant dates that we remember and observe in one way or another. Sometimes the events that those dates mark are remembered with joyful celebrations, and sometimes they are remembered with solemn commemorations.

No one forgets Christmas, New Year's Day or their birthday. And no one should forget their wedding anniversary - even though some of us do, and get into big trouble for so doing.

Likewise, one forgets the anniversary of those events that caused great pain, such as the loss of a loved one.

But which one of us remembers the date of our baptism?

Could it be that the reason why we don't remember the date of our baptism is that for us, our baptism is not really a big deal?

Today, we read about the baptism of Jesus by John, and for both Jesus and John, it was a big deal! And while we may not fully understand and appreciate all of it, it is a big deal for us as well.

When Jesus showed up at the Jordan River where John was baptizing, and requested to be baptised, it was a moment of great uncertainty for John. What was he to do? He tried to turn down the request saying to Jesus: "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" But Jesus' response was "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then John consented to baptise Jesus.

Why was John reluctant to baptise Jesus?

For one thing, John regarded Jesus as “one more powerful than he was, the thongs of whose sandals he was not even worthy to untie”. So for Jesus to come to him to be baptised was a big deal for John.

But what I believe must have been an even more important consideration for John, and what makes the baptism of Jesus a big deal for us, is the fact that John’s baptism was a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins - as Mark explains it in his account. (Mark 1:4)

Sin speaks of brokenness and falling short of what is good and right, just and loving. And repentance means a complete change of mind, a new direction of the will – a reorienting of our lives towards God. John’s baptism was a public expression of one’s desire and decision to change course – it signified a turning away from that which creates brokenness, hurt, separation, and a turning to God.

The question that arises is “Why was Jesus there to be baptized by John?” Was he there to confess his sins? Was he there to repent – to do an about-turn? If that were the case, that does not accord with what we know of Jesus - he whom the Gospels say was without sin.

Why then did Jesus go to be baptized by John?

I believe that in his baptism, Jesus is both committing himself to the will of God and offering himself to us.

Unlike the others who went to John to be baptised, Jesus was baptised not because he needed to, but because he chose to. And in choosing to be baptized, Jesus was identifying with us, taking upon himself our frailty and brokenness, and opening for us a new and better way.

Jesus’ baptism was his commissioning for ministry, and Jesus understood that his ministry is not just about doing things for people, it’s about being one with them. It’s about being with us, wherever we are and whatever our circumstances. In his baptism, Jesus gave himself to us; he took his place alongside hurting humanity, and he gave everything – his love, his labour and his life. No wonder God declared to him: “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

Jesus’ baptism makes our own baptism significant and meaningful. In our baptism, we commit ourselves to the way of Christ even as he offers himself to us in love.

Our baptism is not just an event – an occasion for family and friends to gather and for cute pictures to be taken, it's not a rite of passage; it is an act of commitment. A commitment to turn away from that which destroys and devalues life, that which is wrong and harmful, and to take our place as children of God.

As the baptized, we are called to be members of a community that thinks and acts differently. We are required to tell the truth in a world that finds it easier to lie; to give in a world that is more inclined to take; to love in a world that's often indifferent; to make peace in a world that's ready to fight; to serve in a world that prefers to be served and to seek God in a world that relies upon self.

Our baptism is a commitment to share ourselves with others, and be there for them as Christ is there for us.

Our baptism is also significant and meaningful because it points us to the hope that is ours because of Christ. It tells us that Christ looks at us as family.

In Baptism God chooses us and says that we are loved. And God promises to be with us and for us. That promise and blessing help us to face our challenges - at home, at church or in the community, with greater confidence, and to approach our concerns about the world and our personal lives with hope, knowing that God is with us.

That is a promise that we especially need to hear as we enter into a New Year. Think, for a moment, of all that's likely to happen in the coming year – the decisions that will be made, relationships that will be started (or ended), career changes, illnesses endured, challenges surmounted, risks taken, adventures dared, and love shared.

So much will come our way in the coming weeks and months. Some of it we may anticipate and be prepared for, and much of it we simply can't imagine.

It can be daunting, until we remember that God is with us through it all, guiding us, strengthening us, encouraging us, and granting us grace sufficient to become the people God wants us to be.

We are God's beloved children, not because of what we do, but because of who God is – a loving parent who wants nothing more than to see us flourish.

In our baptism, we can hear Christ saying: This is us - you and I in relationship; facing life's pains and embracing life's possibilities together. That is the hope to which our baptism points. That is the promise that our baptism offers and calls on us to accept and affirm every day and in every situation.

Our baptism tells us that we are people in relationship with God through Christ, and that's a big deal!

As we enter into this New Year, if there is only one resolution that we make, let it be to commit ourselves to live fully in the promise and purpose of our baptism.

Thanks be to God.

Rev Sydney Elias