

Sermon: The gift of baptism. Isaiah 43:1-7, Luke 3:15-17, 21-22.

Prayer: Baptism font. Marked with the Word, Water & Spirit.

It's the season when winter storms and snow literally slow down and stopped traffic in many parts of the country. Drivers and pedestrians forge through the waters to get to work and school. Sometimes we just have to stop and respect what the water around us is doing. Water is important to daily life. It sustains life.

Jesus sets an example for us when he was baptized in the Jordan River by John the Baptist. Again we hear the promise given to Jesus through the Spirit. God spoke the life-giving words through the sacrament of baptism; *"This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."* Jesus was not in need of baptism for the forgiveness of sins. Jesus was baptized by John to affirm the role of a humble servant in his public life and ministry. As a servant, Jesus established a new covenant between God and God's people:

I have given you as a covenant to the people,
a light to the nations,
to open the eyes that are blind,
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,
from the prison those who sit in darkness.

(Photo of the original site where Jesus was baptized at the Jordan River)

Through baptism we have a covenant relationship with Jesus. The sacrament of baptism is a saving moment in the life of people. The person baptized accepts love and forgiveness from God. The baptized person sees the religious tradition as a transition to their relationship with God. It marks a new beginning. Sins are forgiven and the person is offer an opportunity to start all over again. It is a life changing experience. It gives you a new identity as a child of God. The person is nurtured and nourished through the work of the Spirit and the Community of Faith.

Baptism affirms our identity in Christ, a sense of belonging in community and a start over to the promise from God. In, with and through the waters of baptism we are claimed and sealed with the cross of Jesus Christ. We spend the rest of our lives trying to figure out what it means to live in relationship with community and God. Baptism is a life-long journey with Christ. We are constantly growing and evolving through the work of the Spirit.

We do not stop learning and following Christ. When we give up or detour from the journey, God is seeking us out. When we fail to keep our commitment and grow in faith, God is waiting to welcome us home. When the waters are murky and unsettled around us, God's grace is poured out abundantly upon us. God is not finish with us and we must not give up.

In my experience, sometimes people say: "I want to get my child done." Or I want to join the church but I am waiting until I can get my life in order. The hard truth is that none of us will

ever find our **life sufficiently** in order. If we do then the death and resurrection of Christ will be meaningless to the world. Baptism is a gift from God. It is not something we earn by our values and life choices. Here we follow the model of Jesus Christ and offers the gift of baptism to anyone who desires the promise of God. Here we do the work of Christ to anyone who is willing to start over and to make difference in life.

In the United Church we can sprinkle, immerse or pour water on the person. We can baptize infants or adults and welcome them into the church. It is not about membership it is more about a way of life as a follower of Jesus. It gives you identity to be called a Beloved child of God, a sense of belonging and a new beginning.

These two photos were taken summer 2023. Ken and I travelled from Tel Aviv to Jordan. It was a pilgrimage journey for us. We reflected on the experience within as journey through the sacred sites. The Jordan River is a tourist site where some people go to be baptized. There are ceremonies happening all day for a fee. People pay to get a gown and go through the act of baptism. We were doing a photo shot moment in the Jordan River. Baptism is once. It is not where and how much water that is poured out but the words spoken and the mystery of the Spirit in the moment.

Here at baptism something marvelous happens with the blessing of God. This is the mystery of our faith and it is much like the life of Jesus as the journey unfolds. We try to understand what it means for us. Each day we fall short of Christ-like ways but each day God's grace is cleansing, nurturing and rebuilding relationships. We are on the journey to become the person God created us to be. God is not finish with us.

St Paul says: *"We emerge in baptism to walk in newness of life."* Romans 6:4. The community celebrates with a family when a baby, child or anyone is baptized. You certainly rekindle the joy hearing the promise of eternal life. Baptism transforms our lives and we begin to learn, think, speak, live and act in ways that represent to the world the image of Christ. Each one belongs to the "Body of Christ."

We gather in community to pray for someone going through grief or taking chemo or other forms of illness. We believe, Jesus would answer our prayers while facing an uncertain future in the church. Gathering in community for prayers is one of the gifts of baptism. Jesus joined us in the waters of baptism and journey with us through the situations of life.

The story of Jesus baptism validates our baptism. We carry this treasure within us. God spoke at your baptism and mine, hear the promise again: **"You are my beloved child and with you I am well pleased."** **"We are God's beloved children called to be the community of faith."**
Amen

Rev. Margaret MacDonald
Bolton United Church