

Every year, on the second Sunday of January, Christians around the world remember the baptism of our Lord. This is also a time to remember our own baptism, to reflect on it’s meaning, and to reaffirm our baptismal vows. What is baptism?

At the risk of beginning with the obvious, baptism is where we are initiated into the Christian faith through water – clear, pure, sparkling water. If you are thirsty, water is refreshing. If you are dirty, water is cleansing. If you go long enough without water you will realize that water is a necessity for life. In baptism, water is a symbol of all these things. Through water and the Spirit we begin a new life in Christ.

Here at Providence United Methodist Church we recognize all valid forms of Christian baptism. For example, sometimes water is sprinkled in baptism. Sometimes people are immersed in baptism. Sometimes water is poured in baptism. Charles Allen down in Texas once jokingly said, “It is so dry in Texas that the Baptists have started sprinkling, the Methodists have started using a damp cloth, and the Episcopalians are using talcum powder.” He thought that was funny. I say, rather than divide ourselves, why don’t we just recognize that there are different ways to baptize. Sprinkling, immersion, and pouring: this is what *we* do when *we* baptize. But this morning I want to talk about what God does through baptism.

There are three words that describe what God is doing in the first chapter of Mark: **cleansing, claiming, and commissioning**. When it comes to baptism, I want you to remember these three words. Let me give you the background.

In 1948, a young Bedouin boy was tending his sheep in the desert of Judea. Like all little boys, he loved to throw rocks. He threw a rock into a desert cave and he heard something break. What could there possibly be in a desert cave that would break? Do you know the answer? It turned out to be one of the greatest archeological discoveries of our time – it was one of many clay vessels containing the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Since that time archeologists have discovered that at the time of Jesus Christ there was an entire settlement of people living near these caves. Most likely these people were Essene Jews who had gone out into the desert to get away from the corruption of the world. The Dead Sea Scrolls tell us that this community wanted to devote themselves to God and to be found pure and holy for the coming Messiah. What you may not know is that at the site, archeologists discovered 10 Mikvahs. What is a Mikvah? In the Jewish religion, a Mikvah is a ritual bath. Every day the people who lived in the desert would walk down the steps into the water – not to get the dirt off their skin, but as a ritual – a symbol of being made spiritually clean for the coming Messiah. I tell you this because I think that this is where the practice of Christian baptism originates. Let’s look at the evidence.

John the Baptist came from the desert of Judea. John wore clothing made of camel hair, with a leather belt around his waist. He ate locusts and wild honey. The honey sounds good, but I will pass on the locust. John was the picture of an Old Testament prophet. I'm not saying that John was an Essene. There are some differences. But I am saying that John would have been very familiar with this practice of ritual cleansing.

John the Baptist came to the Jordan River where he challenged the people of Israel to repent of their sin. John prepared the people for the coming of the Lord, saying "The one who is coming is greater than I - I am not even worthy to untie his sandals." John baptized people as a symbol of cleansing so that they would be found pure and holy when the Messiah comes.

Not long ago I ran across an article about a new product which originated in England and now is available in the United States. For only \$14.99 you can now purchase a can of spray on mud. That is right, mud. It is sold to people who own trucks or SUV's so that you can now have that off road look while you are driving around in the city. I was fascinated by the article because you have to admire anyone who can sell mud. The problem with this product, however, is that police officers hate it. They want it banned from the market. In the United States people are using spray on mud to cover up their license plates so that their vehicles can not be identified by surveillance cameras when committing crimes. I shook my head when I read this. Who would think of such a thing? - using spray on mud to commit a crime? The problem is not that our vehicles are dirty. Rather, the problem is that we are not clean in our hearts.

Chaing Kai-shek, the Chinese military leader who failed to unify China against communism, said: "It is easier to tame the bandits of the hills than the bandits of the heart."

William Shakespeare had Julius Caesar say to his soon-to-be assassin: "The fault, dear Brutus, is not in the stars but in ourselves."

The psalmist prayed; "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right Spirit within me." (Psalm 51). How do you get a clean heart? How are we cleansed within?

In our passage of scripture this morning, John the Baptist used water. There is nothing magical about it. It is water - H₂O. It is about the most common stuff on the planet. But having come from the desert, this would have been a symbol of life. I believe that John used water as a symbol of how God can make us clean within.

Then, one day a man from Galilee appeared on the banks of the Jordan River. John recognized him immediately. In the Gospel of Matthew, John said: "Lord, you should be baptizing me. Not me baptizing you." Why was Jesus baptized? I believe that Christ did this to set an example for us to follow. I believe that Jesus was adopting the practice of baptism as an initiation into what would become the Christian faith.

When Jesus came from the water, “the Spirit descended like a dove and a voice came from heaven saying; ‘you are my Son, whom I love, with you I am well pleased.’” God claimed Jesus as his Son. In baptism, God claims you and me as well.

Harry Potter. When the Harry Potter movies first came out, it caused a controversy. Some said, “This movie is about wizards and witches and the church should speak out against it.” Others said, “This is just a good story like the Wizard of Oz and it helps our children become good readers.” This became an issue so I said, “O.K., I need to see this movie.”

It begins when Harry Potter was a baby. He received a mark on his forehead. Of course, he was too young to understand it at the time, but when he was 12 years old he began to realize that the mark made him special. This mark meant that he had a destiny to fulfill. I came away from the theater thinking that if our children can understand Harry Potter, then they can understand baptism. My advice is to tell your children that this is just a good story, but also tell them that when you were a baby you were baptized. When you were baptized God has put his mark on you. Tell them, “You have a destiny to fulfill – you belong to the Lord.” In baptism God claims us.

Henri Nouwen. For years Henri Nouwen was a professor of Spiritual Formation at Harvard University until he gave it all up to spend the rest of his life living and working with those who are disabled. He learned a lot from that community. Henri Nouwen said, “The people that I live with hear voices that tell them that they are not good enough, that they are a problem, that they are a burden...” But Nouwen said; “...the spiritual life begins when we listen to the voice that says, ‘you are my daughter, you are my son, whom I love. With you I am well pleased.’ Jesus heard that voice when He was baptized. I want you to hear that voice,” said Nouwen. “...The voice that calls us the beloved.”

Friends, whenever a baptism takes place God is claiming us. In infant baptism, Jesus said “Let the children come to me for to such belongs the Kingdom of heaven.” In adult baptism, Saint Paul said, “You are no longer your own, you have been bought with a price,” (1 Cor. 6:20) you belong to Jesus Christ.

This brings us to our final point. Baptism is a symbol of cleansing, in baptism God claims us, and (what was the third word? Don’t tell me – it starts with a C...) commissioning!

Why does the Gospel of Mark begin with the baptism of the Lord? That is where the ministry of Jesus Christ begins. In our passage of scripture, Christ was being commissioned to begin his earthly ministry. We are a part of His ministry. Jesus said, “As my Father has sent me, now I send you.” Through baptism, God cleanses us, claims us and commissions us to continue the ministry of Jesus Christ.

I close with this thought.

When I was first appointed to Providence UMC my friends asked, “How many members does Providence have?” The answer is 2,584 (professing members plus preparatory members – all who are baptized). Then they asked, “How many ministers does Providence have?” Do you know? The answer is 2,584! Every baptized member of our

church is called to be in ministry. You say, “Hold on now, I just come here because I like the music and these people are my friends. I’m not an ordained minister.” Yes you are. Your baptism is your ordination. If you are not actively engaged in discovering your ministry then you are missing your calling and the greatest adventure of your life. Every baptized Christian is commissioned to continue the ministry of Jesus Christ.

If you have never been baptized, I would love to talk with you. Baptism is a life giving commitment. We can talk, we can set a date for your baptism, and we will have a special part of our service for that at a latter date.

If you have been baptized, I would like to offer you the chance to reaffirm your baptism. At the conclusion of our service we are going to turn to page 50 in our hymnals. None of the ushers are going to ask you to come forward – this is the kind of thing where you have to be led from your heart. We will have four stations where we will take water and make the sign of a cross on your forehead and say: “Remember your baptism and be thankful.” This morning is an opportunity to renew God’s cleansing in your life, to reaffirm God’s claim on you, and to be commissioned for where God is calling you into ministry.