

Baptism of the Lord
January 8, 2017
Matthew 3:13-17

Baptism

The font is here. The water is in the pitcher. The Easter candle is burning. The candidate is present, resting for the moment in her mother's arms. So, if you haven't figured out what's about to happen, I'll tell you: Today we enact the sacrament of baptism. (In other words, the fun is about to start.)

There are two occasions in the liturgical year when baptism is especially appropriate. The first is Holy Saturday, the Eve of Easter. The second is today, called the Baptism of the Lord.

Back in 4th century Rome, the practice on Holy Saturday was to have the baptismal candidates enter the baptismal pool completely naked. After taking the plunge, they would emerge from the pool to be dressed in a white garment. Next they would be given milk and honey to drink. Then everybody would go into the church for Holy Communion.

It would have been fun to baptize Emilia Louise Rosica that way, but she missed the opportunity, due to the fact that she hadn't yet been born last Easter. (It's just as well. I'm not sure the session, which includes her mother, would have approved of that approach to enacting the sacrament.)

In a way, today is even better. Today we recall Jesus' own baptism by John in the Jordan River. We hear from the Gospel writer Matthew how John first resisted the idea that he should baptize Jesus. **"I should be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"** John said.

"Let it be so for now," Jesus replies, **"for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness."** In other words, it's God's will that Jesus should take his place amongst sinful folk like you and me and receive baptism at John's hands. It fulfills all righteousness. It's the right way for Jesus to begin his ministry.

And when Jesus comes up out of the water, sure enough, the heavens are opened to him, the Spirit of God descends like a dove, and a voice from heaven says, **“This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”**

No doubt about it, baptism was indeed the right way for Jesus to begin his ministry. He didn’t need to be baptized in order to get right with God. He needed to be baptized to point us to the God who longs to say to us, “You are my children, my beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

Baptism launched Jesus into his ministry, and it does the same for Emilia Louise. At this font, God claims Emilia as God’s own, and, tiny as she is, calls her into ministry.

When you think about it, only four things are needed to enact this holy sacrament. We’ll need a body, water, a word from God, and a community.

First we need a body. A real, flesh-and-blood, actual body. Before it does anything else, baptism reminds us that we are part of God’s good creation and that God loves us in our bodies. Not body apart from soul; not soul uncomfortably imprisoned in body, but body and soul united – flesh, blood, sinew, bone and spirit.

We forget that sometimes. We are too much the children of Plato and not enough the children of Genesis. You can’t baptize a disembodied soul. You can’t wade out into the Jordan River and hold your nose as you pass under the water unless you’re a body.

Jesus’ baptism is the sign of God’s incarnation, God’s presence in the flesh and blood of Jesus of Nazareth. God has come to us in the child born of Mary, held in her arms, suckled at her breast, nourished by her own body. Baptism reminds us that bodies are good and that God has come to us bodily in the person of Jesus Christ.

So, for baptism you need a body. Just look at this girl with her glorious crown of jet-black hair. She more than fits the bill.

Second, you need water. Water is necessary for life in general, and it's one of the Bible's favorite symbols of God's gracious provision for life. The Spirit of God broods over the watery chaos in the act of creation. The Psalmist praises God for the water that flows from the springs at the foot of Mount Herman. Jesus converses with the woman at the well, and tells her of "**living water**" that bubbles up into eternal life. The children of Israel pass through the waters of the Red Sea as God leads them out of bondage.

You have to have water. Lots of it, if possible. We don't have a pool, so this font will have to do.

Body? *Check*. Water? *Check*. What else do we need?

Well, we need a word -- a word from God. We need for God to tell us again who we are and why we are doing this holy thing. That word comes in scripture in many ways. It comes to us in God's words to Israel, "**I shall be your God and you shall be my people.**" It comes in the words of Peter's sermon on the Day of Pentecost. "**Repent, and be baptized every one of you . . . for the promise is for you, and your children, and for all who are far way, everyone whom the Lord our God calls . . .**"¹

It comes in the words and actions of Jesus. Remember when people were bringing children to him, and his disciples tried to turn them away? "**Let the little children come to me,**" Jesus said, "**and do not stop them, for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs.**"²

Baptism does not happen at our initiative. It is our *response* to God's gracious calling. God makes the first move, and we respond. Just keep listening. In a moment I will tell Emilia all about what God has already done for her. Then I will remind her of the heart of the gospel: **We love because God first loved us.**

God speaks and we respond. God acts and we make eucharist.

¹ Acts 2:38

² Matthew 19:14

So, we have almost everything that's needed. We have a body. We have water. We have a word from God. Only one thing is lacking. We need a community.

Baptism is not an individual act. It is the act of the church, the community of believers. It marks the beginning of Emilia's journey in the faith, a journey that takes place here, among us. In a moment I am going to ask two questions of you, her church family:

Do you, as members of the church of Jesus Christ, promise to guide and nurture Emilia, by word and deed, with love and prayer?

Will you encourage her to know, trust, and follow Christ, and to be a faithful member of his church?

If you answer, "We do," you will be entering into a covenant, a covenant as important as any commitment you will ever make in your life. Emilia needs us to show her how to live her life in obedience to the God who calls her in these waters.

She'll need to learn how to welcome the stranger. We can show her that.

She'll need to learn about that great cloud of witnesses that surrounds us right now, about the Bible, and how to be an agent of reconciliation in a troubled world. We can teach her that.

She'll need not just head knowledge. She'll need to experience God's love for her through us. We can show her that. That's what we're here for.

A body, water, God's word, and a community living out the good news of Jesus Christ. That's all you need for baptism, provided, of course, that the Holy Spirit is working through all of these. And we trust that the Spirit will be present, for that is God's promise.

All is ready. What could be more fun?