

**Matthew 3:13-17** (NRSV)

<sup>13</sup>Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. <sup>14</sup>John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” <sup>15</sup>But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he consented. <sup>16</sup>And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. <sup>17</sup>And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

*(The Message)* <sup>13-14</sup> Jesus then appeared, arriving at the Jordan River from Galilee. He wanted John to baptize him. John objected, “I’m the one who needs to be baptized, not *you!*”

<sup>15</sup> But Jesus insisted. “Do it. God’s work, putting things right all these centuries, is coming together right now in this baptism.” So John did it.

<sup>16-17</sup> The moment Jesus came up out of the baptismal waters, the skies opened up and he saw God’s Spirit—it looked like a dove—descending and landing on him. And along with the Spirit, a voice: “This is my Son, chosen and marked by my love, delight of my life.”

**Acts 10:34-43** (NRSV)

<sup>34</sup>Then Peter began to speak to them: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, <sup>35</sup>but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. <sup>36</sup>You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. <sup>37</sup>That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: <sup>38</sup>how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. <sup>39</sup>We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; <sup>40</sup>but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, <sup>41</sup>not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. <sup>42</sup>He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. <sup>43</sup>All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

**“I AM BAPTIZED”**

Sarah Jo Sarchet was a Presbyterian pastor in Chicago. She tells of the time when a 10 year-old boy in her congregation, named Cameron, walked into her office and said he needed to talk to her. Fresh from soccer practice, and wearing his Cincinnati Reds baseball cap, Cameron had a

request for his pastor. *"I'd like to be baptized,"* he said. *"We were learning about Jesus' baptism in Sunday School. The teacher asked the class who was baptized, and all the other kids raised their hands. I want to be baptized, too."*

Using her most caring tone of voice, she said, "Cameron, do you really want to be baptized because everyone else is?" His freckles winked up at her and he replied, *"No. I want to be baptized because it means I belong to God."*

She was touched by his understanding. "Well, then," she said, "How about this Sunday?" His smile turned to concern and he asked, *"Do I have to be baptized in front of all those people in the church? Can't I just have a friend baptize me in the river?"* She asked where he came up with that idea. *"Well, Jesus was baptized by his cousin John in a river, wasn't he?"*

Caught off guard, she conceded, "You have a point. But, if a friend baptized you in the river, how would the church recognize it?" Realizing this was a teachable moment, she climbed up on her foot stool to reach for her Presbyterian Book of Order that was located on the highest shelf. But before she placed her hand on the book Cameron responded.

*"I guess by my new way of living."* He said.

The pastor nearly fell off the foot stool and left the Book of Order on the shelf. Cameron's understanding was neither childish nor simple. It was profound. Baptism calls us to a new way of living. For Baptism is God's work, not ours. Our job is to respond to God's presence in our lives.

Salvation is God's gift, not our achievement. Grace is a gift. So is faith. In baptism, God adopts us as God's own. God reaches for us, embraces us, claims us as God's chosen ones, as heirs, as royalty. We are marked with the seal of the love of Jesus Christ. Baptism occurs not because we have come to God, but because God has first come to us, and sent a Son to redeem us.

So, we come – we are baptized. But this baptism is not the end. It is the beginning of a lifelong pilgrimage with God, a lifelong discourse with our Creator, our Redeemer, Jesus Christ, and our Sustainer Holy Spirit. As Martin Luther often noted, baptism is a lifelong process of conversion and

nurture which begins at the font and does not end until death, until we are at last tucked safely into the everlasting arms of the God who first reached for us in baptism.

Like Jesus, as he was emerging from the waters of the River Jordan, at baptism, we claim our identity. We learn who we are in God’s eyes, as well as whose we are for all of eternity. Baptism signifies to us washing, cleansing away ~ putting to death our sinful past. And it signifies new life in Christ, incorporation into the local and global community of faith. Baptism seals a person’s identity as a beloved child of God.

Imagine how different our lives can be when we truly believe that the Creator of the universe loves us just as we are, and desires for us to grow into the full potential for which God created us. Imagine life lived not just for self, but to glorify our Messiah who was willing to give his life for our salvation. The result – WE WOULD LIVE OUT OF FAITH, NOT OUT OF FEAR! As a community of faith, we are called to nurture others, to help each one to grow into their identity as God’s beloved children. Jesus’ own ministry is shaped by that knowledge, and so is ours. As we open ourselves to receive God’s love, we free ourselves to share it.

In the imagination of your mind, travel with me to the far northern regions of Europe, to the city of Husum in Germany. Husum hugs the shores of the North Sea. The year is 1921...almost 100 years ago. For decades, every January, the community had gathered for their annual winter festival out on the ice of the bay. They had colorful displays of food, drink, toys, and the enticing rhythms of dance bands. Everyone had gone out on the ice from the shore to skate, dance, eat and make merry ... everyone that is except Tante Tina.

Tante Tina, a lame old woman and the widow of a sea captain, was not well. She watched the beloved festival from her bed, near the window, in a house perched high on a wall by the sea. From that vantage point, what she sees strikes terror in her heart. A small but dark cloud approached from the west, unseen by those at the festival on the ice. It was the unmistakable sign of an oncoming and very threatening storm. She knew

the sign well, as the aging wife of a sea captain. She could still hear his voice warning her of the danger that would follow.

Tante Tina tried desperately to warn the community. After she struggled to open her window, her screams were not heard above the merriment of laughter around tables and music from the bands. And Tante Tina can see that no one else is aware of the oncoming danger. Although no one hears her cries, her desire to do the right thing and save the lives of the community bring her to a point of focus and a bold offering for the sake of saving others. Surrounded with the tumult of the skies, the carousing of those at the celebration, and the impending terror of the people, she prays for the courage to act without counting the cost. She becomes strong with clarity for she has seen the ravages of such storms, and knows that she must act on behalf of others.

Tante Tina, an unlikely bearer of salvation, sets a burning coal to her straw mattress and somehow manages to crawl out of the flaming torch that was her home. Her neighbors and friends way out on the ice see the burning building, not the old woman crouching outside, and rush off the ice to put out the fire and to save the life of the one who is saving them. Before long, the western cloud brings the stormy wind that breaks up the ice in a death-threatening flood. But all of the neighbors are now safely ashore. Letting the flame burn brightly in the night was all that had saved the vulnerable community.

Baptized in the name of Jesus, we will face with Jesus, our own occasions of tumult, joy, chaos, growth, difficult decisions, and opportunities to serve and save – all tangled together. Into those occasions we can carry the enlivening and clarifying voice, light, and vision of God with us, of God blessing us, of God inviting us into discipleship with its inherent cost and joy. It was Jesus, who, at his baptism, heard and saw that which would give him purpose in saving those around him, those who would come to believe, -- even us! Jesus ignited the flame of faith in that moment which would cause mere human beings to engage in self-sacrificing acts in order to bring others to know truth and joy, celebrations and love, in Jesus, the Christ. We are called to reflect that flame, that light

of Christ, in powerful ways in our lives and in our world. That light, reflected by those who follow Christ, can continue to shatter the darkness of sin and death. That light can warm us to amazing compassionate acts and works of justice in the name of Christ. That light can lead us forth in mission and ministry in order to diminish or extinguish the forces of darkness and the destruction that are present in the world even today. In the name of Christ, renew your acceptance of God’s claim on your life.