

## **Jesus' Baptism and Ours**

Peter and Mary Ellis moved slowly to the front of the church carrying their six-month-old son Dylan. It was the service of his baptism, and the congregation looked forward in anticipation of this new member of God's family being welcomed that morning. But Dylan had been a fussy baby, prone to bouts of crying and unsettled wiggling. Would these disturb the proceedings that everyone was looking forward to?

The minister was waiting at the baptismal font as the family approached. It had been decided that Mary would hold her son throughout the service to calm him and give a sense of reassurance of her presence during the ceremony. Still, this didn't prevent Dylan from getting upset as the minister intoned "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit" and sprinkled the water, continuing "may the power of the Holy Spirit work within you, that being born of water and the Spirit, you may be a faithful witness to Jesus Christ" during the laying-on-of-hands. Then something wonderful happened.

Dylan suddenly stopped squirming and crying. A big smile came over his face. His whole body relaxed and seemed at peace. It was as if he understood at this moment that he was loved and accepted, safe and secure in his parents' and the congregation's care. It was a moment of joy for everyone as the service concluded, "Dylan Ellis has been received into the one holy catholic and apostolic church through baptism. He has been made a member of the household of God, to share with us the priesthood of Christ. Let's welcome the newly baptized." Everyone erupted into applause as the parents returned to their place in the church.

For the Jews, baptism was for new converts to their faith. It represented the desire of the person to turn from their old ways and embrace the ways of God as revealed in the law of Moses. It was the sign of acceptance into the community of believers among whom they wanted to live.

John the Baptist emphasized these points for those who came from Jerusalem and surrounding areas to show their desire to be cleansed, renewed and forgiven, “Repent of your sins and turn to God for the Kingdom of Heaven is near. And when they had confessed their sins, he baptized them in the Jordan River.” (Matthew 3:2,6) No wonder, then, that he hesitated when Jesus came to him requesting the same thing. Jesus had no sins to repent of, nor was his way of life in any form contrary to God’s will or Jewish law. So why did Jesus come to John for this strange request to be baptized? Let’s see how this act was an important step in God’s plan not just for him, but for us as well.

The baptism of Jesus was...

1) An identification with humanity. “Then Jesus went from Galilee to the Jordan River to be baptized by John. But John tried to talk him out of it. ‘I am the one who needs to be baptized by you,’ he said, ‘so why are you coming to me?’ But Jesus said, ‘It should be done, for we must carry out all that God requires.’ So John agreed to baptize him.” (Matthew 3:13-15) John was correct in understanding that he was the one needing Jesus’ help, but the request speaks to a deeper issue. Jesus needed to fully identify with us in every way, including the critical need of being accepted by God.

“Because God’s children are human beings – made of flesh and blood – the Son also became flesh and blood. For only as a human being could he die, and only by dying could he break the power of the devil, who had the power of death. Therefore, it was necessary for him to be made in every respect like us, his brothers and sisters...Since he himself has gone through suffering and testing, he is able to help us when we are being tested.” (Hebrews 2:14,17a,18)

Notice the reason Jesus gave John was “to carry out all that God requires.” Baptism symbolizes important steps in a person’s acceptance by God and welcome into God’s family.

Jesus needed to model the humility and obedience necessary for repentance to happen. “Though he was God, he didn’t think of equality with God as something to cling to. Instead, he gave up his divine privileges; he took the humble position of a servant and was born as a human being. When he appeared in human form, he humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal’s death on a cross.” (Philippians 2:6-8) In the act of dying and rising to new life, every person now has the opportunity to receive the same things in our baptism.

## 2) An affirmation of God’s presence

“After his baptism, as Jesus came up out of the water, the heavens were opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and setting on him.” (Matthew 3:16) This physical manifestation of God’s presence would have been greatly encouraging to Jesus, just about to encounter the difficult period of testing in the wilderness that followed. Not that Jesus wasn’t filled with the Holy Spirit from conception, or simply received God’s commission to begin his ministry at that moment as some think. No, this was a wonderful demonstration of God’s nearness as he fulfilled “all that was required.” We, too, can be affirmed of God’s nearness when we accomplish good deeds in Jesus’ name.

## 3) An empowerment for the mission ahead

The prophet Isaiah in our Old Testament reading had this to say about Jesus’ ministry, “He will bring justice to all who have been wronged. He will not falter or lose heart until justice prevails throughout the earth. And you will be a guide to light the nations. You will open the eyes of the blind. You will free the captives from prison, releasing those who sit in dark dungeons.” (Isaiah 42:3b-4a, 6b-7) Jesus modeled, not just humility, but service in God’s name. For an oppressed people, these acts of kindness and healing showed the unfailing love characteristic of divinity.

This wouldn't have been possible without the fullness of the Holy Spirit filling him and motivating his every thought and action.

Our own mission may have elements of these in them, too: gifts of hospitality and welcome, gifts of caregiving and healing, gifts of teaching and instruction, gifts of organization and leadership. Whatever the Spirit has placed in us to add to the church's overall mission, we should be eager not only to identify but to use these talents and skills, thanking God for empowering our service, just like Jesus.

#### 4) A blessing of acceptance and love

“And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my dearly loved Son, who brings me great joy.’”

(Matthew 3:17) What better way for Jesus' baptism to conclude that this strong statement from God of Jesus' place in the family and the emotion it stirs up. Human parents can experience joy, too, when their children successfully go about reaching their potential. For God, seeing Jesus about to embark on his public ministry, this was an even more intense moment of celebration as the words “my dearly loved Son” indicate.

It's the same for us, as God wants to shower acceptance and love as we model our lives after the example of Jesus. The apostle Paul wrote, “Indeed, you received God's Spirit when he adopted you as his own children. Now we call him ‘Abba, Father.’ For his Spirit joins with our spirit to affirm that we are God's children. And since we are his children, we are his heirs. In fact, together with Christ we are heirs of God's glory.” (Romans 8:15b-17a) Just what this glory entails was brought out in our Psalm. Listen to the mightiness of our Creator which he desires to share with us, “The voice of the Lord echoes above the sea. The God of glory thunders. The Lord thunders over the mighty sea. The voice of the Lord is powerful; the voice of the Lord is

majestic. The Lord reigns as king forever. The Lord gives his people strength. The Lord blesses them with peace.” (Psalm 29:3-4, 10b-11)

Sheryl grew up in a Jewish family who lived in a predominantly Christian neighborhood, being exposed to everything from the ‘Lord’s Prayer’ at school to the Christian holidays of Christmas and Easter. She was attracted to the Jewish festivals of Passover and Hannukah with its candles and lights, but doubted the stories of Jesus as Messiah and Redeemer. But was she overlooking something important? Even as a child she remembered asking her mom, “Why don’t we believe in Jesus?”

Interfaith marriages weren’t uncommon in her family, so when she married a Christian man there was no alarm from her parents. It was one afternoon when the doorbell rang and her sister-in-law appeared at the door with a bible that she started to think otherwise. “What would I do with that? It’ll probably just gather dust on a bookshelf!” “You might be interested in what you find,” was the curious reply. That evening Sheryl glanced through the bible and was surprised to find the entire Jewish scriptures within it! That got her intrigued – maybe there was a connection between the Christian faith and her own.

Over the course of the next months, she accepted her husband’s invitation to attend church and hear the message of the Christian gospel. She found so many similarities with what she already understood about redemption through the sacrifices in the law and the blessings of living God’s way that perfectly reflected Moses’ instructions to the Israelites that it was easy to grasp the treasure of Jesus that she’d been long searching for.

May we be like Sheryl in our search for God’s truth and goodness promised in the Christian message. Let’s make the days ahead productive in sharing our gifts of love. Amen.