

SCRIPTURE

Matthew 3:13-17

13 Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. 14 John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" 15 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.

16 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. 17 And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

MESSAGE

The baptism of Jesus this morning – always an interesting topic. I enjoy this scripture because this seemingly simple narrative challenges us; humans have a tendency to become lazy in our thinking. Given the choice, most of us don't want to try very hard.

There is good reason for that; pattern recognition allows us to navigate a complex world – for the most part we don't need to overthink routine matters. If we had to stop to consider the nature and meaning of everything that we encounter throughout the day we'd never make it out of bed in the morning.

So as we figure things out in life we file away that information and rarely think of it again unless something disrupts the pattern to make us reconsider. Once we learn that socks are for keeping our feet warm and protected, we no longer think about socks aside from deciding which colour to wear. We figure out that common courtesy is the social lubricant that reduces friction between people, so we say please and thank you as a matter of course. We no longer think about it, we simply do it.

Our lives are filled with such cognitive shortcuts – learned behaviours, repetitive routines. They help prevent us from becoming overloaded or overwhelmed by the sheer volume of decisions that we have to make every day.

However, as with anything, we can overdo this pattern recognition behaviour to the point that we spend much of our days on autopilot. What we do becomes routine, habitual; even unconscious. Surprisingly, we can do some very complex activities without thinking. Have you ever hopped in the car and ended up at your destination with no real awareness of the drive itself?

A couple of times I've been driving and ended up in the wrong place – I've intended to go the grocery store but as I drive down the same old road in the same old car with the same old song on the radio I end up at the church because the autopilot just took over.

As much as the autopilot can be helpful, it can also be a problem. We don't want to be frozen into inaction by overthinking the simplest things – that's not life. But neither do we want to spend all our day simply reacting without awareness – that's not life either.

I think in North America we rely too much on our autopilots, and that's not good. We're not fully living, not engaging with the world. A life lived on autopilot is characterized by boredom and lack of purpose or meaning. Sounds like our culture, doesn't it? We need constant entertainment and distraction – seven second videos and phone holders built into shopping cart handles. As individuals we all vary, but as a culture, as a society, we generally go through life as amoebas, seeking out and reacting to stimulus with very little thought or contemplation.

Today's scripture shakes that up. At least, it does for me. If asked what the purpose of baptism is, many of us would respond that baptism is for the washing away of sins. And that's not wrong – Mark wrote that John the Baptizer proclaimed a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

We could get nitpicky and ask whether it is the water or the repentance that is doing the actual washing – though perhaps that misses the point. The point is that the Sunday School answer is that baptism washes away sins.

But if that is the case, why would Jesus get baptized? Did Jesus have some sins that we don't know about? Did Jesus need forgiveness for something?

This is the question that confronts us, and shakes us out of simply responding with the easy, unconsidered answer. Either Jesus didn't understand what baptism was all about, and he got in the wrong lineup, or we're missing something.

John directly confronted Jesus about this. 'What are you doing?' he asked. 'Shouldn't you be the one baptizing me?'

Jesus responded 'This is the way. Carry on.' He seemed quite sure about what he was doing. If Jesus fully understood what he was doing in submitting to baptism, then that can only mean that our understanding of baptism is incomplete.

Baptism does represent a washing away of sins, but if the sinless one was baptized then there must be something more to it than that.

Jesus' baptism as recorded in the gospels was special. At Jesus' baptism the Son of God was present, standing in the river; the Spirit of God descended; the voice of God resounded. That must have been awesome.

The voice of God declared 'This is my Son, my beloved, in whom I am well pleased.' This pronouncement is a declaration of identity. By naming Jesus as Son, God simultaneously claimed Jesus as his own and gave Jesus the power and the authority of the Godhead.

Immediately following this, Jesus began a ministry of miracles; of healing, cleansing, feeding, loving, sacrificing, calming storms, creating and quieting riots, facing down the devil and death itself.

When we look at Jesus baptism in context, we see that for Jesus this was a transformative event. Through baptism, Jesus went from being Mary's 'miracle baby' to being a bona fide miracle worker. With his newly announced identity, Jesus was imbued with a new sense of purpose and intentionality. Remember I talked of a lack of purpose earlier.

So let's reconsider our concept of baptism. Often we see it as a washing away of sins. That also means that we see it as an end. We go through a baptism or catechism class, have our sins washed away, then we're all good with God and we're done. Often we don't see people again once they've been baptised, that's the end of the line.

But by noticing that Jesus' baptism was not an end but a beginning, a transformation into a new life with a new identity, new power, new intentionality and new purpose. The same is true for us. The washing of sins is still true of baptism, but that is not the goal. The washing of sins is simply one component of our transformation into sons and daughters of God, gifted with power and purpose.

Even that transformation itself is not the end, because it is not a one and done deal. It is a continual, lifelong process.

In the years since my own baptism I've been growing. I've had the opportunity to study theology with an intensity that not many get to do. Each week I continue to contend with scripture: I read it, pray about it, listen to it, fight with it. I try to make it say what I want it to, then eventually I have to resign myself to what it actually does say and submit to that.

As I learn and grow, I'm actually learning that I know very little. It seems counter-intuitive; I should be thinking that I'm getting to be more of an expert, but instead I'm growing increasingly aware of my own limitations.

This is true in many other areas of life as well. Getting a degree does not make one an expert in anything. When I graduated as a computer programmer I knew nothing of the skills demanded of me in my first job. At best, an undergraduate degree simply gives us enough grounding to begin to ask a somewhat intelligent question. It is a truism that the more we learn, the more aware of our ignorance we become.

Now, I don't say this out of some kind of false modesty, nor to discourage folks who might think 'Well if the minister feels like he's only just scratching the surface, what hope do I have?' I'm telling you this because along the way I've discovered something wonderful.

I've discovered how to feel awe. When I'm faced with my own limitations, it's not that there is something wrong with me. The problem is not that I'm slow, or incapable. I'm wonderful. You are wonderful. We're made in the image of God, we're fantastic creatures – we're amazing.

But God is even more amazing. Whatever we think of God, it's not nearly enough. Whatever we think of this incredibly intricate and beautiful creation that we are a part of, it's not nearly enough. The reason I feel small is not because of my lack, but because of the awesome wonder of God and his works.

What a world to live in – a world that amazes and astounds, because we have a God who awes and astonishes. Whatever we think is too small, and I love being reminded of that.

Today's scripture reminds me of that. What I think of baptism is far too small, too feeble. Baptism is not an end, it's a beginning. It's identity. It's purpose. It's a confirmation, it's a commissioning. Baptism is transformation.

Let the words soak into you, and form who you are.
You are my child, whom I love. I am so pleased with you.
Now go live your life with purpose.