

The Baptism of Our Lord  
Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

The water was muddy and more than bellybutton deep as I stood in the lake at Camp Brosend with Brother Don Ashby, the pastor of South Friendship General Baptist Church, to be baptized by him sometime late in the summer of 1981. My way to those waters had been more than a little bit winding.

As you may remember, my mother was a Christian but my father was not, at least not until very late in his life. And since my mother couldn't drive, we hardly ever went to church when I was young. Although my mother did her best to raise me in the Christian faith, and certainly passed along the virtues and values of her own religious convictions, I strayed from her beliefs sometime in my early teens. Like many youths do, I began to drink heavily, I did drugs occasionally, and I ran around as often as I could with wild, wild, women! In the religious vernacular of rural Southern Indiana where I lived, I was lost...about as lost as a young man could be at the time.

But then one day, when I was nearly nineteen, a former girlfriend invited me to attend church with her. To her surprise, and mine, I went, and heard again the gospel story – the old, old story of Jesus and his love – the story my mother has passed on to me – the story I had somewhere left behind. And something must have come over me when I heard it again from different lips, because a few weeks later, on a Sunday night, the 12<sup>th</sup> of July, 1981, I walked the aisle at that little church and knelt down at the altar to surrender my life to God.

Not long afterwards, Brother Ashby, or someone else in that little church, told me that I needed to be baptized. Even though it was a Baptist church, that little church didn't have a baptistry or baptismal pool for baptism, so some other body of water had to be found deep enough to immerse me in, after the Baptist fashion. That's what led us to the lake at Camp Brosend.

The water was warm, as I recall, it being late in the southern Indiana summer. Brother Ashby stood by my left side, his right hand resting on my back, as he spoke a few words to the small congregation gathered on the nearby shore. Then he raised his left hand, prayed for my soul, invoked the name of the Triune God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – and then plunged me under the muddy water. He didn't hold me down very long; he probably should have held me down longer since I had a lot of sin that needed to be washed away! And then he raised me up, all dripping wet, as though I'd been raised to new life from a watery grave.

And the angels sang a little song...or so I imagined. And the congregation clapped in warm approval...that much I recall. Up we came – up out of the muddy waters – to stand on the sand of the lake's little shore where I was surrounded by my newfound brothers and sisters in Christ to receive from them a host of warm handclasps and firm back slaps welcoming me to the family of God.

I've forgotten the faces and names of most of those who were there that day, but I'll never forget Melba or what she did for me that warm summer's afternoon. Melba was an older woman who worked with me at the corner grocery in Boonville, Indiana. She was a cashier at the store and I was a packaging and logistics technician. In other words, I bagged groceries and carried them to customer cars! Melba was also a Christian and she was pleased to see me enter the family of faith, so she came to witness my baptism in Christ.

When I came up out of the water, Melba met me on the shore with a decorative dove – the kind you might use to decorate some flower arrangement – half as big as the real thing, covered with feathers, and white as snow – and she pinned it on my dripping shirt as a reminder that my baptism was just like the baptism of Jesus Christ! Just as Jesus had gone down in the muddy Jordan, I had gone down in the muddy waters at Camp Brosend. Just as he had come up to receive the Spirit in the form of a dove, the same Spirit had come on me. Just as the Father had claimed him as his own Beloved Son, he had claimed me, too, as his own beloved child. And just as he went on from there to do great things for God, the way lay before me to do great things too, if only I would follow the Spirit's lead. I've been trying to do just that these past 37 years – sometimes with more success than at other times. But the waters keep washing, and the Spirit keeps coming, and the voice from heaven keeps sounding my name! And I keep following the sound and doing what I can to leave some little mark for good and for God.

"Remember your baptism and be thankful," we sometimes say in the liturgy of our church. In fact, we'll say it in a few moments when we renew our baptismal vows. That's easier to do if you were baptized as an adult as I was. But some of you were baptized as infants, far too young to remember a thing. Perhaps you can remember the stories of your baptism as told to you by your parents or godparents. Perhaps you have a few photos lying around in some scrapbook you've packed away. Perhaps you have a baptismal certificate or a baptismal date inscribed in the family bible. Perhaps you have the baptismal gown that you were baptized in all tucked away in some dresser drawer. We dug around in our storage boxes a few days ago and found the clothes our kids were baptized in. I've placed them on the communion table. Precious!

But you may not have any of these things. No memories, no stories, not scrapbooks, no gowns. What, then, are you supposed to recall about your baptism? Well, you can still recall the meaning and message of it. When you were too little to carry yourself to the water, someone loved you enough to carry you there! And when you were too weak to do anything for God, God came and did something for you! When you couldn't do anything but soil your diaper, God came and washed you clean. When you had no words to call on God, God spoke a word and claimed you as his own: "You are my child, the beloved; with you I am well pleased." And when you didn't know the difference between a dove and a dodo, God sent his Spirit on you to begin the work of a lifetime, and beyond – the work of making you a true disciple – the work of making you a fellow-follower of God's only begotten Son – the work of raising you to heaven at last! And when you didn't know which way to go, even then, at your baptism, God set the Way before you – the

Way, the Truth, and the Life. And if you're still walking in that Way, if you're still trying your best to discern the Truth, and if you're still endeavoring to live by it, then you can trace your current path all the way back to some little baptismal font in some little church in some distant past and you can be thankful for your baptism!

And even if you've strayed from the Way as you've grown older, then your baptism is a reminder of where the Way is, and a call to return to it for your good and for your blessing. You can be thankful for that! You're not completely lost. Look back to the water. Remember your baptism, return, and be thankful.

But I realize, now, that I'm talking to the baptized, and some of you may not been baptized at all. You have no memories of baptism because there are simply none to be had. No one ever took you to the font and you've never come to it on your own. What does baptism mean for you, if anything? It means there's a wet, warm, watery, washing welcome just a waiting for you, if only you will come!

You see, baptism is not a sacrament or rite of exclusion. Instead, it is the sacrament or rite of inclusion. It is God's call to all people everywhere to come into all the blessings he came to give us when he came among us in Jesus Christ! "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself," the scripture says. (See 2 Cor. 5:19) So in Christ, by Christ, and through Christ, God wades into the water with us to show us that he is one of us, that he stands with us, and that all are welcome to stand in the water with him.

No, none were excluded from baptism in Jesus' day. According to Luke's account, great crowds came out to be baptized by John. Crowds came out – mind you! According to one account, the people of Jerusalem, and all Judea, and all the region along the Jordan came out! (Mt. 3:5) The religious elites came out. (Mt. 3:7) Tax collectors came out. (Lk. 3:12-13) Roman soldiers came out. (Lk. 3:15) The great unwashed mass of sinners and saints came out and stepped into the water! None were excluded in Jesus' day. And none are excluded in our own.

Yes, we have to repent of our sinful ways – in other words, we have to change our minds about our sin, see the evil in it, seek forgiveness for it, and ask God's help in leaving it behind – but all of us are welcome when we do those things. All of us! No matter who we are, or what we've done, or what we may still do in our fallen and imperfect state – all of us are accepted and all of us are welcomed – the water says it's so!

And so, the water waits for you to step in, if you haven't already done so, so you, too, can make a memory and then remember your own baptism with a grateful heart. Will you come to the water to be baptized, you, who until now, have only been watching from the shore? The water waits. And Jesus does too. He stands in the shallows, bellybutton deep, waiting for you! My friends, remember your baptism and be thankful! Amen.

### **Renewal of Baptismal Vows:**

Now let's take a moment to reflect on and renew our baptismal vows. If you are not yet baptized then I encourage you to meet with me to learn how you can receive this sacrament of welcome and inclusion!

Brothers and sisters in Christ, remember this: Through the Sacrament of Baptism we are initiated into Christ's holy Church. We are incorporated into God's mighty acts of salvation and given new birth through water and the Spirit. All this is God's gift, offered to us without price.

Through the reaffirmation of our faith, we renew the covenant declared at our baptism, acknowledge what God is doing for us, and reaffirm our commitment to Christ's holy Church.

And so, on behalf of the whole Church, I ask you: Do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and repent of your sin? If so, say...

**I do!**

Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves? If so, say...

**I do!**

Do you confess Jesus Christ as your Savior, put your whole trust in his grace, and promise to serve him as your Lord, in union with the Church which Christ has opened to people of all ages, nations, and races? If so, say...

**I do!**

According to the grace given to you, will you remain faithful members of Christ's holy Church and serve as Christ's representatives in the world? If so, say...

**I will!**

Brothers and Sisters in Christ, remember your baptism and be thankful. **Amen!**

The Holy Spirit work within you, that having been born through water and the Spirit you may live as faithful disciples of Jesus Christ. **Amen!**