

### **Matthew 3:13-17**

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?' 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. 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. And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.'

Today on our church calendar, we celebrate the baptism of Jesus. I say the word “celebrate” deliberately, because this is a true cause for celebration. In conjunction with this celebration, we will shortly be remembering our own baptisms and the vows that were taken for us by our caregivers while we were babies or that we took in person later in life.

Nevertheless, while remembering the ritual of baptism, either what Jesus experienced or what we experienced, the question remains, why does any of this matter? What does it mean that Jesus chose to be baptized? What does it mean that we were baptized? In fact, aside from an excuse to have an afternoon party, what is the point of baptism, anyway?

I’ll be honest, to many Christians, the whole issue of baptism is just one of those obscure theological points that constitute one of the hoops we have to jump through when we say we want to join a church. Cynically speaking, in many quarters, the church is seen as having but three functions: match, hatch, and dispatch. Heard that before? There are many people who enter the doors only when they get married, when they present a child for baptism, and when they die.

That’s kind of sad, that many see the church as useful only in these three critical moments of our lives, but to a certain extent, we as the church have played a major part in creating this idea. So let’s spend some time discussing what baptism is, why it is undervalued by many, and what the significance of Jesus being baptized is to us today.

In a few moments, we will remind ourselves of our own baptismal vows. We will come forward and put a hand in the water of the baptismal font to take out a stone. The stone, which I hope you’ll keep in your pocket or purse, should remind you of your vows and that what you said once upon a time, or was said for you once upon a time, is still at work in your life today. So, what exactly were these vows?

The first vow is to renounce sin. I will say, “Do you turn away from sin, and renounce evil and its power in the world?” And I assume you’ll all reply, “I do.” I guess that it should be obvious the answer is yes. Who, after all, is for evil and for sin? But when you look more closely, if we are renouncing sin and evil, that means that we are giving up actively practicing sin and evil. In other words, the first thing we have to do is frankly and honestly admit that we are sinners and that we are regular participants in evil. Not your enemy, not your neighbor, not your partner, but you and me. To sin, to commit evil, means that we have to admit to ourselves that we regularly and deliberately disobey God and actively try and frankly succeed in breaking our relationship with God. We, you and I, admit in baptism that we are part of the reason the world is a messed up place.

Friends, we see it on the news everyday: war, silly political arguments, ecological disasters, human beings treating each other with violence and prejudice and hatred. It can be easy to blame someone else, from the president on down, for this state of affairs. But the truth is, hard as it might be to accept, that we personally bear some responsibility for what is going on in the world. We do commit evil, we do sin, we choose to break our relationship with God both through our deliberate

choices to participate in the evil in the world as well as by our refusing to do anything to stop what is going on.

That is what is so powerful about that word, “renounce.” By vowing to renounce sin and evil, we are declaring that we want to get off the insane merry-go-round which is tearing humanity apart and rather want to find a new way of life and living.

One of the great, hard to understand phrases of our faith is that Christians are in the world but they are not of the world. In other words, Christians don’t play the same game the world plays. We don’t go along with the same old, same old. We demand better of our leaders. We insist on equal rights and social justice. We will not tolerate politics that are rooted only in gaining or keeping power. We strive to attain the dignity of every human being and we cannot rest until we genuinely care for this world God has given us.

But having quit the world’s game, what now? It’s one thing to condemn sin and evil, it is quite another to propose an alternative to all the nonsense that is happening around us right now. The alternative course is found in the second question: “Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept Him as your Lord and Savior, trusting in his grace and love?”

Again, another hard question. To be a follower of Jesus Christ means two things: First, we have to acknowledge that we need a savior. We have to admit in our heart of hearts that our lives are so messed up that we cannot possibly fix them all by ourselves. We can pretend. We can wear a mask to hide our feelings from the world. We can read every self-help book out there. But to be a Christian means to admit that as much as we might want to renounce sin and evil and change our lives and change the world, it’s not going to happen. It, in fact, cannot happen. It, in fact, will not happen. That is, unless we are willing to humble ourselves and accept the love, wisdom, and guidance of Jesus in our daily lives and living. That’s the “trust” part in the vow and, yes, that level of trust is incredibly difficult to attain.

It is one thing to come to church, give money, partake in the Lord’s Supper, and do all the other nice “church things” we are supposed to do. It is something else entirely to move past those outward actions and fully trust Jesus with every aspect of your very life. How, how, how can we trust someone we’ve never seen with our eyes, touched with our hands, or heard with our ears? Yes, this is hard. But to trust in Jesus means to believe that he is as real in your life as I am , just standing up here and talking to you. If Jesus is simply an abstract ideal, if he’s just a symbol for niceness, if he’s merely an excuse for giving gifts at Christmas or throwing a party at Easter, than there is no real trust or faith going on. Jesus is merely some blond-haired, blue-eyed dude on a painting or a character in a biblical movie or TV show.

I agree, it’s hard to follow someone you’ve never actually seen or heard. But the Christian experience is rooted in our having some kind of living, personal relationship with Jesus. To accept Jesus as Lord and Savior means reaching out beyond your senses, beyond your emotions, beyond your feelings and linking your very soul to His. All these words may sound like complete nonsense, and in a way, they are. That is, unless you have experienced a relationship with Jesus Christ for

yourself. You cannot make it happen on your own. Instead, encountering Jesus is a gracious gift Jesus has, is giving, or will give you when you least expect it and also, when you most need it.

Finally, the last vow we make is a vow to act. “Will you be Christ’s faithful disciple, obeying His Word and showing His love?” If you truly are committed to the first two vows, this one should be, literally, a no-brainer because the hard part is over. As I said before, when we renounce sin and evil, we are admitting that we are part of the broken creation which rejects and undermines the will of God at every turn. We need look at no one but ourselves and confess that we are part of the problem, and we resist being part of the solution. When we accept Jesus as our Lord and Savior, we accept his gracious invitation to trust in him for everything that happens in our lives. Making that leap of faith, trusting Jesus every day and every hour of our lives can be the ultimate challenge for us. But once we do surrender ourselves to God’s love and God’s will as revealed in Jesus, our spirits, our minds, our bodies should all be crying out with in the same united voice: Do something! Get up and do something about this disaster around us called creation. Act! Cry out! Demand justice! And do it the only lasting way possible: by obeying the Word of God as revealed in the scriptures and showing everyone, friend, stranger, and enemy the same love Jesus showed the world every day of his life, up to and including the day he died on the cross.

That’s the meaning of these three vows we will be taking again in a few minutes. That is why baptism is so powerful and so meaningful. These words, these actions, these commitments can, when properly understood, enable us as individuals and us as a congregation to radically transform the world. Yes us, this Collingswood Presbyterian Church! Yes us, as few as we seem to be! Yes us, the faithful remnant in a world gone horribly, horribly mad! WE CAN CHANGE THE WORLD! And when we as a congregation believe it, it will happen.

So we return to the original question, why was Jesus himself baptized? After all, when we look at the three vows of baptism, none of them seem to apply to Jesus. He certainly doesn’t need to renounce sin and evil — he was human, but without sin. He doesn’t need to trust in himself as Lord and Savior — he already is. He doesn’t have to be a faithful disciple — he is the leader, after all.

John the Baptizer obviously agreed. He told Jesus that Jesus should be baptizing him, not the other way around. But John was wrong, just as we have been conditioned to think of Jesus in very different ways than who he truly is.

The hardest misconception for us to shake about Jesus is that he is just some dude out there with no direct connection to us. Whenever we see religious art with Jesus wearing a crown and robes — we may think, what does this king have to do with me? How can I possibly relate to a king? I’m not a king. Or, when we recall some the miracles Jesus performed. Hey, I’ve never raised a dead person to life! I’ve never fed 5000 people with practically nothing! I’ve never made blind people see, or deaf hear, or disabled people walk! What does that have to do with me? And finally, even the cross itself is kind of an obstacle for relating to Jesus. Hey, I’ve never been asked or required to die for the sins of the world! I can’t possibly be good and perfect like Jesus for my sacrifice to mean anything, anyway! In short, what does Jesus’s life and living have to do with me!

These are reasonable questions. How can I relate to Jesus? He is so much that I am not. Yet, what if I or any pastor did nothing but stand before you on Sunday and lead worship? What if I or any pastor did not visit the sick and dying? What if I or any pastor did not teach the Bible, or attend committee meetings, or rake the leaves, or pickup trash, or do any of the dozens of things most pastors do for their congregations? What kind of credibility would I or any other pastor have? The answer, of course, is none.

Emmanuel. It's a Hebrew word found in the words of the prophet Isaiah as he described what the Savior would be. It means, "God with Us." In other words, the Savior would not be some isolated, disembodied, supernatural, unrelatable entity who had no understanding of humanity. The Savior would not watch us, "from a distance" as the Bette Midler song goes. The Savior would not be unapproachable.

The Christian Faith is unique in that it makes the audacious claim that Almighty God, the Creator of the Universe, the Author of all that was, is, and will be, chose to become a human being just like you and just like me. Everything, and I mean everything that we have experienced in our lives Jesus experienced for himself. It's a bit like the show "Undercover Boss" where the CEO of a big company becomes just a regular employee and experiences everyday life for his workers. By the end of the show, the big boss has learned a lot.

Jesus became one of us. He laughed. He cried. He got angry. He felt hunger. He knew sorrow. His body worked the same way our bodies do. In short, he knows what is like to be fully human with all the greatness and all the imperfections that entails. Moreover, he lived his life on the margins, knowing poverty like we've seldom experienced, knowing discrimination and prejudice, like we've seldom experienced, knowing first hand what it's like to have all your so-called friends and supporters run away just when you needed them most. Jesus knows the highest highs of life and the lowest lows. That's why when we reach out to Him, when we pray to Him, he knows and understands and accepts our own pain, our own tragedy, our own sufferings and sorrows. That, that is what it means to be fully human.

And that is why, friends, Jesus chose to be baptized, just like us! The baptism of Jesus was simply the first, the first of many, many ways Jesus chose to tell us that he knows us, he loves us, he identifies completely with us. That is why we call him Emmanuel, God with us.

For, as Paul writes, if God is for us, who can be against us? Celebrate, celebrate, celebrate this wonderful day, when our Savior declares and embraces the fact that He is us. Hallelujah!

I say these words in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.