



**Sermons from St. Marks
United Church of Christ
New Albany, Indiana**



Taking the Plunge

Text: Luke 3:15-17; 21-22

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Every year on the first Sunday of January we celebrate Epiphany which is the coming of the Wise Men bringing gifts to Jesus. On the church calendar, however, there is another set of Scripture passages which run almost concurrent to it and are hardly ever preached about. The passages refer to the Baptism of Jesus. And Jesus' Baptism usually takes second place to the Wise Men.

I don't want to diminish the Wise Men and their importance in the story of the Bible. The Magi are a rich part of the Christmas story, and the story of them bringing gifts to Jesus is, to me, an incredible narrative.

But today I want to talk about Baptism.

Several years ago I was at an ecumenical clergy meeting and one of the ministers in the group announced that he had never been Baptized.

The group was, needless to say, quite surprised. Here, after all, was an ordained minister, a man who had Baptized many people, who presided at weddings and at funerals, a man who was a leader within the Christian community.

And he had never been Baptized.

The group got off onto a tangent. We all decided that we had to Baptize him.

Some of us wanted to sprinkle some water on him and say the words--after all, that was a part of our tradition.

There were a couple of ministers from the Church of the Brethren. They wanted to immerse him, facing forward. Two Baptist ministers in the group wanted to immerse him falling backwards, as was their tradition.

We laughed a lot and remarked on how we all had different baptismal traditions--some we somehow missed something.

Our colleague left the meeting and was not Baptized; and we had, much to our own chagrin, become lost in discussing how we were going to Baptize someone instead of why we were going to Baptize someone.

Baptism is something we do all of the time. I wonder, however, if we put a great deal of thought into it. Today, I'd like to share some of my thoughts on the subject of seeing Baptism as a challenge, a promise, and a gift.

We read in Luke's Gospel about the Baptism of Jesus. Jesus really didn't need to be Baptized and the Baptism of John was not a classic Christian Baptism. But Jesus chose to be Baptized, in part, to demonstrate a promise to God and to people.

Our challenge from Baptism comes through our promises.

When we are parents we make promises for our children.

When we are confirmed we affirm (or confirm) the promises our parents made on our behalf.

When a child is Baptized in our congregation, we make promises along with the parents and family.

We make promises and you know what they say about promises--promises are meant to be....

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Do we keep our baptismal promises? Do we, as parents, keep promises for our children? We are all here so it's pretty likely that all of us keep those promises. But what about the promises we make as a congregation?

We say:

We receive this child as a new person in Christ. We offer our understand and support as he explores life. We enfold this child in our love, seeking together to grow in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and all people. We join with these parents in telling the gospel in our midst so that this child may live with us for Christ, show forth God's love for all people.

Those words are undoubtably familiar to us. We have said them often. We said them today. Yet, we need to do more than say them.

Little things tend to challenge us with these promises.

Each week we have people sign up for the nursery. Time and time again I've heard the comment that the people who should be working in the nursery are the parents of the children in the

nursery.

That would be fine IF we didn't take the promises. Whenever we make the Baptismal promises we ALL promise to nurture children in our midst doing whatever it takes.

Helping with kids, helping with VBS, helping with Children's choirs, helping in Sunday School, the same stuff goes. Do we really keep the promises?

Even more pressing is do we encourage parents to keep their promises.

People have commented to me, over the years, "Isn't it terrible that people have their children Baptized and we never see them again. Somebody should do something about it!!!"

Again, we don't have a right to say that if we too took the promises.

Keeping our promises is a challenge.

Baptism also brings about a promise from God.

The first "Baptizer" was John the Baptist. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all tell us that Jesus went to John to be Baptized in the Jordan River. After Jesus came out of the water, God's voice said, "This is my own dear Son, with whom I am pleased."

Part of the promise of Baptism comes in the water.

Water, in *Genesis*, is the first of God's creation.

Without water there is no life. God gives us water so that all life, animal and plant can survive.

It has been said that in the world of food, the three primary cooking cultures were the Greeks, the Chinese, and the Romans. There is a vast amount of difference between the way the three cultures prepared food--but they all needed water to survive.

Perhaps the greatest lesson of learning how as human beings we are all equal is to recognize that we all need water equally.

Water nurtures us, cleanses us, and refreshes us. In water we see the promise of life.

The integral part of Baptism is water. Traditions use water in different ways.

If we were Baptists or Brethren or from one of the Christian Churches, we would immerse people in the water.

If we were Roman Catholics we would pour water over the heads of the child.

Within our tradition, I place the sign of the cross, three times, on the foreheads of those who are Baptized.

The form is different, but the use of water is the same.

Water marks the promise of God. And the promise of God remains the same.

Finally, Baptism is about submitting ourselves before God. In the Baptism of Jesus, perhaps the most significant thing about it was that Jesus submitted himself before John and ultimately before God ---to demonstrate to us that we need to do likewise.

Jesus submitted to Baptism. It was a very symbolic gesture on Jesus' part reminding us that salvation is a gift from God--but we need to submit to it.

Today marks the day when we remember the Baptism of the Lord. It is an important day for us because it really causes us to reflect on Baptism in a significant way.

Let us experience the challenge of Baptism in the keeping of our promises;

Let us share the promise of Baptism, refreshed, nourished, and cleansed by the water of Baptism and the promises God makes to us.

And let us joyfully submit to God's love in our lives.