



“Embracing a New Beginning”

Text: Matthew 3:1-17

a sermon by Kevin Fleming

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

There has been an interesting development in the church over the past couple of decades. We have seen the rise of Evangelicalism and the subsiding influence of what used to be called “the mainline church.” There are lots of reasons that happened - far too many to address in this setting - but if you ever want to discuss it, I’ll buy the coffee.

Part of what happened is that for many years - decades - people were “brand loyal.” If your parents went to a church, you went to that church too. We were cradle Presbyterians, Methodists, Catholics, Baptists, Lutherans - you name it. Just like in most homes, you either bought cereals from Post or Kellogg, burned Gulf or Esso in your car, shopped at A&P or Kroger - we patterned our lives on loyalty to a particular brand or place. And that included churches.

But then, partly because we became a far more mobile society, we began to discover new opportunities. While we had enjoyed, “two all-beef patties, special sauce, lettuce, cheese, pickles, onions, on a sesame seed bun,” we suddenly discovered we could “have it your way.” Suddenly, there were new options, since we no longer lived where the old loyalties were no longer in play. Presbyterians became Methodists. Methodists became Lutherans. Lutherans became different kinds of Lutherans. And Catholics stayed Catholic, but stopped being quite as regular at Mass, as Father Godfrey Mullen will tell you.

It shows up when you pick hymns. “Why don’t we ever sing any of the old hymns?” I am frequently asked. “Like what?” I usually respond. And then a hymn is named that I never heard of. Upon investigation, I usually discover that it was one of the top-ten hymns of another tradition. We don’t share a common hymnody.

It shows up in other ways. Those who come to the Presbyterian tradition from more conservative traditions, often ask about symbols, liturgical colors, and the wearing of vestments. They aren’t opposed to any of that - just curious as to what it all means and why we do things in the way we do them.

You really notice it when it comes to the Sacraments. For us, in the Reformed tradition, there are two: Baptism and the Lord's Supper. That is instantly different from our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters who have seven: Baptism, Reconciliation/Confession, Eucharist/Communion, Confirmation, Marriage, Holy Orders, and the Anointing of the Sick/Extreme Unction.

Within the Reformed tradition, and those denominations that grew from it, the questions are more pointed. How is Christ present in the Lord's Supper? What is the proper order for the worship of God? What is the nature of salvation? Start asking questions like that in a gathering of Reformed Christians without body armor and you risk annihilation.

And where we most often see it is around the Sacrament of Baptism. Infant baptism? Or believer baptism? Sprinkling? Or dunking? Understanding what it means? Or entering into the mystery of God's grace? A variety of understandings and practices have been developed about Baptism.

Still, here is the interesting thing. Among those who were baptized as infants, I often hear them say, "I wish I had been older so that I could understand a little more and remember a little more." And among those who were baptized as a young person or an adult, I often hear them say, "I wish I had been baptized as an infant and felt that connection to God earlier."

On this Sunday, when we remember Jesus' baptism by John in the Jordan River, let's take the opportunity to say a few words about Baptism and what it can mean to us.

When Jesus went to the Jordan to be baptized by John, by his actions, he was saying two important things.

First, Jesus went to be baptized to identify himself with all that John was about. He went to the water to become a part of what John had been preaching and teaching. John was preparing the people for the coming "kingdom of heaven." John was calling people to abandon the worrisome way they were walking and to repent - to turn around - to go in a new and other way. John called the people to "righteousness" - a new way of life that is evidenced by living in peace and love with God and neighbor. Jesus goes to John for baptism, not because he is establishing something new, but because he has come to continue and fulfill what John has been preaching and teaching.

Second, Jesus went as one of us. Jesus went into the water to show us that we all need this new beginning - this moment of recognition that we are no longer going to travel through life by the same sorry way that so many choose, but that we will travel through life by a new and better road. Jesus blazes the trail that we are to follow to live as God created us to live,

to turn away from pettiness and meanness,
to abandon self-centeredness and self-absorption,
to walk away from the need for more and absurd consumption.

Jesus goes into the water to proclaim in an action that will be followed by the wisdom of his words that the kingdom of heaven - God's chosen way of life - has come and is coming and we can be a part of it. In his baptism, Jesus opens the door for the rest of us to enter into this new way of life and living.

Still, there's one more connection we need to make. His baptism was not the end goal for Jesus and it shouldn't be for us. Baptism was the beginning of Jesus' life of ministry and mission and our baptism is the beginning of our life of ministry and mission. This idea that the goal is to be baptized so that you can get to heaven is all kinds of messed up. The waters of baptism are the birth waters of the Christian into a life of service, compassion, love, peacemaking, and justice. Baptism is not a "stand alone" event that provides another excuse for a party. Baptism is the beginning of a new life dedicated to the service of God.

We see it and hear it in Jesus' baptism. Jesus goes into the waters of baptism, with no detail provided for us about how it was done or what might have been said by John. But, when Jesus rises from the waters, Matthew tells us, "suddenly, the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.'" The highly symbolic and metaphoric language makes it clear that something very important is happening here. "The heavens were opened" is a way of talking about a revelation - a uncovering - a bringing to light. This is what is now called an "ah-ha" moment. "A voice from heaven" - this draws on a Jewish tradition that speaks of the "bat kol" - "the daughter of the voice" - a heavenly voice that represents God's proclamation or judgment. "This is my son" - are words heard throughout the Jewish Scripture and tradition. As God said to Abraham concerning Isaac, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love..." As God called Abraham to offer his beloved son, Isaac, so now God offers to all people God's beloved son, Jesus.

Our baptism carries with it the same voice and the same words. In our baptism, we are grafted into God's family - we are adopted as God's own - and our lives begin anew. As we are born into this world in a rush of waters, we are born into the household of God by the waters of baptism. As Jesus was commissioned to his life of ministry and service, so, in our baptism, we are commissioned to our lives of ministry and service in his name. It is not an empty ritual, or a moment to ooh-and-aah over a sweet baby, or carry on a family tradition. It is our adoption into God's household and our acceptance of a life of service and love.

William Willimon, [the now retired] Dean of the Chapel at Duke University tells the story of getting a telephone call from an irate parent one day:

“I hold you personally responsible for this,” the father told him.

“Me?” the campus minister asked.

“Yes, you. I send my daughter off to college to get a good education. Now she tells me she wants to throw it all away, and go off to Haiti as a Presbyterian mission volunteer! Isn’t that absurd? A degree in mechanical engineering from Duke, and she’s going off to dig ditches in Haiti.”

“Well,” said Willimon, in a feeble attempt at humor, trying to break the ice, “I doubt the engineering department taught her much about that line of work, but she’s a fast learner; she’ll probably get the hang of ditch-digging in a few months.”

“Look,” interrupted the father, “this is no laughing matter. I hold you completely responsible for her decision. She likes you. You’ve filled her head with all those pie-in-the-sky ideas!”

“Now look,” said Willimon, trying to keep his composure, “Weren’t you the one who had her baptized?”

“Why yes,” the father replied.

“And didn’t you read her Bible stories, take her to Sunday school, send her off to Youth Group?”

“Well yes, but...”

“Don’t ‘but’ me. It’s your fault she believed all that stuff, that she’s gone and thrown it all away on Jesus - not mine. You’re the one who introduced her to Jesus, not me.”

“But all we ever wanted was for her to be a Presbyterian,” the father said meekly.

“Sorry, you messed up. You made a disciple.”

That’s the kind of thing that baptism can cause. It opens untold new beginnings to those who dare touch its waters. It charts a new course for a life that is always fascinating and unexpected. It opens the door to be a channel of God’s love and peace.

And, like Jesus, as we embrace that new beginning, the world around us changes. The power of love is unleashed and overcomes the powers of hatred and division. The power of justice is set in motion and those who are ignored or overlooked are lifted up and blessed. The power of hope is turned loose and the light continues to shine in the darkness.

A new beginning. That’s the nature of baptism. Embrace it.

For now and evermore. Amen.



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