



# “The Questions of Baptism”

Texts: Genesis 1:1-5 and Acts 19:1-7

*a sermon by Kevin Fleming*

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

We're a little behind the rest of the Church as we turn to celebrate the Baptism of the Lord. Most in the Church observed the day on the first Sunday of the year. We chose to celebrate the Feast of the Epiphany. Then, last week, I had to call in a pinch-hitter and I appreciate the Reverend Joe Easley and Patty taking my place while we celebrate a very special honor with my mother-in-law last weekend in Dayton. Perhaps there was a little providence in pushing the Baptism of the Lord to this day, considering how few of you were able to make it to church last week and I thank you for using common sense and practicing that measure of safety.

But, here we are this week. Jesus is now thirty years old and is ready to begin his ministry. He makes his way to the Jordan River and is baptized there by his cousin John, who has already plowed the field in preparation for God's Chosen to take up his divinely appointed work. Jesus goes down into the water and comes up. The Spirit of God appears, like a dove descending, and rests on Jesus. Then, at least Jesus, hears a voice say, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Baptism, like the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, comes with its own set of questions. I get asked about baptism quite a bit and some of the questions deserve a public answer. So, this morning, we'll answer a few questions about baptism, as we prepare to renew our own baptismal promises.

### **Question #1 – Who Can Be Baptized?**

The short answer is: anyone who gives their life to following Jesus Christ in the pathway of discipleship can be baptized. Baptism is the Christian act of initiation. It is the beginning of the journey and not the journey's end. Baptism is a public act of committing one's life – or the life of one entrusted to our care – to the way of God in Jesus Christ. Baptism is an embracing of God's gift of grace and renewal.

For Presbyterians, that means that infants, children, young people, adults, and senior adults can be baptized. When infants and children are baptized, the parents make the promises of baptism on behalf of their child. They covenant with God and the Christian community to raise their child in, what used to be phrased, “the nurture and admonition of the Lord.” That is, they promise to provide for their child's formation in the Christian faith. Young people and adults are committing themselves to the life of discipleship.

So, anyone who believes – puts their trust – in Jesus Christ can be baptized.

### **Question #2 – How much water should be used?**

The simplest answer is, enough to know you've been baptized. Jesus went into the water, Mark tells us. Some denominations insist that is the norm, and practice baptism by submersion. Some of my friends, from those denominations, joke with me that we Presbyterians practice “dry cleaning.” While we commonly practice baptism at the font, I try to remember to use enough water to remind the baptized that something has happened. But, we Presbyterians are happy with any of the forms of baptism – including submersion – though we usually have to meet somewhere outside the church in order to accomplish that.

But it's really not about the water. The water is secondary to God's grace that meets us in baptism. If we were to use enough water to match God's grace, drop for drop, the oceans of the world could not contain enough water for baptism. It's not about water. It's about God's grace.

### **Question #3 – Shouldn't we wait until Baptism can be understood by those being baptized?**

There are some traditions that practice what some call “believer's baptism.” The idea is that they have been trained and prepared for baptism and are of an age to make the decision to be baptized. The idea is that they understand what is going on and can articulate the whys and wherefores.

The trouble with that is simply this: we can't ever completely understand or articulate what is going on in baptism. That is because we can never completely understand or articulate the fullness and wonder of God's grace. I had the blessing of being taught by some of the most brilliant and accomplished teachers of theology. Each of them would quickly admit that they were incapable of telling you everything there is to know about baptism.

So, if we waited to understand it all before we are baptized, no one would ever be baptized.

#### **Question #4 – Can we have a private baptism?**

In our Presbyterian practice, we understand that God works with and through the community of faith. Baptism is about being connected to God and God's people. In baptism, the parents of a child, or the one being baptized, make promises to God and the community. The community of faith, in turn, makes promises to God and to the one being baptized. It's hard to do that in a private ceremony.

And, while we're here, let me also remind you that baptism, like the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, is to be celebrated after the preaching of God's Word. I can't tell you how many worship services I have attend in Presbyterian churches where baptism appeared at the beginning of the service, in complete abandonment of the Directory for Worship, simply because they don't want the infant to get fussy and disrupt the service. Can you imagine having Communion before the sermon in case someone's stomach growled at an inopportune time? Of course not. And frankly, a fussy baby in most Presbyterian Churches would be a breath of fresh air.

Baptism, like the Lord's Supper, is a response to the good news of God's love in Jesus Christ, which is proclaimed in communal worship and is an act of the whole church.

#### **Question #5 – If I was baptized in another church, do I have to be rebaptized?**

Absolutely not. No church or denomination has sole possession of baptism, any more than it has sole possession of grace. There is one baptism and whether it is practiced by the Roman Catholics, the Baptists, the Lutherans, the Episcopalians, or anyone else, it is baptism and should be recognized as such by all Christians.

But a while back, the Presbyterian Church began thinking about baptism and about the fact that in the lives of individuals and congregations, there is a time when renewing the promises of baptism would be a good and helpful thing to do. When people begin a new time of life, or return to the way of discipleship in a new way, or feel the need to express their connection to God and the community of faith, the renewing of one's baptismal vows can be a time of revitalization and can express a new commitment to the life of faith.

As a result of that season of reflection and conversation, we began to observe occasions when we renewed the promises of our baptism. We will do that again this morning. In that renewal, we will again ask and answer the questions of baptism. They are:

Trusting in the gracious mercy of God,  
do you turn from the ways of sin  
and renounce evil and its power in the world?

Do you turn to Jesus Christ  
and accept him as your Lord and Savior,  
trusting in his grace and love?

Will you be Christ's faithful disciple,  
obeying his Word and showing his love?

These questions – the questions of baptism – mark our turning from a life without God to a life with God. They serve as guides to how we will live and who we will follow. They tell us who we are and whose we are.

The Confession of 1967 reminds us:

Christian baptism marks the receiving of the same Spirit by all his people. Baptism with water represents not only cleansing from sin but a dying with Christ and a joyful rising with him to new life. It commits all Christians to die each day to sin and to live for righteousness. In baptism the church celebrates the renewal of the covenant with which God has bound his people to himself. By baptism individuals are publicly received into the church to share in its life and ministry, and the church becomes responsible for their training and support in Christian discipleship.

In baptism, we submerge ourselves into the depths of God's grace and love, and we rise from the waters as new people, ready to follow Jesus Christ wherever he leads.

So, let us remember our baptism, renew its promises, and rise from those waters, once more, ready to share the good news of God's boundless love, which is for now and evermore. Amen.



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