
Church of the Beatitudes United Church of Christ

So Who Baptized Jesus?

A Sermon by

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Scripture: Luke 3:15-22

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I've always lived near water, up until now. I had a creek behind my house, a pond at my grandparents' down the road, Lake Erie about five miles away. When we lived in St. Louis, we had the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers. Boston, the Atlantic Ocean; Poughkeepsie, New York, the Hudson River; and the great inland lakes of New York, like Saranac Lake and Lake George and the Finger Lakes.

The church that Ted and I served in Poughkeepsie was fertile ground for ministry with wonderful people. Just north of the church, overlooking the banks of the Hudson River was the Roosevelt Estate, one of the homes of Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt. Several members of the church had served on the staff of the Roosevelt's during the 1930s and '40s. Dorothy was one of the cooks, and Ralph one of the groundskeepers, and they got married. Eleanor Roosevelt gave the newly married couple a gift of a tablecloth. The tablecloth was 30 feet long, for those informal, cozy dinners. Dorothy and Ralph told stories of how Winston Churchill became a frequent visitor once the United States entered World War II, and his strange quirks and love of eating scallions and strawberries together.

Many of you know the history much better than me. Hitler and his Third Reich were in power beginning in 1933. By 1939 they invaded Poland and France, and Britain declared war on Germany. By 1940 France had fallen and Winston "Churchill was the man to whom the British people and many in Europe looked to bring solace and comfort in the continent's darkest hour."¹ Many thought Britain too would fall. There were daily bombings of London by the German Luftwaffe. Winston Churchill, in a speech to the House of Commons, June 18, 1940, called his people to continue their fight for this would be "their finest hour"² "Churchill firmly believed that while Britain was in a period of darkness, if the people persevered and believed in themselves, the light would return. Churchill was able to convince Franklin Roosevelt to aid England, morally and materially. He built alliances. He knew the dark hour would pass and that peace, prosperity and joy would once again reign."³

If that is what happened alongside the Hudson River, could that also be what was happening that day at the Jordan River?

It was a river in the desert and people gathered at the river. They washed their clothes in the river. They got water for their crops and animals from the river. They did their ritual washings and immersions in the river. Over time, water came to be 'rated' for its value: "living water", rivers, lakes, springs, were best. Then water that was salty or hot. Then certain types of wells. Then pools larger than 125 gallons. Then rain pools while it was still raining. Then standing collections of water less than 125 gallons.⁴

¹ Sermons on the First Readings, p. 65

² <http://www.winstonchurchill.org/learn/speeches/quotations/famous-quotations-and-stories>

³ Sermons on the First Readings, p. 65.

⁴ Seasons of the Spirit, Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Nov 20, 2009-Feb 14, 2010, p. 86

The River Jordan was living water and people gathered there. They shared the news of their day. They shared the gossip. They shared their joys and their heartbreaks. “Do you think these Romans will ever leave our country?” “I am so sick of paying these taxes to that Caesar whats-his-name, and don’t even get me started on the Herods!”

It was a dark time for the people of God. They were looking for signs of hope and listening for good news. Luke especially was attuned the cries of his people, Gentile Christians, Greeks, a global community, praying, asking, wondering, “Does God love us? We, who are the widows, the orphans, the oppressed, the forgotten, the broken and the broken hearted, we are looking for healing. We have come to the living waters. Is this one, Jesus, *the One*?”

Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized (Who baptized him? It doesn’t say) and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

Luke does not say, like Mark, that baptism was a rite of “repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Mark 1:4), although Mark does say that John baptized him.

Matthew writes of John in the camel hair clothing eating bugs, reminding his Jewish listeners of their Old Testament prophet Elijah, but almost discourages Jesus from being baptized, “Why do you come to me?”

The author of the fourth Gospel, John, would never intimate that “the word made flesh” needed to repent and receive the forgiveness of sin, so that Gospel omits any reference to Jesus’ baptism, though it is pre-supposed. (John 1: 32-34)⁵

‘For Luke, the evangelist, the sharer and bearer of Good News, the baptism is a prelude to Jesus’ prayer during which the Spirit descends on him in the form of a dove and he hears God’s voice identifying him as God’s Son. Luke uses the tradition of Jesus’ baptism to make a Christological point.’⁶ This is the Christ. This is the true Living Waters. All you people gathered down here around the Jordan River, day after day, year after year, looking, searching, hungering, thirsting, this is the one. Matthew says “Listen to him.” In Luke, the next verse is, ‘Jesus was about thirty years old when he began his ministry.’

Do you hear it? Jesus didn’t say, “Gee, I have a wonderful baptismal gown, it was handed down to me from my grandmother. It hung in my closet for so many years.” Jesus began his ministry. Filled with power of the Holy Spirit, he stood up in synagogues and said God has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and the recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free. He got to the work of healing, not dividing. He fed people even when the city told him he couldn’t. He made disciples, meaning he went out and found other people who he thought would like to do those same kinds of things too, acts of kindness, asking people not to judge others so quickly but to look at their own lives too. He calmed storms and prayed with people. He blessed people.

⁵ Feasting on the Word, p. 239.

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 240

How often do we stop and bless people? People are hurting all around us, every day, everywhere, as far as the eye and CNN can see. What would it take for each one of us to stop and bless another person, to meet them in *their* need, not ours? I am not talking even of random people on the street. I am talking in our own families, our neighbors, and our church. I would love it as a pastor if I never again heard someone say to me, “Pastor, I went through a crisis recently. You were the only ones who stuck with me, who helped me.”

Bless someone. Do ministry. Don't wait until you are thirty like Jesus did. If you are over thirty like some of us are, start now.

Wasn't it exciting to see all these kids up here being baptized? They came to us. They were reading and talking about this baptism of Jesus stuff and they actually got excited about it. “I want to be baptized!” “I want to be a part of the church.” Well, what does it mean? “It means God loves me. Me.”

I am God's beloved. God is pleased with me, even when I am not pleased with me. God is making a better me, a new and improved me. I, with God, am making a better me. Me-God: I can hardly tell them apart anymore.

When was the last time you heard, really heard, “Child of God, disciple of Christ, member of Christ's church” (and got a kiss from the pastor?)

After Christmas we were on vacation with our daughters and went to Las Vegas. What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas, so I can't tell you very much. We saw the inside of nearly every casino, although after you see a few, they all look alike. There is a New City Center, 76 acres, \$11 billion, rooms, retails, restaurants: it is amazing what \$11 billion won't buy! We became fascinated by the water features: a large fountain with large arcs and twisting ribbons of water, a two story high water wall composed of thick, textured glass that gives the effect of an idea of what it would feel like to walk underneath a waterfall, and then these clear tubes of varying heights called Halo that have spinning vortices of water in them.

I guess if I had \$11 billion and I had conquered world poverty and therefore world peace (because don't most wars really start because people are desperately poor and will do most anything to survive?), with the few billions I had left, I too would build living water. In fact, we may just have that chance, this spring, in La Flor, Nicaragua, as we try to bring clean, drinkable, cook-able water to those 55 families who are now people of a dirty river and tainted ground water. We saw what clean water can do in another village. It brings health and hope and security. “I know my family is more safe now.” Soon you will hear about how you can turn Wine into Water, be a partner in La Flor, bring life, and do it for less than \$11 billion.

Baptism of our Lord Sunday and of these young people is a great day for us to celebrate the tearing open of the heavens. It is a great day for us to wear white and shout hallelujah. We have been told again that we are loved. We too can rise up out of all the things that are holding us down or holding us back, and we can be bold enough, to share that love with others. Amen.