

**Baptized with Christ**  
Luke 3:15-16, 21-22  
Baptism of the Lord

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Before performing a baptism, the priest approached the young father and said solemnly, "Baptism is a serious step. Are you prepared for it?" "I think so," the man replied. "My wife has made appetizers and we have a caterer coming to provide plenty of cookies and cakes for all of our guests."

"I don't mean that," the priest responded. "I mean, are you prepared spiritually?" "Oh, sure," came the reply. "I've got a keg of beer and a case of whiskey."

That's not exactly what the priest had in mind (unless of course it was an Episcopal church).

There are many forms of baptism in the Christian community (emersion, dunking, sprinkling, one-time in a persons life, many-times in a persons life), but we all agree on one thing: Baptism is at the heart of what it means to be a Christian.

Baptism is how Jesus began his public ministry. And this is how we begin our public life as one of his disciples--with baptism. Our baptism is sign and seal that we belong to Christ. Today is the First Sunday after Epiphany, a good time to affirm the meaning of our baptism and acknowledge its centrality in our lives.

**Part of the meaning of baptism is the washing away of sin.** Scripture teaches, and personal experience affirms, that each of us is a sinner. It is sin that separates us from God. Baptism doesn't mean that we become perfect, simply that sin is no longer a barrier to our relationship with God.

Some of you may have seen the movie *O Brother, Where Art Thou*. It's a whimsical retelling of Homer's *Odyssey* set in 1930s Mississippi. Three hapless escaped convicts--Everett, Pete and Delmar--are hiding out in the woods, running from the law.

There they encounter a procession of white-robed people going down to the lake to be baptized. As the baptism ceremony begins, Delmar is overwhelmed by the beauty and the mystery of this rite.

He runs into the water and is baptized by the minister. As he returns to his companions, he declares that he's now saved and "neither God nor man's got nothin' on me now."

He explains that the minister told him that all his sins have been washed away; even the sin of stealing a pig which got him sent to jail in the first place. One of his convict friends exclaims "But you said you were innocent of that," "I lied," Delmar says, "and that's been washed away too!"

Later the three convicts steal a hot pie from a window sill. Delmar returns and places a dollar bill on the window sill.

Delmar wasn't made perfect by his baptism any more than any of the rest of us are made perfect by our baptism. But he was aware that it was time for him to make a new beginning. That's why in understanding baptism we begin with the washing away of our sins.

**Even more important, baptism identifies us with Christ.** A voice comes from heaven at Jesus' baptism, declaring "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well

pleased.” In our baptism we affirm that Jesus is God’s Son, and when we are joined with him, we become children of God as well.

Jim Standiford, a pastor in San Diego, tells of baptizing a five-year-old boy. He prefaces the story by saying, “There is danger lurking here,” and he’s right. Anyone who’s had any experience at all with four and five-year-olds will tell you that.

Anyway, Jim met with the parents and their son the week prior to the baptism ceremony. They went over the service, step by step, so that they all understood how the service would proceed in the context of worship.

So, Sunday morning came, and they all were there. They came to the place in the worship Pastor Jim invited the family to come forward. They all gathered in the chancel around the baptismal font: mother, father, the five-year-old, and two godparents.

Everything proceeded smoothly until Jim asked the question, “What name is given to this child?” The mother and father and the two godparents looked at each other, but no one spoke. Now, Jim was pretty certain that they all knew the name of their child. After all, he was five years old.

So, it was obvious that they hadn’t talked about who was going to say his name publicly and the question caught them quite by surprise, leading to the awkward silence.

Just then, though, there was a little tug on Jim’s robe, and a little five-year-old voice spoke up and said, “Pastor Jim, you know who I am. I’m Michael!”

We know who we are - God’s child. Baptism first of all is a washing away of sin, but it also signifies our identification with Christ. We never truly know who we are until we find ourselves in Christ.

**Lastly, baptism is our initiation into the church of Jesus Christ.** This is so important. Baptism signifies our entrance into the family of Christ.

Dr. Fred Craddock tells of serving as a pastor in a little community in southwest Oklahoma named Custer City. Fred ministered there for about three years - population around 450. There were four churches of about the same size: a Methodist church, a Baptist church, a Nazarene church, and a Christian church. The attendance at each of these small churches rose and fell according to the weather and whether it was time to harvest the wheat.

But the most consistent attendance in town was at the little café where all the pickup trucks were parked, and all the men were inside discussing the weather, and the cattle, and other farm-related concerns--not bad men, good men, family men, hardworking men— just not often-go-to-church men.

The churches had good attendance and poor attendance, but the café had consistently good attendance. The patron saint of the group that met at the café was named Frank. He was seventy-seven when Fred first met him. He was a good, strong man; a pioneer, a rancher and farmer, and a prospering cattle man too. All the men there at the café considered him their patron saint. “Ha!” they said, “Ol’ Frank will never go to church.

Pastor Fred met Frank on the street one day. Craddock says, “[Frank] knew I was a preacher, but it’s never been my custom to accost people in the name of Jesus, so I just was shaking hands and visiting with him, but he took the offensive. He was not

offensive, but he took the offensive. He said, 'I work hard, I take care of my family, and I mind my own business. Far as I'm concerned, everything else is fluff.'

"You see what he told me?" Craddock asks. "Leave me alone, I'm not a prospect.' So, I didn't bother Frank.

"That's why I, the entire church in fact, and the whole town was surprised - and the men at the café church were absolutely bumfuzzled - when old Frank, seventy-seven years old, presented himself before me one Sunday morning for baptism.

Some of the talk in town was, 'Frank must be sick. Guess he's scared to meet his maker. They say he's got heart trouble. Going up there and being baptized, well, I never thought Ol' Frank would do that, but I guess when you get scared . . .' All kinds of stories."

But this is the way that Frank explained it to Pastor Fred. You see, Fred and Frank were talking the next day after the baptism, and Fred said, "Uh, Frank, you remember that little saying you used to give me so much: 'I work hard, I take care of my family, and I mind my own business'?"

Frank said, "Yeah, I remember. I said that a lot." Fred asked, "You still say that?" Frank said, "Yeah." Fred asked, "Then what's the difference?" Frank responded, "I didn't know then what my business was."

And so Fred baptized Frank. He raised his hand and said, "In the presence of those who gather, upon your confession of faith in Jesus Christ, and in obedience to his command, I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit. Amen." <sup>1</sup>

What changed? Frank now knew what his business was- to be a disciple of Jesus Christ; to be part of the worshipping community of those who serve Christ in their daily lives.

And that's our business, too, to be disciples of Jesus Christ.

By our baptism we know who we are and to whom we belong. Baptism is so much more than a cleansing from sin. Baptism represents our identification with Christ, our initiation into the Body of Christ.

So today, go forth with the knowledge that you have been baptized, that you are not your own, and that you belong to God.

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<sup>1</sup> Mike Graves & Richard Ward, eds., Craddock Stories (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001), pp. 67-69.