

Isaiah 43:1-7
Luke 3:15-22

A Strange Request
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He came to the study with a question, “Why should I be baptized?” He and his wife had started attending worship a few months earlier, had made a profession of faith and now she was talking about being baptized. She wanted them to be baptized together and had taken every opportunity to “prod” him on the subject: breakfast, lunch, dinner and in between. Thus, his visit to the study. Together, he and I looked at the Scriptures regarding baptism and I noted that this was one of the few episodes in the life of Jesus that was recorded in all four Gospels. This led to his next question, “Why was Jesus baptized?”

It was a strange request in the light of John’s baptism. John’s baptism was a baptism of repentance, the remission of sins. It sought for a change in a person’s lifestyle (Luke 3:7-14). It sought a new direction in people’s lives, a new lifestyle towards family, friends, neighbors and strangers in the land--A new way of doing business. It was an admittance of imperfection. Why, then, should Jesus be baptized? Was he not without sin? Our text would indicate that this was a part of God’s plan, the voice from heaven, “this is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased.” Jesus is following the plan set out for him.

Jesus comes to John with this strange request, “baptize me.” From the other Gospel accounts we know that John was hesitant to do this. John wants Jesus to baptize him or at least John feels that he is not worthy to baptize Jesus. To paraphrase Matthew 3:15 Jesus responds, “You are right, but for now, let it be done this way.” As Jesus comes up from the water a dove descends and God’s voice echoes over the land – an affirmation from heaven of the task just completed.

They had wondered with expectation if John was the One. John had repeatedly said, “no”. There is another coming, One who is greater than John and now the One who is coming is here. The Word has become flesh and now dwells in our midst.

I want to take a moment to look at Paul’s understanding of baptism (Romans 6 and Colossians 2) to help our understanding of it. For Paul baptism is our dying to an old life and rising to a new one. We are buried with Christ and raised to new life in him. It is a public acknowledgment of a private decision. We say our past is gone and we are born into a new life, a new relationship. As we go under the water we symbolize our death to self and as we rise up we enter into a new life in Christ. (After Ananias had placed his hands on Saul (Paul) and the scales fell from his eyes, “*He got up and was baptized*” (Acts 9:18b NIV). He had left his old life and was beginning a new life in Christ.)

In New Hampshire we did not have a baptistery in the church building and thus we conducted all our baptisms at a local lake. One of the families lived on one of them, had a beautiful beach and we would move our worship service to the lake for one Sunday and have a baptism as part of our outdoor worship. These services always drew onlookers. Boats would stop and watch and listen. Even a family of ducks would drop by (they usually went on the dock and jumped in the water during the service!). It was people making a public declaration of their decision to follow the living Christ. They were entering into a new community and into a new relationship in a very public way.

However this does lead to another question of why baptism? Why immersion? Why the symbolism of water. In the Old Testament water is one of the symbols found for cleansing. In Ezekiel 26:25-26 we read, “*I will sprinkle clean water on you and you will be clean. I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh*” (NIV). It is an acknowledgment of something that we cannot do for ourselves. The shedding of an old life, old relationships – taking off our old clothes and putting on new, clean fresh garments. It is a decision made in faith – public profession of a private decision.

Does baptism save? No, at least not in our Baptist theology. It is only God through Christ who saves. Salvation comes with our decision to accept Christ as Lord and Savior. Baptism has no magical, saving power. In the words of 19th century theologian Alexander Campbell, “Baptism is a sort of embodiment of the Gospel, and a solemn expression of all of it in a single act. In baptism we are passive in everything but in giving our consent. We are buried and we are raised by another. Hence in no view of baptism can it be called a good work.”

It marks for us a new beginning. One could say that Jesus’ baptism was the mark of a new beginning in his life. It marked the end of the carpenter’s shop and the private life he had led in Nazareth. It was the beginning of three years of public ministry, teaching, preaching and healing. It represented his decision to follow the path God had chosen. *“This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.”*

The invitation is to “come to the water.” Remember the story of the Ethiopian and Philip in Acts 8? Philip meets the Ethiopian who is reading from the book of Isaiah and asks who the passage is about. Philip explains the passage and the life of Christ, his death and resurrection. As they continue on with Philip riding in the chariot with the Ethiopian they come upon a body of water and the Ethiopian asks, “Why shouldn’t I be baptized?” (8:36b NIV). The chariot is stopped and Philip baptizes the Ethiopian.

There is no way to adequately explain the experience of baptism. It is the same and yet different for each one of us. We can have “head” knowledge of the process and an understanding of the process but until we feel the water flowing over us and the power of our being raised to new life there is no way to adequately describe the event to another. There is a sense of joy and a sense of resurrection. There is a sense of newness and hope for a better tomorrow. We do not fully understand the impact of the decision on our lives but we know that something has forever changed us. Now, the clouds will probably not part and a dove descend but...

We will have followed in the steps of Christ. He has set for us the example. He does not ask us to do what he is not willing to do. He was baptized by John. We follow in his steps.

It was a strange request, Jesus asking John to baptize him. We know Jesus and his disciples also baptized (John 3:22 NIV), *“After this, Jesus and his disciples went out into the Judean countryside, where he spent time with them, and baptized.”* Jesus was now calling a people to himself—as one enters the water they are giving up self to another – they rise to a new life. John has it correct when he is questioned about the rise in popularity of Jesus. Jesus is attracting larger crowds than John and John is asked what he is going to do about it. He responds, *“He must become greater, I must become less” (John 3:30 NIV).* In baptism we are saying the same thing about our self, “he must increase and our self must decrease.”

A few months after the encounter in my office I was privileged to baptize this young couple. Together they had made the commitment to follow Christ and this included following him through the waters of baptism. They, too, had begun to decrease that he might increase.

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quoted is from NRSV, NCCC/USA 1989
NIV, New International Bible Society, Zondervan, 1989
Campbell, Alexander, quoted in Chalice Hymnal, p. 377