

Baptism: The Beginning of the Beloved Community

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Introduction

Today, we stand once again in the waters of Jordan. We hear a familiar story—Jesus coming to John, stepping into the river, the heavens opening, the Spirit descending, and a voice from heaven declaring, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

This moment is not only about Jesus. It is about who God is, who Jesus is, and who *we* are called to be. On this day, when the Church celebrates the Baptism of the Lord, we are invited to reflect on the meaning of baptism—why it matters, what it does, and how it forms a people who live as God’s beloved community.

1. Baptism as God’s Gift: Being Born from Above by Water and Spirit

Baptism, in the Wesleyan and United Methodist understanding, is first and foremost **a gift of God’s prevenient and justifying grace**, not a human achievement. It is the visible sign of an invisible grace through which God reaches us before we can reach God. Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus helps us grasp this meaning when he speaks of being “born from above,” “born of the Spirit,” or “born of God.” These

phrases describe spiritual regeneration—not a second physical birth, but a **new beginning of life shaped by God’s Spirit**. Through baptism, God opens us to a renewed life where the Spirit awakens us to God’s presence, purpose, and love. Wesley understood regeneration as the beginning of God’s restoring work in us—the healing of what was damaged by sin and the reorientation of our lives toward holiness. Baptism does not complete this work; it **initiates a lifelong journey of grace** in which God continually renews us.

2. “You Are My Beloved”: Baptism and the Birth of a Community, Not Just an Individual

When Jesus comes up from the water, the heavens open and God declares, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” This divine affirmation is deeply personal, yet not private. It is spoken publicly, in the presence of the community, revealing that baptism is never merely an individual event.

In Christian baptism, God’s claim on a person always occurs **within a community of faith**. Whether an infant or an adult is baptized, the church promises to nurture, teach, and support the baptized in their faith journey. In the same way that Jesus is named “Beloved” in the presence of others, those who are baptized are welcomed into a community where identity is formed and sustained.

Baptism, therefore, shapes not only who we are, but **who we belong to**. The voice that names Jesus as Beloved becomes, by grace, a voice that echoes over the church: a people born anew, claimed by God, and called to live together as a beloved community marked by grace, justice, and love.

3. Why Jesus Was Baptized: Solidarity with Sinners and the Beginning of His Messianic Mission

If baptism signifies regeneration and new birth, we must ask whether Jesus himself underwent regeneration. The clear answer is no. Jesus was sinless and did not need repentance or forgiveness. His baptism was not about cleansing; it was about **calling and commitment**.

When John hesitated to baptize him, Jesus insisted, saying, “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” In this act, Jesus deliberately chose to stand in solidarity with sinners. He entered fully into the human condition—not from above, but from within. His baptism marks the beginning of his public ministry. It reveals the nature of his messianic mission: a mission rooted in humility, identification with the broken, and obedience to God’s will.

Jesus’ baptism declares that the beloved community he came to form would begin not with the righteous, but with those in need of grace. By stepping into the waters,

Jesus sanctified them for all who would follow, making baptism the doorway into a life shaped by God's redemptive love.

4. Baptism, Temptation, and the Journey Back to the Image of God

Baptism is a beginning, not an exemption from struggle. Immediately after Jesus' baptism, the same Spirit who descended upon him led him into the wilderness to be tempted. This underscores that being born of God does not mean being immune to sin or testing.

Adam was tested in the garden and failed. Israel was tested in the wilderness and failed. Jesus, the new Adam and true Israel, was tested and remained faithful. For baptized believers, temptation is not a sign of failure but of **calling**. Those claimed by God are often tested because they are being shaped.

Through baptism, God begins the work of restoring us to our original human nature—created in the image of God but distorted by sin. Regeneration opens us to this healing process, enabling us to live differently, to resist evil, and to grow in holiness. Baptism assures us that even in temptation, we do not stand alone. The Spirit who leads also sustains, and grace continues to work within us.

5. Baptism as Obedient Discipleship and the Formation of the Beloved Community

Baptism calls for a response. Wesley described this as “living answerable thereto”—a life that reflects the grace received. Baptism is a divine act, but it also invites human participation in obedience and discipleship. Jesus’ submission to baptism establishes it as a divinely ordained act through which God shapes faithful followers.

The purpose of baptism is not only personal renewal but communal transformation. As individuals are born anew, the community itself is renewed. The beloved community emerges when pride is replaced by humility, hatred by love, and self-centeredness by compassion. Good works flow not as a means of earning salvation, but as the fruit of faith made alive by grace.

In a fractured and divided world, baptism calls the church to live as a visible sign of God’s renewing love—people who remember who they are, to whom they belong to, and how they are called to live together.

Conclusion: Living as the Beloved, Together

Baptism is the beginning of the beloved community. It is God’s gracious claim upon our lives, the opening of a new way of seeing and living, and the call to walk together in faith. As we remember Jesus at the Jordan and recall our own baptism, we are invited to hear God’s voice once again: “You are my beloved.”

May we live answerable to that grace—resisting evil, trusting the Spirit, and embodying God’s love—so that the world may glimpse, through us, the community God is still bringing to life.