

January 9, 2011
Remember Your Baptism
Isaiah 42:1-9, Matthew 3:13-17

Jesus and Satan were arguing about who was better on the computer. They had been going at it for days, and frankly God was tired of listening to their bickering.

Fed up, God said to the two of them, "That's it! I've had enough. We're settling this once and for all. I'm going to set up a test. You will have two hours to complete all the work I give you. From the results, I will judge who does the better job."

So Satan and Jesus sat down at their keyboards and began to work.

They wrote documents. They downloaded PDF files from the Internet. They created spreadsheets! They produced labels and cards, charts and graphs. They even did some genealogy reports.

Jesus worked with heavenly efficiency; Satan was devilishly fast.

Ten minutes before their time was up, lightning suddenly flashed across the sky, thunder rolled, rain poured, and, of course....the power failed.

Satan stared at the blank screen in front of him and swore with colorful Satanic curses.

Jesus just sighed.

As soon as the electricity came back on, they restarted their computers.

Satan looked at his computer and began to sob. "It's gone! It's all gone! I lost everything when the power went off!"

While Satan was throwing a hissy fit, Jesus quietly started printing out all of his files from the past two hours of work.

Satan looked over at Jesus. "Wait!" he hissed. "That's not fair! He cheated! How come he has all his work and I don't have any?"

God just shrugged, looked at the Devil and said, "Jesus saves!"

The joke is old and the story is silly. But the punch line is central to our understanding of Christ's mission. Jesus came into the world in order that the world might be saved, redeemed, made right with God. He came that the world might find a new way to live... However you want to put it, the bottom line is: Jesus saves.

So what does the story we heard from Matthew's gospel this morning have to do with Jesus' mission of salvation?

We begin with a problem that has vexed theologians over the centuries—it's the same problem that John the Baptist has when Jesus comes to be baptized. If this Jesus *is* who the gospels claim him to be—the messiah, the sinless, blameless anointed one of God who has the power to save the world—then why does he think he needs to be baptized—in fact insists on being baptized?

Let me tell you a story that might help us understand at least one reason for his choice.

Almost twenty years ago, some 60 miles off the coast of South Africa, a brutal storm whipped the sea to a frenzy. Two people on a small sailing vessel—a married couple—had not made it to port before the storm blew up, and the fierce winds capsized their boat. Because of the kind of boat it was, it righted itself. But the mast was broken and lay across the deck while the sails and rigging tossed uselessly on the turbulent sea. The lives of the man and the woman were in jeopardy.

The couple sent out a distress signal, which was picked up by a ham operator and relayed to the authorities. As soon as the storm permitted, an airplane from the South African Air Force responded to the couple's distress call. With relief, the local newspaper was soon able to report that the plane had located the couple. There was even a picture of the grateful pair waving up at the plane from their crippled sailboat.

The couple may have felt grateful to see the airplane, but they weren't out of the soup quite yet. The airplane, with its fixed wings, had no way to rescue them. So they had to watch as it turned around and headed back to base and then wait a nail-biting while longer for a boat to come to their assistance.

Theologian Peter Woods, from whom I borrowed this story, says that it has stayed with him since he first read about it twenty years ago as an illustration of how useless a God who only watches from the heavens would be for us humans.

Like the couple in the storm, we might take some comfort from a God who looks down from heaven like the pilot of an airplane. But truth be told, what that couple needed more than someone watching from a distance, was someone who could get in the water with them, lift them from their crippled boat and save them.

And that almost brings us back to the baptism of Jesus. A couple of weeks ago, we heard about how he was born in a stable. Last week, we were there when a few foreign visitors dropped by with gifts for the small child. Then, there's a gap in the life of Jesus. Matthew doesn't tell us anything about Jesus growing up. Luke gives us a trip to the temple when Jesus was twelve. John and Mark tell us nothing at all about his birth or childhood.

But they all tell the story of this event. At about the age of 30, Jesus left his home in Nazareth and traveled the several days journey down to the Jordan where his wild cousin John was attracting huge crowds to be baptized for the forgiveness of sins.

The world in which John preached and baptized was as stormy as the ocean on which our couple found themselves stranded. It was a world of violence, and oppression and poverty.

The world in which you and I must live is just as stormy—a world of rampaging hooligans in the Mayfair Mall, deadly shootouts in Omaha and Tucson, drug wars and street wars and wars on terror.

It is a world in which you and I must sometimes deal with the storms of our own restless hearts, bitter quarrels that can erupt in our families, serious illness that can disrupt our lives, job stress and job loss, raising children and worrying about grandchildren in a world that offers too many temptations and too many terrors....

It is a world that is as beautiful as the sea—and as dangerous.

This is the world that Jesus came to save, and he began his work with the public act of having himself immersed in John's baptism.

Now baptism, the way we do it in our denomination, is a pretty tame affair. We pour a little warm water in a bowl. The pastor asks some questions of the parents if a baby is being baptized—or of the candidate if an older child or adult is being baptized. The pastor then says a few sacramental words and dabs a bit of water on the forehead.

Which reminds me of another old joke: a pastor's son decided to baptize the family's three cats. Being a good little Baptist, the boy took the three cats into the bathroom and filled the tub with water.

Everything went fine with the first two cats. They protested a bit, but allowed the boy to dunk each of them in the tub. The third cat was having none of it and bolted for the door as soon as the boy's wet hand touched its head.

Fine!" said the boy to the quickly departing cat, "Go ahead and be a Congregationalist if you want to!"

The boy has a point. His method of full immersion is closer to John the Baptist's method than our Congregational dabbling.

When John baptized Jesus, the two men would have waded out into the water, probably waist deep. John would have taken hold of Jesus and would have forcefully thrust Jesus' head under the water and held it there for a few moments—long enough to remind him that his first birth was not easy; long enough to symbolize that the old life was being washed away so that a new life could begin.

The baptism of Jesus does signify a new life. The old, private life as a carpenter's son in Nazareth ends with this act, and the new life of public ministry begins.

His baptism also signifies Jesus' willingness to immerse himself in the same messy, wonderful, desperate, beautiful, awful, confusing, stormy life that we must all live. In his baptism, Jesus signals that God does not watch from some far off place. God is with us—in the very ocean of our lives. He can save us because he is in the water with us.

But there's something else that happens in this baptism. As Jesus comes up out of the water, he sees the spirit descending like a dove and hears a voice proclaim, "This is my son, the beloved, in whom I am well pleased."

I want you to imagine for a moment that a young man is getting ready for an important assignment at work. His whole career hinges on this assignment. This is sink or swim time.

He's prepared for this work. He's had the schooling and the experience. He gives himself a pep talk. "Come on, I know you can do it!" he says to his image in the mirror.

And then a voice goes off in his head—a voice from his childhood, a voice of a parent or a teacher. The voice is harsh, unkind. The voice tells the young man, "You'll never amount to anything. You're nobody."

What do you think happens to this young man when he remembers that someone important in his life has called him a nobody?

In another part of town, a young woman is similarly preparing for a sink or swim assignment at work. She, too, has studied hard and gained the appropriate experience in preparation for this assignment.

And like the young man, she gives herself a pep talk. But when she says to the image in the mirror, "Come on, I know you can do it," she is hearing the voice of her parents who always told her, "You're somebody. You can do anything you set your mind to."

Assuming that both young people have the same professional preparation, which do you think has a better shot at making the grade on this make or break, sink or swim career assignment?

Names are powerful. Names can bring us pride or cause us shame. They can lift us up or throw us down.

Like our young man and our young woman, Jesus has been given a make or break assignment. He has been sent on a mission to redeem the world. The parent who sent him knows that Jesus can only fulfill this mission if he knows firmly who he is.

In baptism, Jesus is claimed and affirmed as God's beloved child and given the precious gift of God's Holy Spirit. Now, he will have the power to fulfill all righteousness, as he says. Now he will have the power to fulfill Isaiah's prophecy of salvation. Now he will have the strength to enter the storm of human life and not be overwhelmed.

The fact that Jesus chooses baptism to launch his public ministry is not merely symbolic, it is transformative. Jesus can touch us and reach us and save us because—through his baptism—he has done two things:

- He has demonstrated his willingness to immerse himself in the river of our imperfect lives.
- He has received the power and authority of God to enter the water and not be overwhelmed.

And what about us? For we, too, have been baptized. Whether we were dunked, dabbed, or sprinkled, whether as babies or as older candidates—we have been named and claimed by God as God's own beloved children.

I love the words of the hymn we will sing after this message. Near the end of the song, the words read: “Lord, bring us to our Jordan of newly opened eyes, through love immersed in living, as you were once baptized.”

We are not Christ; that is not our mission. But each of us has been given a mission and the authority to complete it. We have been given the power of the Holy Spirit. And we have been given the companionship of the one who “through love immersed in living” enters the water of life with us, to gasp with us and swim with us until we reach the far shore and come home at last. Amen