

Baptism | Acts 10:34-43; Matthew 3:13-17 | LUMC | January 8, 2023
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Dear Church family and friends: we have celebrated Christmas and the new year. This week we enter a new Christian season—the Epiphany of Christ. It is a moment for reflection and discovery of what Christ has just done, agreeing to come to earth. During his birthday, God promotes inclusion; both the Jews and the Magi (Gentiles) are invited to celebrate Jesus' birth and in extension, the global community is to continue the inclusion ministry.¹ The birth of Jesus caused sudden revelations and new insights.

The presence of the wise men in Israel caused King Herod, his cabinet, and the rich and politically influential people of Jerusalem to fear greatly. It is on record that when the king got the news of the birth of Jesus, he went into panic mood. He withheld the visa (permit) to let the wise men see Jesus until he investigated the time the birth occurred, and the story being told about the birth. The religious leaders narrated the old prophesy concerning Jesus' birth. Thereafter King Herod permitted the wise men to visit Jesus.

We also gain insight when Jesus reached out to shepherds, who were among the lowest in the Jewish social structure. He uplifted the poor Jews and included foreigners in his ministry. According to St Paul, this invitation caused the poor and the gentiles as well as future believers to be members of the same body, fellow heirs, and equal sharers in the reign of Christ. We are among God's people through God's grace. Thanks be to God.

Following the birth, in keeping with Jewish ritual, Jesus was named and baptized on the 8th day. Today's sermon is about baptism and the story starts with Jesus being baptized by John the Baptist. Later Jesus baptized his followers and advised the church to continue the baptism ritual until his second coming². We also learn a new meaning of baptism opposed to the old understanding of Jewish baptism as an annual recurrence. The ancient Jews held baptism once a year; they tied their sins to the neck of the scapegoat and released it on the eastern desert, in the region of the Jordan River. The ancient people believed that the scapegoat took away their sins. They felt relieved when they were baptized at the river Jordan. John the Baptist taught the concept of repentance followed by water baptism. Jesus added the presence of the Holy Spirit during baptism. Jesus taught us that baptism is a once in a lifetime sacramental event, and the candidate genuinely repents and turns away from his or her wicked ways.

Since the time of Jesus' baptism the ritual continues uninterrupted despite some denominations' and theologians' views that focus on specific baptismal doctrine and

¹ Matthew 2:1–12. The magi or the wise rich men who came to celebrate Jesus were gentiles, and foreigners from another country on the east region of Jerusalem. They requested a verbal visa to enter Israel (Judea). Their presence caused great fear. Later they were permitted to enter and celebrate the birth of Jesus.

² Matthew 28:16-20

beliefs (perhaps a sermon for another day). The three elements always used during baptism are water, invoking the triune God, and the institutional words and remembrance of “continue to do this until I come again”. We know water symbolizes the washing away of our sins, and that the triune God acts as the components. Symbolically, when the water and the trinity combine our sins are cleansed. The person being baptized repents of his or her sin and chooses to live according to God’s ways, enabled by the Holy Spirit. This is what you and I did at baptism. Often during a child’s baptism, the parents vow on behalf of their children until they grow to the age of reason, when the church leads them to the vows. For Methodists this is done during confirmation.

During a baptismal service, or the sermon on baptism, it is necessary to self-reflect on an individual’s story of baptism. When there is doubt, one can confirm with the family or the church of their childhood. It’s not uncommon for some members to come to the realization that they were not baptized as they thought. In such cases, they would get a proper baptism. It is very important to recall one’s baptism clearly as explained by the parents, and check the records, because baptism is essential and a first step to being a member of a Christian community of faith.

Christ taught and promoted baptism, and over the years since, the church has developed—and continues to advance—four principles why baptism must be done:

- Baptism is the initial—and initiation entry point—into the community of Christ;
- Jesus instructed those who believe in him to be baptized;
- Baptism is the mark of identifying with Jesus Christ; and
- Baptism is a public confession of one’s faith.

Through baptism, a believer is ‘born again of water and the Spirit’. Baptism is, therefore, a sacrament of initiation and incorporation into the body of Christ. The Methodist fellowship has a hymn to identify members of being one body: ***They Will Know We Are Christian by our Love***³

The community of believers remains faithful to God’s calling to be holy because God, who calls them through baptism, is holy. When members live according to their baptismal vows; they proclaim and exemplify the Gospel in their practical Christian living, and they attract new members.

The Methodist baptismal vows that express our faith in daily living include the following:

1. To renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of the world, and repent of our sin.
2. To accept the freedom and power God gives us to resist evil, injustice, and oppression.
3. To confess Jesus Christ as Savior, put our whole trust in his grace, and promise to serve him as our Lord.

³ The Faith We Sing #2223; Hymn #300

4. To remain faithful members of Christ's holy church and serve as Christ's representatives in the world.
5. To be loyal to Christ through The United Methodist Church and do all in our power to strengthen its ministries.
6. To faithfully participate in its ministries by our prayers, our presence, our gifts, our service, and our witness.
7. To receive and profess the Christian faith as contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments.⁴

This week I have reflected on my baptism vows, and I thank God for enabling me to continue the journey of faith. I am humbled that Christ finds in me a reliable person of faith to use for his glory. I have practiced my faith among believers who sincerely understand what it means to follow Christ, and do not feel alien to their faith journey one bit! I pray for you, as you too can reflect on your baptismal vows and find yourself not judged nor self-blaming for certain failures. Christ calls us to a life of surrender to his teaching, and to practicing tough love whenever a situation may call for it.

Our baptism vows bind the people called Methodists to a covenant of sharing and shouldering each other's burdens. Some acts of love may carry risks, yet our covenant binds us to celebrate each other's joys and pains, both privately and publicly. We do it publicly during worship and in fellowships.⁵

Methodists believe that every baptized member is called to share in the entire ministry of the whole church of Christ, each of us being a servant of the local and global community, and of Christ's ministry. We are also called to be responsible citizens, to join social activities and be faithful stewards of God's property. We are expected to retain positive attitudes toward others, to identify with those suffering in the world, and to bring hope to the hopeless. We are to enjoy being advocates of accepted and endorsed Methodist social principles (another sermon for another day?). We are also called to hold each other accountable to our faithfulness, to our covenantal vows, and to encourage those neglecting their vows to return to them. But they must be willing, refusing to impose external restrictions.

The Methodist baptismal vows fulfill Jesus' commission of "going everywhere doing good, healing the sick, and announcing freedom to those oppressed by the evil one" who is constantly invading our thoughts. Friends, may we continue our mission and our spiritual journey, aware God is ever with us.

Amen

⁴ You may want to refer on the book of discipline #213 to 242 for detailed learning on baptism and membership.

⁵ Every joy and pain shared publicly needs to comply with privacy laws of the land that may affect our work. Please ask members who want you to bring a public announcement the limit of information to be shared. Where in doubt consult with the pastor.