

## Wesley United Methodist Church

January 10, 2016

"Don't Touch Me With That Water!"

Isaiah 43:1-7, Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

"Fill the glasses with water, honey. Daddy's guests will be here soon," Mother said. Her young son carefully filled the crystal goblets. "How's it look, Mom?" Surveying the elegantly set table, she smiled and ruffled his hair. "You did great work, honey. Daddy will be so pleased." The boy grinned in anticipation of his father's approval.

Then the doorbell rang. "Our guests have arrived. Let's go greet them. We're done here," his Mom said. Opening the door, the boy took his Dad's hand and showed him the dining room. "Look, Dad, what Mom and I did." His Dad lovingly picked him up and said, "You certainly did a great job, son." And the boy's face lit up with his Father's approval.

Today we celebrate the baptism of our Lord. The setting has been prepared. God had summoned John to prepare the people for the arrival of the Messiah. John told the people that he was NOT the Messiah--the one they expected. "I baptize with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thongs of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."

The last genuine prophet of God was Malachi, 400 years before Jesus' birth. Malachi's words form a bridge between the Old Testament and the New Testament. He warned the Jews that they had broken their relationship with God and that judgment and punishment would come. After chastising them, however, he offers hope and forgiveness if they repented. John's baptism of water was done for the forgiveness of sin. Jesus' baptism of the Holy Spirit and fire would give the truly repentant, not only forgiveness, but the power to do God's will. Those who failed to honestly repent would receive God's judgment.

Every day the crowds at the Jordan river grew. They'd come to hear the powerful voice of the prophet. John dressed like a prophet, and he spoke like a prophet, "Turn from your sin! Do it now!" Like a sharp knife, his words went straight to the heart, dividing his audience in two. The hard of heart found themselves confronted. Repentant hearts found comfort and hope.

John's words took hold in unexpected places--among the poor, the dishonest, and even hardened soldiers--those who were painfully aware of their need for forgiveness of sin. "What must we do?" they asked John. "Repent! Believe and be baptized."

Nicholas stood at his father's side. He watched as his baby sister was baptized. He listened to the pastor's words recalling the story of Jesus' baptism. He heard that water was a sign of cleansing and rebirth. "In baptism we have been set free from sin and death," the pastor said. Sin and death are scary words to a six-year-old. Pouring water over his sister's head, the pastor continued. "Rachel Paige Martin, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen." The pastor then turned to Nicholas, who quickly grabbed his father's leg shouting, "Don't touch me with that water!" Unlocking their son's arms, his parents said with firm voices, "We present Nicholas Robert Martin for the Sacrament of Holy Baptism."

Nicholas' defiance toward baptism stemmed from fear and misunderstanding. He did not comprehend what God was doing through this sacrament. The pastor spoke words of reassurance as he touched him gently with warm water. Nicholas and Rachel were now children of God, forgiven, anointed by the Holy Spirit, and marked with the cross of Christ forever.

Jesus was fully human and fully divine. He was perfectly God and at the same time perfectly man. In his baptism, Jesus identified with us in all ways. He could have gone up to Jerusalem and identified with the established religious leaders, but he chose to go to the Jordan River and identify himself with sinners.

Jesus did not need John's baptism for the forgiveness of sin. He was sinless. On that day, he was just one of the crowd coming for baptism, one among many. In this act, he showed obedience to the Father, and the Father showed his approval. Luke tells us that after he was baptized, he prayed. Jesus' first response was to communicate with his divine Father. And God responded, not only to his Son, but to those gathered with him. The heavens opened, and the Holy Spirit, in the form of a dove, came down on him. Then God showed his approval by saying, "You are my Son; the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." (Luke 3:22)

Can you imagine that moment? In recording this event, Matthew tells us that when Jesus came to John for baptism, John actually tried to prevent it. Looking at him he asked, "Why do you come to me for baptism

when I need to be baptized by you?" Jesus answered, "Let it be this way for now. We should do all things that are God's will." (Matth.3:15). So John agreed. When John heard the voice from heaven speak, he knew that Jesus was the Lamb of God who would take away the sins of the world. John the Baptist was to decrease; Jesus the Christ was to increase. The real baptizer had arrived.

God had a mission for John--to announce that the kingdom of God was at hand. God had a mission for Jesus--to announce that God's kingdom had arrived. God anointed Jesus for that mission through baptism.

In order to advance his Father's mission and advance God's work in the world, Jesus was anointed to fulfill righteousness, freeing us from guilt and sin. His baptism showed support for John's ministry and inaugurated his own public ministry to bring God's message of salvation to all people. He who was without sin, fully identified with those who had sin. And so he came for the baptism of water, the baptism of repentance, to set the example.

On a beautiful Sunday morning, three youth from the local detention home stood before the baptismal font. The pastor asked them, "Robert, Charles, Tory, do you desire to be baptized?" Each responded, "I Do." As they were baptized in turn, their names were repeated. In the congregation, a foreign exchange student turned to his host mother with a questioning look. "Didn't these boys have a name before this time?" Smiling at him, she responded, "Yes, they did. At their birth they were named, but now they are given new birth through their baptism. They are now the children of God who claim the name of Jesus, the name above all names.

As the boys lifted their heads, their faces shone. They knew their sins. They wanted forgiveness for the wrongs they had done. They knew their need to be forgiven. They wanted God's approval. As God spoke to his only Son, he now spoke to these three boys. We can see it in our mind's eye. Turning to each one, the Father nods, smiles at them, his beloved and precious children, and washes them clean of sin. Hear God say with pride, "You are my sons, whom I love, and I am very, very pleased with you." As God touched each of us with baptismal water, he also touches us with his love so we can touch others. Amen.