

## NEW BEGINNINGS IN BAPTISM

Matthew 3:13-17

*“Are you going to speak all about our goals and vision for mission in your first sermon?”* a member of the Search Committee asked me. It was a good question. I’m excited about the goals in the parish profile and want to explore with you St. John’s mission to represent Christ and Christ’s love in the midst of Stamford. But that’s not what I’m called to preach this morning. *“No,”* I told her. *“I’m going to talk about Jesus.”*

After his birth this is the first we see Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew. The narrative of Jesus’ adult ministry begins with his baptism in all four gospels. We have the story of his birth and then, boom, 30 years later we see him standing in a line going down to the muddy banks of the Jordan River, to be baptized by his fiery cousin John the Baptist. In fact, it’s important to note that Matthew’s account begins and ends with baptism. Jesus’ last words in the Gospel of Matthew are the Great Commission to his disciples:

*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.*

Jesus’ baptism is at the beginning and then the commission to baptize all nations and races and cultures is at the end of Matthew’s Gospel.

Another unique detail to Jesus’ baptism is that it is told in the first person. When Jesus came up out of the water Matthew tells us that the heavens were opened to him and that he *saw* the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And he heard a voice from heaven saying, *this is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.* Well how did anyone know what Jesus felt and saw and heard? Especially since, as far as we know he hadn’t called any of his disciples yet? They didn’t see his baptism. (How could they know?) The simple answer is that he must have told them. Jesus’ baptism was such an important event that he told his disciples what he experienced at that moment that he came up out of the waters.

Because Jesus pioneered our faith, because he blazed the way for us, the same great gifts that he experienced in his baptism are available to us through our baptisms. Jesus saw the heavens opened. The sky is no longer the limit. There is no limit. There is no barrier between us and God. When Jesus died on the cross the thick curtain that closed off the *holy of holies* at the center of the Temple was torn from top to bottom. Jesus is the way to God. In him we see the heavens are open for us.

The same Holy Spirit that Jesus experienced alighting on him like a dove is available to us. God gives us his Holy Spirit in baptism. We see the Holy Spirit in the gifts and abilities we have for ministry. God’s Spirit empowers us for the work of ministry. Indeed, Jesus encouraged us to ask for the Holy Spirit to fill us, to direct us, to strengthen us and to use us.

“*This is my son,*” Jesus heard in his baptism, “*the beloved.*” In our baptisms God claims you and me as his own, as his beloved forever. The Apostle Paul says that we are made God’s children through adoption. Through our baptisms we were adopted. Each of us became God’s child. But more than that we became part of God’s family.

As our family is still in the midst of unpacking boxes I am at the moment particularly fond of stories about moving. Barney Hawkins, the Director of my Doctor of Ministry program at Virginia Theological Seminary, told me about moving into his house in Virginia. He was hanging family pictures in his daughter Ellen’s bedroom. Ellen is mentally retarded and seeing pictures of her parents, brother, aunts and uncles, cousins, etc. help ground her in who she is. Mixed in with the box of family pictures for some reason were several icons. “*What the devil are these doing here?*” Barney wondered out loud as he shoved aside an icon of the Virgin Mary. “*Well, she’s family,*” asserted Ellen. Apparently Ellen’s family extends beyond blood relatives. So now all the members of Ellen’s family, including Jesus, Mary and a number of saints, are up on Ellen’s wall. How right Ellen was. Indeed our baptism makes it so.

“*Remember your baptism,*” the Reformation theologian Martin Luther was fond of saying. He didn’t mean the actual event, which for most people then as now was when they were infants. Most of us couldn’t remember our baptisms if we tried. But we can remember what it means to be baptized. We can remember that in his baptism Jesus realized in some mystical and powerful new way his deep connection to God. We too are connected to God through our baptisms. Jesus was empowered from the moment of his baptism to do God’s business. Every crying person, every brokenhearted person, every hungry person, every diseased person, every alienated person, every suffering person was his business. As we recall our baptisms we need to remember who we are called to serve. Remembering our baptisms we recall with Ellen Hawkins who our family members are. Remembering our baptisms we should recall that God has given us the victory over every power, over every evil, over every voice that seeks to diminish our humanity, over every temptation, even over death itself.

Jesus’ baptism was the beginning point of his ministry. How blessed I am as I begin as your new Rector to do so on the day we celebrate Jesus’ baptism. It is also the anniversary of my ordination to the priesthood 28 years ago. Our baptisms as Jesus’ own baptism represents the starting point of ministry. Linda Clapp has a wonderful button at the entrance to her office she tells me was given her by Interim Rector Hugh Tudor Foley: “*Authorized Minister,*” it says, “*by baptism.*” So are we all.

Matthew’s Gospel begins in Jesus’ baptism; it ends with a new beginning of Jesus’ commissioning his disciples to go in his name, to proclaim good news, to teach and to baptize. Today we recall Jesus’ baptism and remember the impact of our own baptisms. But we also need to begin to think as a community about our mission, about those exciting goals outlined in the parish profile and the ways Jesus challenges us to go out bring his Great Commission to the City of Stamford and beyond.

**Amen.**