

New Beginnings

¹³ Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. ¹⁴ John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" ¹⁵ But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. ¹⁶ And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. ¹⁷ And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." (Matthew 3:13-17)

Several years ago, I visited a local hospital for my church member. After praying with him, I went to a family waiting room and met his niece there during his surgery. As I was introduced to her as her uncle's pastor, she started to talk with me on her faith journey. It was a dramatic story of her life that had so many ups and downs. Now I barely remember her name or her many stories but one thing. It was her story as a "reborn" Christian. She was so enthusiastic about her "reborn" experience that I could still remember her climactic baptismal story. As a born Christian, I did not have such a dramatic baptismal story. In fact, I don't even remember any part of my own baptism, other than knowing I was baptized according to my parents' say-so. After listening to her long stories, I simply talked to her that baptism is not the end of her faith journey, but a beginning! Many Methodists just like me may not have such a memorable baptismal story. For even adult baptism, we Methodists do not use much water to make the baptized "fully" wet! Whether we were baptized as infants or sprinkled as adults during our regular worship service, we don't seem to be much excited with our own baptism.

As we hear the story of Jesus' baptism, we may revisit our own baptism even though we may not remember it. In Matthew's Gospel, we can see that Jesus' baptism was part of God's plan and Jesus and John faithfully obeyed it. When John the Baptist hesitated to baptize Jesus, Jesus said to him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." *To fulfill all righteousness* means to follow and obey the words and ways of God who has prepared all things according to God's righteous Will. By being baptized, Jesus became anointed by the Spirit of God and was revealed as the Son of God. The image of a dove and the voice saying "this is my Son" affirmed the identity of Jesus Christ as the Son of God and bestowed him with the blessing of God. At the very moment of Jesus' baptism, Matthew's Gospel witnesses the presence of the triune God, in other words, Father (the voice), Son (Jesus), and Holy Spirit (the image of a dove).

Why does Jesus' baptism matter, and how does it relate to our own baptism? Jesus' baptism signifies his relationship with God the Father and the Holy Spirit. Through baptism, Jesus is reaffirmed as the Son of God! The proclamation of the heavenly voice, *"this is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased,"* characterizes the nature of Jesus Christ. Baptism is

the new beginning of Jesus' life as the anointed Messiah who holds a loving relationship with God! As we enter into the intimate relationship with God, our own baptism is also as significant as the baptism of Jesus Christ.

Baptism is not only a meaningful Christian ritual, but also a new beginning in our relationship with God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Through baptism, we become part of God's family in which we welcome, accept, and embrace one another as our sisters and brothers in Christ our Lord. While we have our biological family, through baptism we become a part of God's extensive family with those who confess their sins, accept the love of Christ, and commit to live and follow the ways of Christ Jesus.

Of course, we do not need to repeat our baptism whenever we move to a new city or town and transfer our church membership because the host of our baptism is the same God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It connotes a very important theological meaning: One baptism is enough and valid!

One day a prospective member came to me before joining the church and requested a baptism: "Pastor, could you re-baptize me when I join your church?" she asked. After inquiring her reason, she said, "Because I want to live a new life as a committed Christian. I was told that I was baptized when I was young but can't remember it at all." I replied to her, "Once you are baptized, you don't need to be baptized again for two reasons. First, the loving God was the host of your baptism. As you transfer your membership to our church, the same God who loves and takes care of you has already baptized you. Even though you don't remember it, God never forgets your baptism because you have been such a loving daughter of God. Second, your baptism was blessed by your pastor, your parents, and the whole church community. Your baptism was a communal celebration in the name of God in the presence of all witnesses. In this sense, your baptism is much greater and beyond your personal commitment! When you join the church, you only need to renew your baptismal commitment as a child of God in this new congregation. One baptism is enough and valid."

Dear friends, at the baptism of Jesus as the heavenly voice of *"This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased"* was heard, our loving God must have proclaimed the joy of adopting each of us as a beloved child of God at the very moment of our own baptism. With Christ Jesus, through baptism we all have become the family of God! Baptism connects and binds us together as one family of God. While we are uniquely different and distinctive, through baptism we all belong to God's family with equality!

Baptism is our first step to accepting God's invitation into a special relationship with God and other Christians. Last June, my family had a bus trip to Niagara Falls, and we were all wet with abundant water! Only the people who have been there can experience the power of

gigantic waterfalls! Likewise, our baptism invites us to a community of faith in which we experience and learn that faith is not “me and God alone” but “us together!” Baptism connects us to the Spirit of God and to the faith of community so that we truly experience the family of God as a new reality.

I am glad that we begin a New Year by renewing our baptism on this day of the Lord’s Baptism. As we took our first step toward this special relationship with God and other believers through baptism, let us continue our faith journey with Christ Jesus and remember that there is always Christ our Lord who abides with us in our new beginnings!

In the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit! Amen.