

“UH-OH!”

Matthew 3:13-17

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First Presbyterian Church of Portland and the First Presbyterian Church of Decatur, Indiana on January 8, 2017]

I

John Buchanan, the retired pastor of Chicago’s Fourth Presbyterian Church, tells of baptizing a two-year-old boy during a Sunday morning worship service.

After the child had been baptized, Pastor Buchanan, following the directions of the Presbyterian Book of Worship, placed his hand on the little boy’s head and said to him:

*“You are a child of God,
sealed by the Spirit in your baptism,
and you belong to Jesus Christ forever.”*

Unexpectedly, the little boy looked up and responded, **“Uh-Oh.”**

The people in the congregation smiled—I’m sure if they had been anything but Presbyterians they would have laughed out loud.

But, writes John Buchanan, the child’s response was appropriate.

He called it a “stunning theological affirmation” from the mouth of a child.

II

Baptism ought to be an “Uh-Oh!” kind of event.

Baptism is not a routine ritual,
not something done casually or without serious consideration.

Baptism is something we go through only after deep soul searching and prayer...
whether it is our own baptism
or the baptism of someone in our care.

Whether we are two months old,

two years old,
 twenty-two years old,
 or 102 years young,
 baptism represents a movement...
 from the world of darkness to the world of light,
 from the kingdom of fear to the kingdom of love,
 from the stark reality of certain death
 to the promise of glorious and everlasting life.

Baptism should never be taken lightly.

As we can see from our gospel lesson this morning,
 Jesus did not take his baptism lightly either.

He traveled from the north country of Galilee south to the Jordan River where he presented himself to his cousin John to be baptized.

Many were coming to John out of curiosity...
 coming from Jerusalem and all over Judea,
 attracted to this charismatic reincarnation of the prophet Elijah.

John called the people to repent,
 to change the direction of their lives,
 because God's long-promised reign was about to break into life.

As a sign of their repentance and as an act of solidarity with and commitment to welcoming that reign,
 the people were lining up to be baptized.

Think how uncomfortable John felt when Jesus stood before him asking to be baptized.

“What’s going on here?” John surely wondered. *“I’m not ready for this.*

I am but a prophet. This is the Christ...the Messiah!

What am I doing baptizing him?”

All four gospels report the event of Jesus’ baptism.

Only Matthew records the conversation between John and Jesus.

“John would have prevented him, saying, ‘I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?’

“But Jesus answered him, ‘Let it be so now; for it proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.’”

It is not hard to guess what was going through John’s mind.

I wonder, what was Jesus thinking?

Why would he, the sinless Son of God, submit himself to baptism right there in the middle of the muddy Jordan River?

Several reasons come to mind.

III

For one thing, Jesus wanted **to identify with the ministry and message of John.**

There is no question Jesus had great admiration for John.

“Truly, I say to you,” said Jesus on one occasion, “among those born of women there has risen no one greater than John the Baptist . . .” (Matthew 11:11).

Last time I checked, 100% of the people who have ever lived have been born of women.

Jesus is paying John an enormous compliment.

The respect Jesus had for John’s **ministry** is unquestioned.

The respect Jesus had for John’s **message** is equally impressive.

John came preaching, *“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”* (Matt. 3:2)

According to Matthew 4:17, Jesus’ first sermon was,

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

There are those who portray John as being hard on sin and Jesus as soft.

Everyone associates John with the need for repentance;
 few of us associate Jesus with the same word.

But if you read the gospels closely, Jesus' teachings were just as uncompromising as John's.

Jesus was compassionate with sinners,
 he welcomed them and ate with them,
 but he was not so tolerant of sin.

Jesus, having the heart of the Father, understood in a way John could not just why sin must be rooted out of our lives.

Sin destroys.

It destroys individuals...
 it destroys marriages..
 it destroys churches..
 it destroys everything it touches.

That is why sin is the enemy.

Deep in our heart of hearts, we know this is true.

And yet, we modern folks don't like to talk about sin much anymore—
 which is tragic for two reasons.

First, it is tragic because it allows us to evade the sad truth about the choices we make until it is too late.

Theologian Cornelius Plantinga wrote a book entitled *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin*.

In the book he tells about a scene from the 1991 film *Grand Canyon*.

Mack, an attorney played by Kevin Kline, attends a Lakers basketball game and is in a hurry to get home after the game. The main roads are jammed with traffic, so he tries a short-cut.

Suddenly he realizes he's in South Central Los Angeles, one of the most dangerous areas of the city. Even worse, his car stalls.

He phones for help, but before it arrives, a group of young gang members surround his car and begin to threaten him.

He looks helpless, fearful about what might happen.

Suddenly, a tow truck arrives.

The driver, Simon, (played by Danny Glover) steps out to hook the car up.

The gang members protest.

Simon takes the leader of the gang aside and firmly says,

“Man, the world ain't supposed to work like this. Maybe you don't know that, but this ain't the way it's supposed to be. I'm supposed to be able to do my job without askin' you if I can. And that dude”—referring to Mack—“is supposed to be able to wait with his car without you rippin' him off. Everything's supposed to be different than what it is here.”

We live in a world where many things are different from the way God intends them to be.

The result is fear, death, and destruction on every hand.

And the second reason not talking about sin is tragic is—

**When there is no consciousness of our sin,
there is no consciousness of our need for salvation.**

Barbara Brown Taylor, in her book *Speaking of Sin*, names one chapter “Sin is Our Only Hope.”

She argues that the key to experiencing salvation is to first be aware that we need saving.

That means we must recognize our sin.

This is why worship in the Presbyterian tradition often includes a Prayer of Confession—

a weekly reminder that sin is not a harmless plaything,
but an enemy that infects every human action and interaction.

And yet when we recognize our sin

when we confess how we have sinned and fallen short of God's glory,
the door is opened for God's grace to flood into our lives.

This is why the Prayer of Confession is always followed by the Assurance of Forgiveness—

to remind us that there is always more grace in God than there is sin in us.

The opening words to Jesus' ministry echoed those of John the Baptist:

"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

Jesus understood the destructiveness of sin even more acutely than John did.

So Jesus came to be baptized by John as a way of identifying with John's message and his ministry.

IV

A second reason Jesus came to be baptized that day:

This was his way of initiating his own ministry.

Jesus was about thirty years old.

Presumably he helped his mother raise his younger brothers and sisters.

He had spent his early years in the carpenter shop of his father Joseph.

Now it was time for him to step up to fulfill the mission to which God had called him.

Baptism at the hand of John was his way of announcing to the world that he was ready to begin the ministry that within three years would send him to the cross.

If it seems that being baptized by a rough-cut preacher like John was very humbling for the Son of God,

remember that humbling himself was what his whole ministry was about.

As St. Paul wrote in Philippians 2, Christ *“humbled himself by becoming obedient unto death--even death on a cross.”*

Why? Because that was the only way he could fulfill his mission of seeking and saving the lost.

He laid down his life for us.

Some years ago there was a news story of a bank official who became a hero in a most unusual way.

Andrew Parker and his family, along with many others, were on a ferry which was sinking in the English Channel.

Fortunately this was near a small island.

Unfortunately between the sinking boat and a small dock jutting out from the island was a six-foot span of turbulent water.

Safety was close at hand, but none of the people on the ship could jump six feet.

So, Andrew Parker decided to build a bridge...with his own body.

He stretched his six-foot-three-inch frame across the gap to become a human bridge in order to allow the twenty persons on board to get across.

His wife Eleanor was the first to try out the human structure.

She said, “I stepped on his back and I was petrified!”

All of the people aboard the ferry made it across.

Once across, all of them clung to the small island until rescuers from a larger ship could throw them a rope.

Parker helped everyone climb the rope.

“People were screaming, and my daughter thought she was going to die,” Eleanor Parker declared. “She said, ‘Mommy, if I did something wrong, I didn’t mean to do it.’”

In the midst of all the confusion and pandemonium, Andrew Parker himself became a vital pathway to safety.

Now go back 2,000 years.

A humble carpenter of Nazareth set out not only to **build** a bridge between God and humankind,
but to **become** the bridge.

It began here on the banks of the Jordan when he chose to initiate his ministry at the hands of John the Baptist.

Jesus was baptized as an act of identification with John’s message and ministry and as a means of initiating his own ministry,
a ministry marked by humility and love.

V

And here is a third reason Jesus presented himself for baptism that day beside the River Jordan:

He was indicating to us the path we are to take in our Christian discipleship.

We submit to baptism as an act of identification with Christ’s message and ministry.

In baptism we become part of Christ’s family.

This is no small thing.

This is the moment when we say, **“UH-OH!”**

Nothing on earth can tear us away from Christ once we are part of his family.

We have a place of safety and security that will never fail us once we put our trust in him and give ourselves to him in baptism.

Author Jack Gullledge puts it in a beautiful way.

He describes how the Jordan River flows southward for 158 miles through the Holy Land.

He notes that for the most part this river is neither beautiful nor peaceful.

For one thing, it plunges downhill at a furious pace,
falling nine feet per mile.

The river begins in the snows of Mount Hermon, 9,232 feet above sea level.

Then it empties into the Dead Sea,
1,365 feet below sea level,
the lowest point on earth.

Jack Gullledge writes:

“Amid the unbeautiful, sometimes furious river, east of Jericho, there is a lovely bend called . . . the Ford of the Partridge. It’s a place of great beauty, shaded by willows and eucalyptus trees, much as it was in New Testament times. Here, according to tradition, Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist.

“How symbolic . . . The place of [Christ’s] baptism is a spot of beauty and peace amid a furious flowing river of hate and strife.”

This is the assurance we have in the sacrament of baptism—
in the midst of hate and strife,
in the midst of suffering, pain, and loss,
in the midst of death, destruction, and despair of the world,
*we are children of God,
sealed by the Spirit in baptism,
and we belong to Christ forever.*

I like that story told of Martin Luther, that whenever he faced difficulties in his ministry, he would touch his fingers to his forehead and say to himself,
“Remember, Martin, that you have been baptized.”

I invite you, before you leave this sacred space today, to touch your forehead and say, “Remember, (name), that you have been baptized.”

VI

And so as Jesus comes up from the waters of baptism,
his faith and his sense of purpose are renewed and sealed.

He is now ready to begin his public ministry.

God’s Spirit descends upon him like a dove,
and God’s voice, echoing the ancient prophecy of Isaiah, says,
“This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

Baptized by John and anointed by God,
Jesus is ready to follow the straight path that God has laid out for him,
the path that will eventually lead to the cross and beyond.

For us as Christians, baptism is a public proclamation of faith and intention to follow the path of Jesus,
to live a life that pleases God.

When we are baptized,
when we have our children baptized,
when we renew our baptismal vows,
we promise to proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ,
to resist evil,
to love our neighbors as ourselves,
to strive for justice and peace among all people,
and to respect the dignity of every human being.

“Uh-oh,” said the young boy when his pastor stated the meaning of his baptism.

That boy was correct in his assessment of the seriousness of the situation.

Baptism is a big deal.

And I hope that everyone in this room understands what an important and beautiful sacrament of the church it is.

There may be someone in this fellowship who has never taken this essential step of Christian discipleship.

If you have not, I invite you to consider following Jesus into those sacred waters.

Christ wants you as part of his family.

The beginning of a New Year is an ideal time to make this decision.

The story is told of a pastor's words to a baby shortly after he had baptized her.

No doubt, the minister was speaking as much to the congregation as to the infant.

"Little sister, by this act of baptism, we welcome you to a journey that will take your whole life. This isn't the end. It's the beginning of God's experiment with your life. What God will make of you, we know not. Where God will take you, surprise you, we cannot say. This we do know and this we say—God is with you."

And God will be with you as you live out your baptism.

Amen.

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