

Baptism of Jesus 2025
A Sermon by Chris Hensley
Based on Luke 3:15-17 & 20-22
Presented to Sardis Baptist Church
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Baptism has been an important sacrament, ordinance, rite, or whatever word you would like to attach to it, since before Christianity even existed. Baptism, which means to immerse or dip or wash, is an act of individual worship, a ritual which was done solo and was done so that the individual in question might be made ceremonially clean once again after having been through an event which made them unclean. John the Baptist, though was baptizing people in the Jordan River in a public act of worship and reverence as well as an outward sign of some form of repentance to which John was calling his listeners. It is also an action which sets the person or persons apart within a religious community. For Christians, the meaning of baptism has shifted throughout the last two millennia. It has been the act of securing some Christian's their place in heaven, it has been done more as a sign of a public conviction to follow Jesus' teachings. Baptism has been offered to infants as well as consenting adults. Baptism has also been used as a method of gatekeeping in some Christian traditions, preventing others from accessing other rites and sacraments including communion. It is a history fraught with

sorrow, joy, hope, and rich with meaning which sometimes shifts over time and with reflection for the individuals involved.

For John the Baptist, baptism was apparently a one off event which individuals did not have to repeat a break from the larger Jewish tradition of John's experience. The act of baptism to which John was calling his listeners led the crowds to begin to wonder about who this fiery preacher was. Was this the Messiah? The promised anointed one of God? This question was never raised in the other Synoptic Gospel accounts, Matthew and Mark, and it was not mentioned in what is called the Q source, or the source which is shared by Matthew and Luke but not Mark. John instead says that his baptism is of water while the Messiah will baptize with fire and the Holy Spirit. This is Luke's way of connecting John to Pentecost and making John into a true prophet, because you are not a true prophet unless you actually predict something.

The second half of our passage moves away from John the Baptist because the unread portion tells us that John has been imprisoned by Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great from the birth narrative. Instead, the focus is on Jesus as he is baptized. Luke omits whether or not John baptized his cousin whereas Matthew and Mark seem to have no issues in this connection.

It is possible that Luke did not want to explicitly state that John baptized Jesus, though it seems Luke wants the readers to understand that this happened as we read further into Acts, which was attributed to the same author as the Gospel of Luke.

Luke seems to be elevating the affirmation of Jesus on the part of God the Creator as opposed to Jesus' submission to John through the act of baptism. The idea behind this appears to be that Luke is elevating Jesus to be the paradigm for believers rather than John. That is to say, Jesus is the example which we are called to follow in the movement that is now called Christianity. Jesus going through the act of baptism, his praying, fasting, meditating on scripture, his inclusion of the marginalized, his dismantling of oppressive systems, among other things are to be modeled by his followers.

Baptism is an act of setting oneself apart for a life of working, wrestling, pondering, communion, and including. It is fitting that the recognition of the Baptism of Jesus falls on the Sunday closest to Martin Luther King Jr. Day here in the United States. While the liturgical calendar spans cultures and countries all over the globe and in no way should be placed into bed with any sort of American exceptionalism, it is neat when things like this happen. Dr.

King was a paragon of sacrificially following in the steps of Jesus – working to dismantle oppressive systems of government which had invited prominent religious leaders into its bed and they had gladly dove into those sheets without a second thought. Rev. Dr. King, though, spoke truth to power and addressed the powers that be head on. Dr. King was led by his Christian faith to work to dismantle cruelty. Though we would be gravely mistaken to presume that Christianity has cornered the market on working against oppressive systems. Unfortunately, the Church has been guilty of getting into bed with oppressive systems but that is another sermon for another day.

Let us find encouragement as we reflect on the story of Jesus baptism as it is recorded in Luke's account. Especially on this Martin Luther King Jr. Day weekend, may we find encouragement to reflect on our own baptism. For those of us who have been baptized in the larger Christian tradition – what does our baptism mean individually and communally? How are we following the steps of Jesus beyond into the waters of baptism? What good trouble are we causing? Our baptism is a public declaration of our commitment to follow the Christ, an out loud declaration that we will work for the things which matter in this life – things like love, justice, and peace for all. May we continue to lean into that declaration today and everyday.