

# Baptism & Ordination: Empowered to Serve

## Baptism of the Lord Sunday Ordination & Installation of Elders

*Luke 3:15-17, 21-22    Isaiah 43:1-7  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa*

*Rev. Todd B. Freeman  
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Just a couple of Sunday ago Jesus was an infant. Last Sunday we talked about him when he was 12 years old. This week he's around 30 years old. And you think kids grow up fast today!

On the liturgical church calendar, today is the first Sunday in the church season of Epiphany, which lasts until the beginning of the season of Lent. The word "epiphany" means "to appear" or "to make known." The First Sunday of Epiphany is also always designated as Baptism of the Lord Sunday – a time when we read that a voice from heaven "makes it known" that Jesus is God's beloved child, with whom God is well pleased.

From a theological perspective, the story of Jesus' baptism is about revealing the mystery of Jesus' relationship to God – his identity. Luke reveals him as God's Son, the promised One, the Messiah, the Christ. There is legitimate debate, however, as to whether Jesus himself was aware of this specific relationship during his lifetime.

It is very interesting that Luke does not recount the actual baptism of Jesus. He does not even tell us specifically that John is the one who baptized him. While the other Gospels focus on the baptism of Jesus directly, Luke is the only Gospel that places Jesus among the crowds of people responding to John's preaching: "when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized..." This is a profound statement, for in it **Luke means to identify Jesus as being with and among the people.**

**Luke will work out this understanding of Jesus' identification with humanity (and therefore God's identification with humanity) throughout his Gospel** as Jesus reaches out to the outcasts and the powerless, as he touches lepers, and as he laments over Jerusalem. **We learn that Jesus' concern for the human condition is God's concern for the human condition.**

Since the assigned lectionary gospel readings throughout this year will focus on the book of Luke, we will discover how Jesus becomes the example, the model of what we as the community of faith are called to become. So perhaps Luke's primary theological point is his telling of Jesus' baptism is this: **As the Holy Spirit empowers Jesus for his work in the world, so the Holy Spirit empowers the Church for its work in the world.** And the implication is that this empowerment, as symbolized through baptism, carries with it the call to serve others.

As you might imagine, there has also been a lot of theological debate as to what Jesus' baptism actually meant, as well as debate about exactly what our baptism means. One of the things I have learned when considering different denominational understandings of the meaning of baptism is the following: as a broad generalization, for example, while most Baptists see the **Sacrament of Baptism** primarily as emphasizing what believers promise to God, **Presbyterians emphasize God's promises to us.**

That being said, however, I think one thing that most everyone agrees on concerning **Jesus' baptism** is that it signified **his commissioning to begin his public ministry.** And, as symbolized by the descending dove, it served as an empowerment by God to fulfill that ministry. In other words, it functioned, in part, somewhat as **Jesus' ordination and installation service.** That's why it's such a good story in light of today's ordination and installation of our incoming elders who will be commissioned for their public ministry in the leading of this congregation.

Being commissioned for service to God and the church, however, is not limited to those who are ordained and called to serve as an elder or pastor. **Our baptism calls each and every one of us to work for the furthering of the kingdom of God.**

What are some of the other meanings of baptism? More importantly, **what does your baptism mean to you?** After reading a lot about baptism over the years, even referring back to my seminary notes, I remembered that the Presbyterian **Book of Order** actually has a very nice summary of the meaning of baptism. It lists seven things. And now, a reading from W-2.3004:

Baptism is the sign and symbol of inclusion in God's grace and covenant with the Church. As an identifying mark, Baptism signifies

- a. the faithfulness of God,
- b. the washing away of sin,
- c. rebirth,
- d. putting on the fresh garment of Christ,
- e. being sealed by God's Spirit,
- f. adoption into the covenant family of the Church,
- g. resurrection and illumination in Christ.

We could spend the rest of the year talking about what all those seven things mean to you and me. So I guess we better get started. Actually, there is only one that I want to comment on today: **adoption into the covenant family of the Church.**

**That means that each one of us has a place in the family of God. And because of that, nobody can tell us that our lives don't matter. Nobody can tell us that we are unloved. Nobody can tell us that we don't belong.**

Just as Jesus' baptism identified him in relationship to God, so does our baptism establish our identity in relationship with God. Just as with Jesus, we all are also sons and daughters of God. An important question to reflect upon, then, is: **What does it mean to you to be a child of God?**

Finally, and interestingly, I have found meaning in our baptism in an *Old Testament* passage, on that we heard just a few moments ago.

*Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they*

*shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through the fire you will not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. You are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you.*

So does baptism matter? Yes it does! It matters because hopefully we come to understand ourselves as being **called by God**, individually by name. Hopefully, we come to understand that as part of God's family, we are offered a profound **sense of belonging**. And hopefully, we also come to understand that we are who God says we are. Like Jesus, we are **beloved children of God**, and through God's indwelling Spirit, we are **empowered** to carry on the ministries of Jesus. That includes ministering to those in need, of course, as well as ministering to one another.

So may God help us all to live out our baptism and our calling as children of God!

Amen.