

Baptism of Our Lord 2023

Today we celebrate the Feast of the Baptism of Our Lord.

The fact that our focus on Jesus' baptism comes so soon after our celebration of his birth, naming, and circumcision makes it seem like he was baptized as a child, but that, of course, was not the case.

We remember how, as an adult, Jesus so valued a public profession of his intentions that he traveled from Galilee all the way to his cousin John at the Jordan to be baptized.

With that completed, his public ministry began.

Baptism sits at the heart of Christianity.

It is about informing others that we have come to share their values and goals and intend to pursue a life in community with them.

Christianity, in other words, does not encourage the pursuit of private enlightenment.

Nor is it merely a philosophy, something about which to think.

It holds instead that we are at our best in community with others, processing with others, working together with others.

(Though coincidence is not causality, it is hard not to observe that the current epidemic of loneliness, depression, and anxiety coincides with a surge in individualism.

As a way of life, Christianity works best for those who have realized that being well adapted to a culture that is itself not healthy is unhealthy for us.)

Knowing that mutual responsibility is central to God's purpose for us, Jesus' adopts John's baptism as the means to make his public profession.

Because John sees Jesus as the leader, however, he initially demurs, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"

In other words, "I need to profess publicly my shared intentions with you. You do not need to profess your shared intentions with me."

Jesus disagrees.

Relationships are mutual.

We all need to acknowledge publicly that we have had a change of heart, that we are committed to a certain way of living, of being together guided by the commandment, love your neighbor as yourself.

If Jesus had claimed that he did not need to be baptized, he would have been implying that everyone is responsible to him, but he is responsible to no one.

This is the definition of selfishness, not mutual responsibility.

Jesus explains: "It is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness."

John sees the wisdom of Jesus' response and proceeds with the baptism.

This is why our current prayer book removed the option for private baptism.

This former practice undermined the communal meaning of the ritual.

Now, baptism is to be performed among those to whom one is professing one's responsibility, that is, it is to be performed at a church service.

In addition, in the current liturgy of baptism, the congregation also professes its responsibility to those being baptized.

We are all stating that we are choosing a different way of being in the world, a life of mutual responsibility rather than selfishness and competition.

This raises several questions.

First, what if one is *never* baptized?

Will God frown upon such a person?

Punish her, even?

We see in Acts that Peter says, "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every [culture] anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him."

In other words, the really important thing is how we treat one another, that we love our neighbors as ourselves.

This brings up the next question.

If that is the case, then why do we need baptism at all?

When one is trying to build a mutually supportive community based on loving others as oneself, the public profession of baptism is an important step in making sure that everyone is on the same page.

A community in which all but a few people are required to behave unselfishly is a cult.

Those few selfish people threaten to undermine the entire project, which is why we need the public profession of baptism.

This is also why we require baptism before receiving communion, which is the primary act of communal unity.

It makes little sense to affirm one's unity with a community that one has not first joined.

That being said, although taking communion without first being baptized is against the rules, it is not a mortal sin.

At least, I hope not, because I did that when I first attended the university chaplaincy.

I did have a commitment to them, but I had not made a public profession.

This does get the cart before the horse, but it is not the end of the world.

I ended up getting baptized, as you can see.

Now, as clergy, I do not make myself the communion police.

If someone comes up to the rail and I suspect or even know that he has not been baptized, but I believe him to be sincere (that is, he is not doing it as an act of defiance), then I proceed.

A third question is, what about the opposite case, what about those who want to get baptized, but do not want to join the community, do not want to worship together, to grow together, to socialize together, to continue in the fellowship of prayer and the breaking of the bread, as the prayerbook puts it.

That makes as little sense as saying that one wants to be a member of the Cincinnati Bengals team, but does not want to play the game.

I think there are two reasons that people nevertheless seek baptism without any intention of joining the community of the church, of living in mutual responsibility, of loving their neighbors as themselves.

One is that, in some areas, being baptized still has some social approval.

People want to be able to say that they have been baptized, or that their children have been baptized because it provides a certain cultural capital.

This is beginning to decline, however, as Christianity becomes less and less the cultural norm.

The second reason is that some people think of baptism as a kind of magic, as bestowing sacred protection either in this life or the next or both.

They seek all gain with no giving—the exact opposite of what living in community with others who believe in loving one's neighbor as oneself implies.

Baptism is not a replacement for good parenting and the benefits of growing up in a trusting community.

In and of itself, without any repentance, baptism is just getting wet.

It has to be preceded by a change of heart (metanoia), and that change means that one intends to move from selfish thinking to communal thinking, from get-all-we-can competition to loving our neighbors as ourselves.

That is a significant shift.

It is, of course, more of an aspiration in the beginning, a statement of how one hopes to live.

It takes a lifetime of practice and growth to work out concretely what it means to love one's neighbor as oneself.

Every day is a new challenge.

We are all still working that out.

Baptism is an expression of intent, not achievement.

It is a recognition of a change of heart, not of accomplishment.

It is a public profession to a group of people of a profound change in one's heart, of one's outlook.

It says, "I no longer wish to live for self alone, but for him who died and rose for us. I share your values and want to live them out with you."

The values it professes are inherently relational, mutually responsible.

I hope this explanation will make the promises of the baptismal covenant clearer, more meaningful.

With that in mind, we now renew our own baptismal vows.