

What a Savior!

(Matthew 3: 13-17)

This morning is the day we commemorate the Baptism of Jesus. Jesus' baptism serves as a model for our baptism. Jesus' baptism represented the beginning of His ministry. As Matthew tells the story he sets up the beginning of Jesus' public ministry by having John the Baptist offer the people an opportunity for a new beginning. He was telling them to repent of their sins. Sometimes today the word 'repent' has old-fashioned and negative overtones. But basically it means an about turn. Since Adam and Eve and then throughout the Scriptures humans have fallen into Satan's alluring trap. Just as Adam and Eve asked "Did God really say..? People throughout the Scriptures and until today have been tempted by these same words. Just as the serpent coaxed Eve in Genesis - Satan uses similar reasoning with us humans as he tempts us to water down God's Word, walk beyond His loving protection and make our own choices. This reasoning can seem so sensible, so innocently self supporting. We think we know what we need and rather than going and asking God "Did You really say..? We can feel the urge to tell ourselves God did not really say.. We all go through life our way, doing those things we choose to do. But if we are seriously looking for God, we have to be willing to stop going in our own direction, let go of what we know is wrong, turn right around and live as God wants us to.

Repentance sounds negative, but it means a positive change in direction. And this is what John was asking of his listeners.

Today we may think that we are not all selfish, and do not need to repent. But when we compare the way we live with what God asks of us, we can see that we all fall far short. Jesus said ' that the greatest commandment was that we should love God with all the strength that we have.' No one has kept this standard, no matter how good they may seem. And so as John the Baptist was saying we need to repent and allow God His rightful place at the centre of our lives.

To show publicly that they had repented, people were baptized by John. Baptism, as John practised it, was an outward sign of inward cleansing from sin. Even today, signs are very important. For example shaking hands is a useful gesture in the world to symbolize agreement and friendship. 'The actual friendship is more important than the symbol , yet when we shake hands it helps us demonstrate that friendship.

So baptism in John's time worked partly in that way, It was a sign that people had been washed clean from sin and starting a new life with God.

So now, picture the scene Jesus coming to the Jordan asking John to baptize Him.

Up until this time Jesus had grown up in His parent's home town Nazareth, and worked as a local carpenter. But suddenly He left all this behind - going to John at the River Jordan.

When Jesus heard that John was preaching and baptizing in the River Jordan, He knew that the time had come for Him to begin His Messianic work.

But why did Jesus go to John to be baptized?

We have just heard that John's baptism was an outward sign of an inward cleansing from sin. Surely God's Messiah would not need to repent; He would have no sins to give up.

As John talked with Jesus, it became evident to him that Jesus had no sins which required repentance or confession. But in Jesus' presence John was conscious of his own sinfulness and confessed that he John, should be baptized by Jesus.

But Jesus persuaded John to baptize Him by saying, "Let it be so for now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness." Another way of explaining this is that Jesus was doing what God required of Him.

Jesus' baptism was not in order to be forgiven, but to so identify Himself with people.

The scripture tells us in Hebrews ch. 2: 14. Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, He himself (Jesus) shared the same things..

Imagine yourself at the River Jordan that day, some of us may have known Jesus like John had, others not knowing who Jesus was.

There are two ways Jesus could have reacted to John.

1. Yes, that is right I should baptize you John, you are a sinner like these others who also need baptism. Not like me (Jesus) sinless and good.

Or the second way: In humility, being baptized just being like one of the crowd, fulfilling God's work.

Which reaction to John's question could you relate to?

I know that I would relate more to the humble Jesus, the one who I could identify with - not the person that who seemed so good - that it was impossible for me to attain the mark.

In Hebrews 4 the writer elaborates on what was said in chapter 2: Since then we have a great High Priest who passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God.. Let us hold fast to our confession. 15 For we do not have a High priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are.

When Jesus stepped into the Jordan River to be baptized by John, it was that He was asking to take on the responsibility for human sin. He was accepting His destiny with all that involved God's words.

Paul wrote in 2 Cor. 5: 21. 'For our sake He made Him to be sin, so that we might become the righteousness of God.'

John consented to baptize Jesus, 'And that day at the River Jordan, Jesus publicly declared His determination to obey God and to accept His ministry of suffering. Jesus' name means 'God saves' - Jesus baptism was the beginning of the tasks God had called Him to do. In return Jesus received God's encouragement. Jesus saw a dove descending on Him, and heard a voice which said, "This is My own dear Son, with whom I am well pleased.

- What did this mean? God was reassuring Jesus that He would not be alone in facing the struggles of His life. God was pleased with what Jesus had just done, and was openly showing Him He would support Him. By God addressing Jesus as 'My Son' God the Father was also telling Jesus something about His future mission.

So now Jesus' ministry was launched!

On working on this sermon I thought how that this story of the launching of Jesus' ministry be the scripture for today, so early in the New Year. And what is this story saying to you and me this day.

Jesus' Baptism was the launching of His ministry on earth, doing His Father's work.

Jesus' disciples were specifically commissioned to go out into the world to continue His work, He had taught them and shown them their mission.

Because we believe that Jesus so fully identifies with us by becoming sin for us that we might become the righteousness of God we can affirm that to follow Jesus is about new beginnings and being included.

As followers of Jesus we can begin anew. What a gift God has given to us to be His children through baptism. Paul wrote in Ephesians 1; 3 - 4 'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as He chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before Him in love.

When I think of this I am in awe at the mystery of God's goodness and love. When we become children through baptism, and follow Jesus. By prayer (talking with God) reading and studying His Word - then God's Word has the power to transform us if we listen to it from the very core of our being. When God's word finds a home in our heart, we can experience freedom, a serenity, a tranquility which the world cannot give us. As we experience the peace, joy, happiness and freedom that God gives His children through His Word. Then we can reflect that love, joy, to those we encounter each day.

We know that God gives us a fresh start, even when we are fairly comfortable and satisfied with our old lives. Paul said we emerge from baptism to walk "in newness of life" (Romans 6:4) There are two ways to make something new. We can start with nothing and make something new, or we can start with what we already have and make that new. When we take to heart what it means to follow Jesus our lives are transformed and we think, speak, live and act in ways that represent the image of Christ.

The Holy Spirit transforms stinginess into generosity, narrow-mindedness into thoughtful consideration, and prejudice into love. He transforms our fear of one another into a desire for true community, our suspicious motives into open, honest dialogue, and our hesitancy into boldness. He transforms groups of people into churches, gatherings of individuals into a family of brothers and sisters, and church services into times of worship.

These are the kinds of things that happen through our lives as we continue to be open to what Jesus baptism and our means to us. The Christian life at its best is an ongoing transformation in which we continue to be shaped by the presence of Christ within us.

In Ephesians 4, which discusses many of the implications of baptism, we are shown what this new life looks like. We are urged to lead a life worthy of our calling, and then we are told that such a life entails humility, gentleness, and patience. We are to bear with one another in love, and are to make every effort to maintain unity in the body. The church in general has a reputation of rising to the great occasions -- the special celebration, the response to a disaster, our concern for the dying -- but forgetting in between those times what life in the Spirit involves. Humility, gentleness, and patience won't get much coverage on the evening news, but those are marks of the Christian life.

Yet, who among us has mastered those things in our relationships with our sisters and brothers?

Paul wrote in Colossians 3; 13, 'Bear with one another' - One of the great challenges in life is being able to relate lovingly to all the people God sends into our lives. Our own insecurity can often make us judgemental, jealous, critical and sometimes defensive. We know the kind of trouble that is caused by thinking of ourselves too highly and not regarding others with the kind of appreciation they are due, but true humility is not something very many people spend their days trying to achieve.

We know the problems created by bulldozing our way through every meeting and every conversation, but it seems to get our point across and our agenda passed more effectively than being gentle. We know that some things simply are not going to happen on our schedule and that some things may never happen, but being patient seems too much like not doing anything. In short, humility, gentleness, and patience are sometimes in short supply, but not so among those who are engaged in this lifelong process of growth. We are continually about the business of deepening our spiritual lives by being transformed by the newness which Christ's presence in our lives guarantees.

But not only does Jesus baptism help understand what it means to start again, it is also about being included.

We are included, incorporated into the body of Jesus Christ. This incorporation came about as a result of a love that was determined to draw us in. And long after the act of baptism, that love holds us together without ranking us as more or less important, allows us to disagree with each other without deserting one another, and leads us to

use our different gifts without any need to compare them with somebody else's gifts.

Our baptism is personal, but it is not private. We are included alongside others. The waters of baptism are not only symbolic of being cleansed from sin, but also of the power baptism has to break down barriers between people. We share a common relationship with Jesus Christ in which the old divisions and designations no longer apply. While this part of baptism can be called incorporation, it is easy to see how transformation is necessary in order for us to live with all who have been included by God's love. Baptism is not about being incorporated into the body with no intention of living and working with the other members of the body. As we are included alongside others, we realize that for the body to be healthy all must be transformed. As we are transformed, we are more likely to expand the circle of our love to include others as full partners in the church.

When Jesus was baptized by John that day He was asking to take on the responsibility for human sin, accepting His destiny with all that involved God's words. 'For our sake He made Him to be sin so that we might become the righteousness of God.'

What a magnificent gift God gave us when He called us through baptism His adopted children.

Jesus said: "It was not you who chose Me, it was I who chose you to go and bear fruit," We are special to Jesus. He loved us so much He called us to be His disciples, to be closely united with Him. In His love He provides us with all the graces and gifts, the help and encouragement we need to follow His way of life. And that we may be instruments through which His love radiates itself to others.

What we do in life is not as important to Jesus as is who I am and who you are. It is not what we do, but why we do it.

May we go forward into this year knowing that because we belong to Christ and are included in his family we have an opportunity for new beginnings. Beginnings made possible because we worship the God who chose to be baptized so that in becoming sin for us we in turn could become the righteousness of God.