

1/11/26**A Spirit-Empowered Life*****Matthew 3:13-17*****Pastor Doug Scalise, Brewster Baptist Church**

Have you ever joined a club or organization that had initiation rites? It might have been a fraternity or a sorority when you were in college, or something you went through in the military, or part of the process to become a member of an organization or part of a team. Initiation rites have ancient beginnings. To become a member of a community, there are actions engaged in and promises made. In some cultures, if the promises are broken, then a person may be expelled from the community. Early on, baptism became the basic initiation rite for people declaring their intention, desire, and commitment to being a Christ follower. There are different forms of baptism — immersion, which is what we do; sprinkling; and aspersion, which is pouring water over one's head. Regardless of the form of baptism, the expectation for those being baptized is the transformation of one's character to become more like Jesus over time. This is done with the help, power, and guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Baptism, as a symbolic act, existed before people began following Jesus. For example, people were coming to John the Baptist to be baptized as an expression of their repentance for their sins, their desire to be forgiven, and as a sign of their intention to change their way of living. But the New Testament teaches that Jesus was like us in every way, but without sin (*2 Corinthians 5:21; Hebrews 4:15; 1 Peter 2:22*). So, why was Jesus baptized?

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke all describe Jesus' baptism. It's obviously an important event that marks the beginning of his ministry. At the time of his baptism, Jesus was a Middle Eastern Jewish man, around 30 years old, a person — as we are — made of flesh and blood, not merely a divine being pretending to be a person. He's a man living with the limitations that we do — if he stubbed his toe, it hurt. He needed to eat to live. If he cut himself, he bled. He laughed, he cried, he walked a lot and got an occasional blister like anyone else would. On a warm summer day, he might even have said to Peter, "You know, it's not the heat, it's the humidity." If we don't grasp this truth about Jesus then we'll not fully appreciate his love, courage, leadership, and spiritual strength. Looking at Jesus' baptism, we learn about the importance and benefits of

living a **Spirit empowered life**. Listen to Matthew's description of Jesus' baptism (*Matthew 3:13-17*).

“Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. 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 is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.*’ Then he consented. And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and **he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him**. And a voice from heaven said, ‘*This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.*’”

To understand the significance of Jesus' baptism, first, we must acknowledge the existence of a spiritual realm. Many of us have family members or friends who may not be Christ followers, who may not believe in God, or spiritual reality. That may describe some of you, who are seeking to learn more about all of this, and I trust that God will help you find what you're looking for. The Bible affirms that there is both a physical and a spiritual realm. As human beings, we're constantly reminded that our outer, physical nature is wasting away. However, our inner nature can be renewed, revitalized, and energized, day by day, by our connection with God's Spirit. The world we can see is temporary. Look around at all that you see by the time you go to bed tonight – what will still exist one hundred years from now? How about 1,000 years from now?

The unseen spiritual realm is eternal and, in fact, the greater reality. The spiritual realm is like electricity in that we can see the impact of its energy and power. One time we had a light switch that wasn't working right. When I flipped the switch, sometimes the light would work, sometimes it wouldn't. I called an electrician friend from BBC, who came over and quickly figured out that the problem was not with the light bulb or the flow of electricity, but with the connection. That was fixed, and the electricity was able to flow through the wire and the bulb to light up the room. Often, that's the case in our relationship with God. **God energizes and empowers our spiritual life when we're properly connected with God's Spirit**. The Holy Spirit gives us power for living. At his baptism, Jesus experienced a vision from the unseen spiritual realm, and the Spirit descended like a dove, a symbol of peace, to empower him for his public ministry.

When he was baptized, **Jesus heard God's Acceptance, received his Appointed Task, and enjoyed God's Approval.** Jesus not only sees the Spirit coming upon him, but he also hears a voice from heaven that tells him about his identity and his purpose in life. The heavenly voice says, *"This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."* In these words, Jesus **heard God's Acceptance.** He is God's Son, and he is loved and accepted by God. How many of us could benefit from hearing, and knowing deep within us, that God accepts us? Jesus may not have sinned, but by coming to John for baptism, Jesus is identifying with all of us who long for the acceptance of God, but have strained or disconnected our relationship with our Creator through selfishness or indifference. Some of us may think, *"I can't imagine God would want anything to do with a person like me."* One of the great messages of the Bible is that God sees us exactly as we are and loves us anyway. To God, your first name might as well be, *"Beloved."* God loves you and accepts you, even more than the most devoted parent loves a son or daughter.

The voice from heaven not only expressed **Acceptance of Jesus**, but also gave Jesus his **Appointed Task.** Jesus' appointed task was to **be a Beloved Son.** A Beloved Son carries out the will of his father. Later in his ministry, Jesus told a parable – in *Matthew 21* – about a father who had two sons. He says that the one who was truly a son was the one who did his father's will. Jesus is the Son who shows what his father is like. Jesus will be compassionate. He will heal the sick. He will treat children, women, foreigners, the broken, and the poor, with dignity. The child acts as the parent would. Calling Jesus a Beloved Son identifies Jesus' purpose to do God's will, and it expresses the level of intimacy between Jesus and his Father.

If we're to be God's beloved children, then, like Jesus, we're to be in intimate connection with God, and about our Father's business in the world. Our character will resemble the character of God – we also will be gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. Our task, as beloved children of God, is to reflect the character of our God.

Too often, Christians – and churches – fall short of this behavior. Some of us have had experiences with people, who identify themselves as Christians, who were – or are – consistently rude, unforgiving, petty, quick to express anger, offense, or a harsh word, judgmental, condescending, mean, and abounding in a lack of concern for others.

None of us are perfect, by any means, but I hope and pray that the overall image that people have of this church is that folks will say, *“The people there are gracious and kind, merciful and compassionate. They really love people.”* That’s a description of beloved children doing the will of God.

When he was baptized, **Jesus heard God’s Acceptance, received his Appointed Task, and he enjoyed God’s Approval.** *“This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”* How many individuals struggle because they don’t receive the approval of their father, or mother, or the person they look up to in life? We don’t know anything about the life of Jesus from the time he was found in the temple at the age of 12 (*Luke 2:41-52*) to his baptism at around the age of thirty. The Bible tells us nothing about those 18 years. One thing we know is that we never hear about Joseph, Jesus earthly father, after Jesus is 12 years old. Joseph likely died while Jesus was in the critical teen years or in young adulthood. If Jesus didn’t have an earthly father for the years he was maturing into adulthood, it may help to explain his compassion for children, women, widows, and the poor, and why it would have been important for him to receive the approval and affirmation of God. Now, as a grown man, Jesus hears words of approval about how pleased God is with him.

Those words are worth their weight in gold, especially when they come from someone we love and respect. We often express our gratitude and thanks when people do something kind, generous, helpful, or special for us. But what has Jesus done, to this point in Matthew’s Gospel, to merit the pleasure and approval of God? He hasn’t given a single message or spoken even a parable. He hasn’t healed anyone. He hasn’t performed any miracles. He’s done nothing other than being God’s child.

Some people live most of their lives trying to please parents or family members who never seem satisfied, who never share life giving words of approval and affirmation, who never say, “I’m so pleased with you.” But God is different. God delights in us. In the third chapter of the prophet Zephaniah (*Zephaniah 3:17*), we hear these words, which are also fitting for Jesus at his baptism: *“The Lord, your God, is in your midst, A warrior who gives victory; He will rejoice over you with gladness, He will renew you in his love; He will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival.”*

At his baptism, Jesus experienced a vision of the unseen spiritual realm, he saw the Spirit descend upon him like a dove, and he heard a voice from heaven.

Does that remind you of your baptismal experience? Some of you have never been baptized. Some of you were baptized as infants, and have no recollection of that event. Some of us were baptized, but the experience was less memorable than what happened for Jesus.

An intoxicated man was stumbling through the woods when he came upon a preacher, baptizing people in the river. He walked into the water and bumped into the preacher. The preacher turned around and, almost overcome by the smell of alcohol, he asked the man, “Are you ready to find Jesus?”

The man answered, “Yes, I am.”

So, the preacher grabbed him and dunked him in the water. He pulled him up, and asked, “Brother, have you found Jesus?”

The man says, “No, I haven't found Jesus.”

The preacher, surprised at the answer, dunks him into the water a second time, for a little longer, pulls the man up, and asks again, “Have you found Jesus?”

The man answers again, “No, I haven't found Jesus.”

The preacher dunks him in the water a third time, and holds him down for about 30 seconds until he begins kicking his arms and legs, and the preacher pulls him up, and asks, “For the love of God, have you found Jesus?”

Gasping for breath, the man says, “Are you sure this is where he fell in?”

Some of us were baptized, but the experience was less memorable than what Jesus experienced. I was thirteen, and my sister was fourteen, when our parents felt that it was time for us to be baptized in a private ceremony at the First Baptist Church in Newton, MA. The heavens didn't open, I didn't see the Spirit descend, and I heard no heavenly voice. I did get water up my nose. Perhaps, your baptism was like mine. For others, your baptism may have been more like that of Jesus – it may have been a profound spiritual experience.

Regardless of what you felt or experienced in your baptism, what's truly important is **what happens next**. Sadly, some people view baptism as an ending, rather than a beginning. The membership lists of churches are littered with the names of people who were baptized, and then disappeared from the radar screen of the church. Some of these folks were baptized because their church or family thought that it was time to get them “done.” Others superstitiously view baptism as some form of divine

protection in the present, or eternal “fire insurance” for the future. For others, it’s a family tradition, with no spiritual significance.

Baptism is not a magic act. Being baptized will not guarantee you a meaningful life in the present, nor entry into heaven in the future. Baptism is not the end of our spiritual journey; it’s an initiation into a deeper, transforming, **Spirit empowered** relationship that impacts the rest of our life. In his baptism, Jesus receives acceptance and confirmation of his identity – he’s a beloved Son; he receives approval and encouragement, and his appointed task to serve others and proclaim the good news.

We’re not baptized so we’ll be safe; we’re baptized for service. After Jesus was baptized, he began his ministry in the power of the Spirit. After we’re baptized, we’re also called to serve God by serving others and doing what God has called us to do. If God were to speak over you today the same words spoken over Jesus, *“This is my Son, my daughter, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased”*, how would that change the way you live this week?

Prayer “My First Thought” by John Baillie

Eternal Father of my soul, let my first thought today be of You, let my first impulse be to worship You, let my first speech be Your name, let my first action be to kneel before You in prayer.

For Your perfect wisdom and perfect goodness:

For the love with which You love mankind:

For the love with which You love me:

For the great and mysterious opportunity of my life:

For the indwelling of Your Spirit in my heart:

For the sevenfold gifts of Your Spirit:

I praise and worship You, O Lord. Yet let me not, when this morning prayer is said, think my worship ended and spend the day in forgetfulness of You. Rather from these moments of quietness let light go forth, and joy, and power, that will remain with me through all the hours of the day;

Keeping me chaste in thought:

Keeping me temperate and truthful in speech:

Keeping me faithful and diligent in my work:

Keeping me humble in my estimation of myself:

Keeping me honorable and generous in my dealing with others:

Keeping me loyal to every hallowed memory of the past:

Keeping me mindful of my eternal destiny as a child of Yours.

Through Jesus Christ my Lord. Amen.

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. Why do you think Jesus chose to be baptized, even though he was without sin? What does his decision teach us about humility, identification with others, and obedience to God?
2. At Jesus' baptism, God speaks words of acceptance, purpose, and approval. Which of these — acceptance, an appointed task, or approval — do you personally struggle to receive from God? Why do you think that is?
3. How does seeing Jesus as fully human (not just divine) change the way you relate to him or trust him in your own struggles?
4. Baptism is not an ending, but a beginning. In what ways have you seen baptism misunderstood as a “finish line”, rather than an invitation into a Spirit-empowered life of growth and service?
5. What helps you stay connected to God's Spirit? What tends to disrupt or weaken that connection?
6. Jesus receives God's approval before doing any public ministry. How does this challenge the idea that we have to earn God's pleasure through performance, success, or good behavior?