

This morning our gospel lesson is the Baptism of Jesus.

John the Baptist announced a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, which at that time was a radical way to access God's forgiveness.

John opens the door to forgiveness in a significant way, and it will be Jesus that flings that door as wide open as possible. That's why John says that he baptizes with water, but that the one more powerful is coming, and he will baptize with the Holy Spirit.

This morning I'd like to talk about baptism... What does it mean to be chosen? How does that change our lives? And what does it mean to live into our baptism?

The word baptism has its origins in Hebrew washing rituals. And as in all washing, there is a transformation... When Kris and I wash the dishes, we put some soap in the dishwasher, press a button, and ta da, we baptize all the dirty dishes and lo and behold, they come out clean! They're changed! The dishes are transformed...

Baptismal language is fundamentally about change, from one way of being, into another way of being. And we can think about it in many different ways. For instance, from sinner to Saint; From bondage to freedom; From fear to faith; From despair to hope; From scarcity to abundance; From being mean to being kind; From death to life...

Baptism is all about change. And change that leads, to what the biblical writers call, "abundant life." This is high quality living, change that leads to deeply meaningful and satisfying life. Life that is full of hope and love. Life that moves us away from being dirty, rotten cranky people, to being people who are loving, kind and gracious. Can you see the kind of changes I'm talking about?

We are called to love God and love each other... And I've come to believe it, because the proof is in the pudding. Every time I encounter loving, kind and gracious people, I think here is a community living into baptism...

Many of us are fortunate to be baptized as babies, and that's a wonderful thing! It's a theological statement... It's all about God coming to us and choosing us.

I'd like to tell you a part of my own journey. I've shared parts of it before... Perhaps you'll remember... And I trust each time I tell the story, I emphasize things differently, and perhaps you'll also hear things differently.

When I was born, I was not baptized. My parents belonged to a different denomination-- I was dedicated. My parents made a promise to bring me to church and they certainly did. I practically grew up in that church; we were there all the time!

When I was young, I remember wondering about the universe... about God... and trying to imagine the immense vastness of this whole creation. Remember laying on your back when you were a kid and looking at the stars? I hope kids still do that...

I had an innocent sense of vastness and love and belonging. And that's probably because of my parents... They loved us so much... The whole universe seemed bathed in love and mystery. I felt safe and secure...

And then I started growing up... Along with all the other church kids, I went to bible camp every year. And you would think bible camp would be a good experience! Unfortunately for me, it was where I experienced the most intense fear and doubt...

Every morning, afternoon and evening we heard about hell and how much God hated sinners... I was scared to death! I tried to live a perfect life, believe me I tried... But it was impossible... I knew at my core I was a sinner and just not good enough.

I kept repeating the salvation prayer, hoping that would take my sin away... I must have prayed it a million times! And you know what? Nothing happened! I was supposed to feel happy and saved. But I never felt anything, except more and more doubt and fear... In fact, God seemed angry and punishing me.

The more I prayed, the more anxious I became. I lived in this vicious cycle of fear and doubt and rejection. And it wasn't because I didn't believe in God, truth is, I did believe in God, I believed in an angry and wrathful God.

The more I wanted to be saved, the more it seemed God was ignoring me. And do you see how this is all a shame-based message, this constant drum beat of, "You're not good enough, you're not good enough..."

Eventually it seemed more life giving to just let it go. And I did... It felt more humane to not believe in God. And I wanted nothing to do with Church... I pretty much decided church was for hypocrites, for those who believed in hocus pocus and basing their lives on false hopes...

And I wonder how many people are in that head-space today... Thinking they are not good enough, not good enough... Theology matters profoundly, and frankly, it can be downright abusive. I wonder if atheism is a result of this...

I spent a lot of years in this wounded space... And truth is; I believe in hell today because I've lived through it... And I find it so ironic that those who thought they were saving me from hell were in fact the very ones throwing me in... This is still one of my spiritual challenges, that God teach me how to forgive them...

Much later in my life, Kris wanted the kids to go to Sunday school. I was not enthusiastic. After trying a couple of other churches, I put my foot down and said, if it's so important for the kids to go to church, let's bring them to that church we drive past all the time. Cross of Christ.

I could drop the kids off, and pick up em up later. As far as I was concerned it worked great! Until the day Johanna said, “Dad, we’re singing in church next week you have to come and hear us!” What do you do...

I remember the first time. I had no idea what was going on! I had attended a lot of church before, but I didn’t recognize anything. Everyone was reading from a green book, flipping pages... We happened to sit by Shirley and Alvie, they noticed our confusion and helped us... They rescued us a lot!

We started attending little by little. Once we knew the routine, I could pay attention to what we were actually saying. And the short order for confession and forgiveness always floored me.

I had never heard those words before, people confessing to be in bondage to sin. That was a huge change for me. In the church I grew up in, they could never admit they were sinners, their righteousness was based on their sinlessness. They all put on a good show on Sunday; the rest of the week, not so much...

And not only confessing to be sinners, but receiving the entire forgiveness of all the sins. This whole confession and forgiveness thing, was new and so different... And I knew it to be the truth. It certainly was my truth...

My friend Brad Deitner started to come to church too. We sheared sheep together and had a lot of time to talk. Like my kids, his kids were never baptized. Brad’s son, was in confirmation at the time, so Pastor Iver initiated a conversation with them about baptism.

I remember a day in December, sitting in my truck on 218<sup>th</sup> street, waiting for the kids to get off the bus. Brad was coming home from work. He stopped and we rolled down the windows. He mentioned his son and daughter were going to be baptized and wondered if my kids, or even if I would also like to be baptized with them.

I started hemming and hawing... And then Brad said, “You don’t have to believe in God.” He said, “baptism is about God doing the choosing!” And that startled me... This was a complete reversal of everything I had ever been taught about baptism. It was not about my choosing God, it was all about God choosing me...

Well, today, in fact is my baptismal anniversary. I was baptized twenty years ago. Along with Brad’s two kids, and my two kids... And it became a day when things started shifting for me. Not all of a sudden of course, but slowly, over time.

Instead of imagining myself as not good enough in God’s eyes, I started thinking that God chose me! Hummm... I must be good enough! My identity was changing... When I look back on that journey now, it seems unbelievable. Who’d a thunk! My shame about not being good enough was transformed into the experience of blessing, “You are my Son in whom I’m well pleased.”

And that’s the good news this morning, in our baptism, God chooses us and blesses us and blesses us, time and again, “**You are my Child** in whom I’m well pleased.” Let these words soak into you... “**You are my Child in whom I’m well pleased...**”

Baptism is an event; and it’s also a way of life. As we live into our baptism change happens, sanctification happens. It’s a lifelong process of rising every day as a new creation...

It’s about living into the blessing, it’s about experiencing God’s Love, Mercy and Forgiveness... It’s about being a community, a communion of Saints... It’s about living into Love...

“You are my child in whom I’m well pleased.” We are *brought in* through Baptism, so we are *sent out* in Love. We are a community that is blessed to be a blessing to others. Baptism is not only for us, it is for the sake of the world...

We are the miracles of God's choosing, we are loving, kind and gracious people... As we continue in our baptism, let's wonder and dream, what new miracles does God have in store for us this year...

Amen...