

## The Baptism of Jesus, Pt. 1

Luke 3:17-17, 21-22

If we want to know what Luke is trying to communicate in this story of Jesus' baptism, there are a few things we need to understand. The first is a reminder that the man named Luke who wrote this gospel also wrote the Book of Acts, and they are meant to be a two-volume set. Acts picks up where the Gospel of Luke leaves off and continues the same message.

The second thing we need to understand is that baptism itself is a key issue for Luke. Between his gospel and the Book of Acts, Luke mentions baptism forty-three times. That's only four fewer times than Matthew, Mark and John mention it combined. And one of the key things Luke emphasizes is the difference between the baptism of Jesus and the baptism of others. To be baptized with the baptism of Jesus Christ is different than being baptized with someone else's baptism. It is not the act of being baptized, it is being baptized in the name of Jesus that makes the difference.

John the Baptist himself speaks of this difference when he says, *"I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."* We will speak more about the differences in the next couple of weeks as we look next week at what it means to die with Christ, and, in two weeks as we look at being baptized in the Holy Spirit. Today, I want to look at a very simple aspect of the baptism of Jesus – simple, but neglected these days, and that is the fact that Jesus was, indeed, baptized.

The fact that Jesus submitted himself to be baptized by John has been a point of discomfort for a lot of people from the very beginning, including John himself. That the son of God, the Messiah, would lower himself to be baptized by someone else has never quite felt right. In Matthew's gospel, John resists baptizing Jesus, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" In John's gospel, the writer refuses to say that John baptizes Jesus. The Baptizer reports seeing the Spirit descend like a dove, but the gospel writer will not say John baptized Jesus, and, if you read closely in Luke, he never quite says it, either. Luke says, "When Jesus had been baptized and was praying," but you never quite see Jesus getting down into that water with John.

But, Jesus is, indeed, baptized by John, and this says something we need to hear, and the world needs to hear in a day and time when religious traditions and practices, rituals and sacraments, the "stuff" of religion are being discarded by more and more people.

I am referring to a growing number of people in our society who have eschewed organized religion altogether and have given themselves the description, "Spiritual, but not religious." In fact, that phrase has now become an official category among sociologists who study the faith life of our culture. They've now shortened it to SBNR. Are you Presbyterian, Lutheran, Methodist, Catholic? No, I'm SBNR. Spiritual, but not religious. Statistics say that one in five Americans describe themselves this way. One in five. And, those numbers are growing...even among some of your own family members.

What do folks mean when they describe themselves as SBNR's? Books have been written on this, so I can only focus on a couple of things in this short time, but the primary factors of SBNR's are, first, a separation between private, personal experience of the divine and organized, communal expressions of faith. SBNR's are focused on their own personal experience of things spiritual, of God. My experience of God is what matters, and my experience may not be the same as your experience of God. You do your thing, I'll do mine.

Second, among SBNR's is a common suspicion of organized religion, institutions, beliefs. They see organized religion as oppressive with its structures and rules intended to tell them what to believe and what not to believe. You can certainly see how this fits with our common mistrust of institutions these days. It is ironic that we have come to have this idea that people are basically good, but institutions are basically bad, even those institutions are made up of people.

So, SBNR's are much more focused on their own personal spiritual experience; they don't trust religious institutions, churches, synagogues, mosques and so forth, seeing them as oppressive, controlling forces. And the third characteristic of most SBNR's is that they look down on religious folk as a little less enlightened, dumb sheep who have to flock together and be told what to do.

By the way, these things are not new. Vague spirituality based on personal experience is the essence of something that goes all the way back to the early church. It is called Gnosticism, and it has been condemned throughout the ages because it is too individualistic, too exclusive – too judgmental of people who are not as "enlightened" as those who have received this special understanding.

Now, if you think I am preaching to the choir, in a way, you are correct. You are not an SBNR or you wouldn't be here in church this morning. However, the rise in popularity of this modern-day version of Gnosticism is partially our fault, for all too often we in the church, in organized religion, have been guilty of being *religious but not spiritual*. We have unwittingly, unintentionally, but nonetheless, we have done it, separated a personal relationship with God from the living out of that relationship with others who also have a personal relationship with God. For us, faith has all too often been about getting dressed up on Sunday morning, coming to church, sitting in the same pew, singing the same hymns, and leaving the same as when we arrived. If God was present in worship, he kept very quiet so as not to disturb the status quo, not to move us out of our comfort zones.

For the religious but not spiritual, Christianity is about being a good church member, putting something in the offering plate – maybe even a tithe; going to Sunday school, even if God is rarely mentioned there; doing things decently and in order; serving on committees, going to meetings, keeping the organization going. But, for goodness sake, don't let anyone get excited about Jesus! Don't let anyone begin to talk about how they have felt God moving in their lives. And, most of all, don't let things change!

It is no wonder that some people look at churches and ask why they would want to be a part of that. Jesus criticized the religious leaders of his day for the same faults. He called them white-washed sepulchers, people who looked good on the outside but who were dead on the inside. They had the religion, but not the spirit.

Here is the thing I want us to see in Jesus, from his baptism until the day he died: Jesus was **both** spiritual AND religious. Jesus knew that you cannot separate the internal experience of God, the personal relationship with God, from the public, communal expression of that relationship with others. Jesus did not agree with the religious leaders on many points, and, in fact, he was killed by the Romans at the request of those religious leaders. But Jesus never went outside the system; he was both Spiritual and Religious. After his baptism, he begins his ministry by doing what – going to the synagogue... he went to church. Jesus practiced his religion like a good Jewish believer. He went to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover, he went into the temple, he celebrated the Passover meal with his disciples just hours before he was crucified.

Here's the point: you cannot call yourself a follower of Jesus Christ and not be committed to an organized expression of the Christian religion. You cannot divide the internal and the external. As imperfect as any and every human institution is, including the church, you cannot separate yourself from it because Jesus did not separate himself from the organized expression of faith.

But, the other side of that coin is that we cannot call ourselves followers of Jesus Christ and think that simply doing the organized religion thing without having a personal relationship with God in Jesus Christ is enough, either.

We who are baptized in the name of Jesus Christ are baptized into a faith that is both personal and corporate, internal and external. It is a relationship with Jesus and a relationship with others who have a relationship with Jesus. Because, if we are baptized with the baptism of Jesus, we seek to live our lives the way he lived his, and Jesus was both...spiritual and religious.