

**PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH**  
**BAPTISM OF THE LORD**  
**REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON**  
**“THE BAPTISM OF THE LORD”**  
**Luke 3:15-16, 21-22**  
**JANUARY 10, 2010**  
**9:15 & 11:00 A.M. SERVICES**

At his baptism, Jesus was anointed by the Holy Spirit for his life's mission. He would preach liberty to the captives, offering healing to the sick, and provide salvation for the world. Let us rethink church that the same Spirit will inspire and empower us today to live out our faith by touching people's lives.

Great movements tend to begin with some kind of initiation or commissioning. We do not know how much Jesus knew about his mission, but by submitting to baptism he dedicated himself to fulfill his God-given vocation.

From beginning to end the Bible underscores the truth that human beings have a dual identity. We are fashioned from the dust of the earth and we are animated by the life of God. We are never one without the other. Coming to terms with both our material and our spiritual reality is the great challenge of human existence.

When John the Baptist began preaching in the wilderness and baptizing in the Jordan River the response was extraordinary. People from throughout the surrounding area went out to hear him and many were baptized as an act of repentance. Speculation was rampant that this strange, eccentric prophet was the long-expected Messiah. In a time of religious apathy, John was re-igniting interest in the things of God. Rethinking church! Into this eager, hopeful setting came Jesus. John had told the people that *“he who is mightier than I is coming, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.”* Jesus, however, insisted on being baptized by John. Why?

It is understandably confusing to many people that Jesus insisted on being baptized by John the Baptist. John had already said to the people, *“I have baptized you with water, but the one who is greater than I will baptize you with the Holy*

***Spirit.***” Also, it is clear that John’s baptism was for repentance and forgiveness of sins, and Jesus was without sin. What is more, in Matthew’s Gospel, John expressed to Jesus his reluctance to baptize the one who should be baptizing him! Why was Jesus baptized?

First, let us recognize that Jesus’ baptism was clearly an act of submission to the will of God. Here, before he began his public ministry, Jesus dispelled in a public fashion any doubts about where his allegiance lay. Listen to the voice of God after his baptism, ***“You are my beloved Son, with you I am well pleased.”*** That is confirmation that this act of baptism was in submission to the will of God. O we may not comprehend all of its meaning, but Jesus’ baptism clearly represented the inauguration of his mission. For thirty years, he had been prepared by God and by his life experiences for the great work he would do. We have no way of knowing at what point in his life he became fully aware of his divine mission and sacrificial destiny. If he was waiting for a sign, the coming of John the Baptist was a clear indication that the time was right for Jesus’ work to begin. It is also time for us to Rethink Church!

From his baptism and his temptation experiences onward Jesus consistently sought the will of God as the basis of everything he said and did. His entire life and ministry were a constant expression of his Gethsemane prayer: ***“Not my will, but yours be done.”*** In a public and decisive way, it all began with his baptism.

Second, Jesus’ baptism is widely believed to have been an act of identification with humankind. Throughout the millennia of human history rulers have used every means possible to elevate themselves as far as possible above their subjects. Intoxicated with power, kings and emperors have had the audacity to assign divinity to themselves. Both comedy and tragedy result when mortals claim immortality. But it is a temptation hard to resist. Philip of Macedonia was the father of Alexander the Great, and was himself an impressive leader. It is said that he assigned one of his servants the task of confronting him every morning with this reminder, ***“Remember, Philip, that you must die.”*** It was a safeguard against becoming too enchanted with his own power. It was a reminder that he had entered the world through the door of human birth, like everyone else, and that, like everyone else, he would leave the world through the door of death. It is wise, and rare, for the powerful to keep in touch with their mortality.

The miracle of the Incarnation is not that the human became divine, but that the divine became human. The gods had always been known to use human beings for their own pleasures and purposes. The gods felt essentially nothing for mortals,

certainly not empathy or mercy. Yet here is the divine Son of God condescending to become a mortal. In the ancient world it was a scandalous, unthinkable idea.

This was only the beginning of the scandal. Here was Jesus, the sinless Son of God, being baptized by John, himself a sinner, who has been baptizing people as a sign of their repentance of their sins. Jesus did not come to identify only with our mortality, but with our sinfulness. Isaiah says, ***“He was counted among the wicked.”*** It was true every day of his life. Jesus never hesitated to identify himself with those he came to save. He was openly accused of welcoming sinners and even eating with them. There is no doubt but that he wore this criticism as a badge of honor. All his life he never hesitated to be ***“counted among the wicked.”*** He suffered in their suffering. Their needs were his constant concern. At the end, Jesus carried their sins in his own body to the cross. This is the ultimate identification. The sinless one treated our sins as if they were his own.

And finally, the meaning of Jesus’ baptism had a future dimension to it. Jesus himself understood his approaching suffering and death as a kind of baptism. He said to his followers, ***“I have a baptism to be baptized with; and how I am constrained until it is accomplished!”*** (Lk 12:50) The rest of the New Testament supports this understanding. Paul speaks of Christians being baptized into Christ Jesus and into his death. (Rom 6:4) In another place, Paul refers to his readers as being buried with Christ in baptism, and raised with him from the dead. (Col 2:12) It is impossible to know the actual manner or mode of Jesus’ baptism. The Greek word for ***“baptize”*** suggests immersion, but this is hardly conclusive.

The richness of the imagery is profound. We are indeed buried with Christ, putting away the former life, and raised with Christ to newness of life. For the story of Jesus’ adult life and ministry to begin and end with a death, a burial, and a resurrection seems altogether fitting.

Our lives are made up of beginnings and endings. Repeatedly we are challenged to begin again. That’s why we are called to Rethink Church. Begin again! Every significant human achievement and meaningful human relationship rests on a commitment. We cannot fulfill our roles as workers, partners, spouses, parents, and friends without making promises. Our commitments help keep us true to our values and duties, but the Spirit of God inspires and empowers us.

If you feel called to honor this delicate balance of life, I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your church.