

A sermon on this text will begin with Jesus' baptism, then move to our baptism.

John's baptism had two components: repentance and forgiveness. As John explains what took place with Jesus, he adds that the baptism is not only with water, but with the Holy Spirit. Those elements are true for us today. The baptismal liturgy marks the end of the old life "Do you renounce..." and the beginning of a life lived in God's grace and forgiveness. Then John adds a new component with the gift of the Holy Spirit, also part of our baptism service "you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit".

Later on, toward the close of his ministry, Jesus himself makes clear that baptism leads to a new way of life. When the brothers James and John ask to be seated next to Jesus in the life to come, Jesus points out that "the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized" (Mark 10:39). To be baptized in Jesus is to follow him.

The process started immediately at Pentecost, when God gave the disciples the gift of the Spirit to carry on this new life in Christ. After his sermon on Pentecost, the listeners ask the apostle Peter how they should respond, he answers with these same three components of baptism: "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins will be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit".

As we continue in the New Testament, our understanding of what baptism means for us continues to unfold. It always follows faith: the faith of the person being or the faith of the parents.

Baptism is also more than an individual act. In baptism we become part of a people as the Apostle Paul emphasized how "we were all baptized into one body."

The issue of infant baptism versus believer's baptism is the fundamental division among churches of the Protestant Reformation. However, both sides agree that baptism is always done in faith. That faith could belong to the person being baptized or the faith of those who bring somebody to be baptized. We also agree that children who have faith even before the age of their church's baptism rite are indeed part of God's people because of their faith.

The main thrust of today's text and the meaning of Jesus' baptism for us is that we are baptized into something. A fundamental change takes place in baptism, at whatever age. An adult who is baptized after accepting faith is changed, and an infant baptized into a family of faith will be brought up in that faith.

In baptism we become part of Christ's body. Paul writes that "for by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body."

In his last conversation with his disciples, Jesus spoke again about baptism. He told them, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father

and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you”.

A person who had been baptized as a small infant once said to me, “As far as I’m concerned, nothing happened.” She did not have any memory of it, of course, but something dramatic happened, and her subsequent life as a Christian was proof of it.

We often speak of baptism as a “means of grace,” that is, one of the ways that God’s grace comes to us. Physically it’s only a small splash of water, but it marks the beginning of a whole new life of forgiveness, of the presence of God’s Spirit, of our union with Jesus, and our becoming part of the world-wide Christian church!