Isaiah 42:1-9
42:1 Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations.
42:2 He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street;
42:3 a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice.
42:4 He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his teaching.
42:5 Thus says God, the LORD, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it:
42:6 I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations,
42:7 to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.
42:8 I am the LORD, that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols.
42:9 See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them.

**Matthew 3:13-17**

13Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. 14John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” 15But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he consented. 16And 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. 17And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

Baptism: How It Does Not Function

Baptism is not a subject we talk about too often. Most of us were baptized as infants, so we don’t even remember it. And if I asked you what the anniversary of your baptism is, I doubt any of us would know. It only happens once, and it happened a long time ago. When we have our own children, baptism may be important to us, but once it’s finished, it’s forgotten. The certificate is filed away somewhere and perhaps never seen again.

Most folks believe it is very important to have their child baptism, but I’m not sure they know exactly *why* it’s important. For a long time the Church believed that people who were not baptized were not destined for heaven, but this is not a widely held view today; why, one asks, would a God who sends his own Son into the world to teach us, love us, and die for us make our salvation contingent upon our getting splashed with holy water? Is faith in Jesus Christ not enough? If God is loving, his desire must be that all people gain eternal life; he wouldn’t devise any gimmicks to exclude folks from entering the Kingdom.

So if it’s not necessary, why do we do it? Why did Jesus do it? That was the question that puzzled John the Baptist. John was performing a baptism of repentance; it was a ceremonial cleansing for those who had repented of their sins. So why would Jesus, the perfect Son of God, show up in the line? He requires no cleansing. What’s the point of his being baptized if it didn’t do anything for him?

As I reflect upon that question I think of how typically human that question is. Why was Jesus baptized? Why are we baptized? We think in terms of *purpose.* We think that everything must have a reason, and if there’s no reason for doing something, why should we bother doing it? This is the challenge of the Protestant religion, by the way; the notion that we are saved by God’s grace through faith alone. There are no other requirements – you don’t need to attend church, you don’t need to attend Sunday School, or give offerings attend confessional or help with the Cranberry Festival or be baptized. In other words the Church has no authority over your salvation; it’s strictly based upon your faith which only God can truly discern. So if nothing but faith is necessary, why do anything else? Organized religion would fare much better if we convinced people that all these things are necessary for our salvation – that God *requires* you to attend church and give offerings and take communion and be baptized, but eventually you’ll be asking yourself “Why?”

I dare say that Protestants fall prey to a mindset that looks upon practices like Holy Baptism as ways of obtaining things from God. And Christians like to explain God in functional terms. The language used by the United Methodist Church in their definition of baptism reflects our functional understanding of God: we define baptism as a *sacrament,* and we define sacrament as a “vehicle” of divine grace.[[1]](#footnote-1) Do you hear the language of *function* there? The sacrament is a VEHICLE for God’s grace; it transports God’s grace. It brings it to us. So if we partake of the sacraments, God’s grace comes to us.There: that’s what baptism *does;* that’s the reason you should be baptized! That’s the reason you should take Holy Communion. I suppose I could say that the reaffirmation of your baptismal vows, thought not a sacrament, is also a vehicle for God’s grace. You don’t want to miss out on divine grace, do you? You never know when you might need some!

The real problem that occurs when we think that our religious practices are required by God in order for us to be “saved” is that is diminishes our relationship with God to something that is purely functional. If I do this, God will do that. If God does this, I must do that. Cause and effect. God is the great vending machine that dispenses eternal life, and our rituals and sacraments are the coins that we feed the machine in order to receive eternal life. We don’t have to know God. We don’t have to love God. We just simply fulfill our obligations and heaven is ours.

This sort of thinking pervades in this life as well. People who attend church and confess their sins and give regular offerings and help with special events expect that God will richly bless them in terms of health or wealth or happiness, and when things around them fall apart they ask God, “Why? I’ve done everything I’m supposed to do. Why are you punishing me?” They think in terms of cause and effect. And the same mindset is evident when these folks pray for deliverance from their suffering. “If I pray longer and harder,” they think, “God will put me higher on his ‘to do’ list, and eventually answer me the way I want him to answer me.” Cause and effect; I pray, God delivers. Functional relationship. It should be no surprise to any of us that people who believe in such a God would leave the church. God is sure to disappoint a lot of people.

I think today’s lesson is important precisely because Jesus shows us exactly what the true point of baptism is. It’s not to cleanse us of our sins; Jesus didn’t have any. It’s not to gain anything from God either. **Rather Jesus’ baptism illustrates the nature of the relationship that we have with God.** Jesus goes to be baptized for the same reason we, as infants, go to be baptized. We go simply to offer ourselves to God. Now of course infants don’t make that decision; their parents do. The parents are offering the child to God as an expression of faith. It’s not an obligation; it’s a free choice. Jesus does the same, offering himself to God freely, not to gain anything but to express his faith in God. God, at the same time, communicates his love and pleasure with that choice. “This,” he says, “is my Son, my beloved! In him I am well-pleased.” God is pleased not because of anything that you have done – remember that Jesus hears this before he has begun his ministry – he hasn’t taught or healed or ‘miracled’ anyone. All he has done is offered himself to God. And that is all we can say about our baptisms too. But God is pleased with us regardless of what state we come to him because he’s just pleased that we *came!*

I think that the Gospel of Luke helps us better understand the significance of baptism. In the third chapter of Luke there is a genealogy of Jesus describing his “son of Joseph, son of Heli, son of Mathat, son of Levi…” and it traces it all the way back to “son of Adam, son of God(!)” Do you think about God as your own relative, as someone in your immediate family? Perhaps we should, because it would help us to see that this relationship we have with him is far more than functional, or utilitarian, or professional. *We’re family!* Whether we are baptized or not, we belong to God. Baptism is just our way of acknowledging that, and as we do that God acknowledges us as his…beloved…with whom he is well-pleased.

Even though I don’t remember my baptism, I believe that God communicated the same sentiment to me, and to you when you were baptized. “This is my beloved daughter. In her I am well pleased!” And that’s why I think that once a year it is important for us to reaffirm our baptismal vows. As the prefix “re” indicates, we once again offer ourselves to God as we are, like a helpless little baby, without the need of any past service record, without the need of any excuses. And once again, we re-hear God’s affirmation of who we are in his eyes: “This is my beloved son/daughter in whom I am well-pleased.” And the functional value of that affirmation cannot be overstated. There are times in our lives when we may feel ourselves to be without value – either because of our own deeds or because of others who put us down or hold us down or tell us we’re bad or worthless or not worth employing or marrying or dating or loving. There are times in our lives where we feel isolated, betrayed, abandoned, neglected, or abused. Those are the times that we need to hear once again what God thinks of us: “You are my son/daughter, my beloved. In you I am well-pleased.” That is the essence of God’s amazing grace, a grace that we need to reminded of, not once a year, not once a day, but every minute of our lives.

1. Article: “What Does the United Methodist Church Believe about Baptism?” found at <http://www.umc.org/site/apps/nlnet/content.aspx?c=lwL4KnN1LtH&b=5070497&ct=2902271&notoc=1> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)