

## What does it mean to be baptized?

A sermon by Reverend Alice Marcrum  
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What does it mean to be baptized? The **Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church** defines baptism as ***“the Sacramental rite which admits a candidate to the Christian Church”***. While we may all nod in agreement to this accepted definition of baptism, the gospel reading for today talks about baptisms that were happening before the establishment of the Christian Church. We are informed that a man named John, known to us as John the Baptist, was baptizing in the wilderness in the Jordan River. So, while the definition given by the **Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church** is true, the practice of baptism predates Christianity.

So what does it mean to be baptized? Well, the word baptism actually comes from the Greek word *baptizo*, which means ‘immersion’. Ritual forms of water immersion known as the *mikvah* or ritual bath have been used historically by the Jews for purification such as after coming in contact with a dead person. The mikvah is also used in the ceremony for Jewish conversion. In the Old Testament, the prophet Elisha instructs Naaman, the leper, to immerse himself in the Jordan River seven times in order to be cleansed from leprosy. After much protest over the order to immerse in the Jordan River that was and is still known to be a very muddy river; Naaman agrees and is healed completely. A modern rabbi, Rabbi Matthew Kaufman describes the ritual bath in these words: ***The mikvah allows a person to connect themselves to the moment of creation, to imagine all the world to be water as at the beginning, and thus emerge a new person.***

In our gospel reading for today, John is practicing a public ritual of immersion as a spiritual cleansing of the soul and as preparation for the arrival of the coming Messiah. It is believed that John the Baptist was an Essene. The Essenes lived in the wilderness where they lived a disciplined life that included the mikvah. The Essenes are the ones from whom we credit with the writing of the Dead Sea scrolls. In the Dead Sea scrolls, the Book of Isaiah is marked with a sign of the cross whenever a prophecy is credited with that of the Messiah. Strangely, this group of ardent believers of the coming Messiah just disappeared with the establishment of the early church.

John the Baptist is one of these ardent believers, who were looking for the arrival of a suffering Messiah unlike many of their contemporaries that were waiting for a conquering Messiah who would free them from the Roman oppression. Now we are not told how long John the Baptist has been immersing or baptizing people in the Jordan River. We are just given the fact that he is doing this. Both the scriptures and historical writings verify this fact and the fact that Jesus of Nazareth was baptized by John the Baptist.

In the gospel of Matthew, we are given some insight into why the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth chose the baptism of repentance from his cousin, John the Baptist. Jesus tells his cousin, ***“Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.”*** Apparently the time had come, when Jesus’ ministry needed to begin, but before this could happen, Jesus needed ***“to fulfill all righteousness”***. He who was sinless and knew no sin, but was tempted in all ways needed to be baptized in order ***“to fulfill all righteousness”***.

Let’s just think on this for a moment. The one person who came into this world without any sin and who never sinned needed to be cleansed through a public ritual of immersion before beginning the ministry he was sent on earth to do. Now exactly where does that leave the rest of us?

We who have sinned and in most cases continue to sin in spite of our hearts’ desire to live a righteous life; where do we stand when it comes to the cleansing waters of baptism? The scriptures tell us that many who were baptized by John the Baptist, left John to follow Jesus. Followers of Jesus who had not been baptized by John were baptized by Jesus’ disciples. Some of the last words Jesus spoke to His disciples before He ascended to His Heavenly Father were, ***“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.”***

One of the last things that Jesus commanded of His followers was baptism. Baptism for Christians is essential. For the Jews, baptism is a way of connecting to the beginnings of creation and becoming a new person, but what happens to the person who is baptized into Christ? St. Paul in his letter to the Romans details for us what happens in Christian baptism.

***“Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.***

***For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved by sin. For whoever has died is freed from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.”***

Baptism into Christ not only makes us into new creations, but we are spiritually connected to Christ for all of eternity. We are given abundant life in Him both on earth and in heaven. By sharing in His death and suffering in the waters of baptism, we are not only purified, but also given eternal life by sharing in His resurrection.

When Episcopalians think about baptism, usually visions of infants or children dressed in fancy white gowns or attire come to mind. Along with a baptismal font usually carved from beautiful stone or wood. The amount of water used for Episcopal baptisms can be contained within a pitcher of water. Small shells, silver spoons or the palm of a hand is usually used for the dispersing of the water. Although sometimes, the water is poured directly from the pitcher onto the person being baptized; this is considered to be the exception and not the rule. All in all Episcopal baptisms are done in a proper and respectful way unlike some other baptisms that are just plain messy.

Yet, it was the messy form of baptism that was used by the early church. Not until much later were the much less messy forms of baptism adopted by the church. While the renewal of life and rebirth into eternal life continues to take place no matter how much water is used, somehow I believe we have lost the fullness of knowing for ourselves the complete refreshing that comes with immersion. It is like comparing the washing of one's face with immersing one's self completely in water. Which of these two makes us feel the cleanest?

While we could spend much time discussing the pros and cons of both, I have experienced the joy that comes with baptism both through immersion and through the use of much smaller portions of water. As a young child of seven, I was immersed in a Baptist Church. As an Episcopal priest, I have baptized with joy many with much smaller amounts of water. Then several years ago, I had the incredible joy of baptizing my youngest grandchild at a baptismal font in an Episcopal Church. For me, baptisms are times of great joy no matter how it is done. The fact that we as followers of Christ continue to obey Him in baptism is what is important. For it is through our baptism that we are united not only to Christ, but also to one another.