

## Remember Your Baptism?

### Matthew 2:1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.” When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: ‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.’” Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.”

When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

### Matthew 3:13-17

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

1. Remember your baptism- some people can. Youth. Jesus. Seminary moment.
2. But some of us can't. Me- a baby. What can this mean- one of you asked me that. What does it mean- this gift we were given before we could understand it.

3. This week is Baptism of the Lord and Epiphany when we celebrate the magi. And I realized this week while Jesus did remember his baptism- he also knew what it was like to receive gifts he couldn't recall and couldn't understand.
4. The gifts- weird. But meaningful. It would take his whole life.
5. Some gifts like this- are the most important. Me and mom. Nykol.
6. End

Remember your baptism. Remember your baptism.

If you're part of a more liturgical church tradition like the Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Episcopalians, or to some degree the Presbyterians- if you hang around long enough you will hear this expression at some point. Every time we ordain and install new elders and deacons, for instance, at the end of that service I tell the new officers to remember your baptism. If you come to Easter Vigil on Holy Saturday night, I will tell everyone who gathers to remember your baptism.

And this is a great tradition. An old tradition- at least as old as Luther who, as tradition has it, would touch his forehead and tell himself, "Remember your baptism and that you are a beloved child of God" every time he felt himself faltering.

And this phrase, "remember your baptism", it makes perfect sense to some of us. Some of us really can remember their baptism. You were a teenager and maybe away at camp and felt a powerful sense of God's claim on your life, and part of your response was to become baptized. Or maybe you were an adult and after a lot of thought and reflection decided this was the path you wanted to follow and baptism was a way of showing that to the world as well as to yourself.

Jesus, for example, would have been completely able to remember his baptism. How could he forget? Going out to John in the middle of the desert. Wading into that thick, muddy water. Feeling John's rough, hairy hands upon his head that slammed his entire body down beneath the currents, only to come up, gasping for breath, and to experience the dove of the Holy Spirit falling down upon him and God's voice crying out: "This is my son, my beloved, in whom I am well pleased."

In some traditions, maybe for folks with bad memories, it's even acceptable to be baptized more than once. During orientation at seminary one of our leaders, just to show the kind of diversity was in our midst, asked us to raise our hands if we had been baptized once. Well I think pretty much everyone raised their hands. Then he asked us to keep our hands up if we had been baptized at least twice. Quite a few hands stayed up. Well how about three? There were still a few. Four? Just a couple left. How about five or more times? And only one guy's hand was left in the air. The leader said, "All right folks. This guy was baptized four times and it still didn't take- this is the one you want to keep your eye on." ☺

Remember your baptism. Yeah, for some people this phrase, it's very meaningful to them- they actually can recall the experience, and it all makes perfect sense.

But I have to admit it's a bit of a puzzle for me and for a lot of others- this phrase, See, I was baptized when I was...uh...well I don't actually know. I was a baby. And because I was a baby there's no way I could possibly remember my baptism. This is true for a lot of us- certainly the vast majority of Presbyterians. But still, this phrase, it's tradition. It's what you say. It's in our Book of Common Worship- kind of like our car manual for prayer. And I have to admit I

didn't even really think about this phrase much until one of you came up to me a couple of years ago and asked me about it. This person was baptized as a little one, and they were wondering what they were supposed to be remembering. I was like...well you're supposed to uh...uh...you know I don't know. The truth was I hadn't really thought about it, but when I did, it really was a little odd.

No, for many of us baptism was a gift given to us before we were aware of how to ask for it- a boon granted before anyone could possibly know even whether we would be grateful for it or not.

Now, while it's true that Jesus could remember his baptism- it's also true that he knew what it was like to receive a gift he couldn't possibly remember or understand. See, not only does the church around the world celebrate the baptism of Christ this day, but last week was Epiphany, the day when the magi came from the East to visit the Christ child and offer up those weird, weird, gifts, and some churches are celebrating that today, too.

They really were weird gifts, weren't they? I don't know when you attended your last baby shower- but most of the time you see things like diapers and cute baby clothes people would never buy for themselves. I saw one onesie this week in Brynne's class that had LMDO ☺ which I learned was texting language for "laughing my diaper off" with a smiley face. I'd bet anything that was a gift.

And when you compare most of the gifts you see at a baby shower these days with the magi...well, there's a problem. For instance you really don't tend to see a lot of gold these days. Let's face it- it's heavy. It's bulky. It's not much fun to play with. And if people do give

money they mostly just write a check. And frankincense and myrrh? I checked. Babies R Us doesn't even carry frankincense and myrrh- even in the Middle East. No, these are weird, weird gifts. These are gifts that would leave everyone in the room thinking of some way to disinvite Gaspar, Melchior, and Balthazar from the next shower.

But that would be a terrible mistake. See, as strange as these gifts seem- they aren't gifts without value. Quite the opposite. They are gifts of immeasurable meaning and worth- only, they aren't gifts that Jesus was going to be able to fully appreciate or understand at the time.

No, to understand these gifts it would take his entire life- because these gifts were for his death. Particularly the frankincense and myrrh- both of these precious spiced oils were used exclusively in the preparation of bodies for burial.

See, some gifts- some gifts you simply can't understand or appreciate at first- but it takes time, sometimes a lifetime to understand it.

It wasn't until college that I realized that I had received a gift like this. Now, I know that I can seem a little out there to some of you, but if you want the honest truth, and Melis can vouch for this- I've actually mellowed out QUITE a bit.

Particularly when I was in high school, I was just so SO passionate and touchy and radical about every little thing. I wanted to think deep thoughts. I wanted to make incredible music. I just wanted to live on the edge and push boundaries and argue with people and just suck every bit of marrow out of every moment I could. I grew my bushy hair out- some of you have seen some of my more unfortunate pictures. I had my ear pierced not once, but twice- because

ANYONE could pierce it once. Looking back I know I was incredibly exhausting for a lot of people to be around. But hey, that's who I was.

One of my absolute favorite movies then was *The Doors* with Val Kilmer doing an AMAZING version of Jim Morrison. Oh my gosh, I probably saw that movie 10 times in the theater and another ten times at home. I loved this story of this guy absolutely pushing every edge and turning over every rock- even rocks that obviously, given his early death, should have been left unturned. I remember telling my mom about this movie and telling her how incredible it was and how much I loved it and how she had to see it. To her great credit she actually sat through it with me, although I can't imagine what that must have been like for her. And then when it was over I was just looking at her excited to see her reaction, sure she would love it- and again, much to her credit, she tried very hard to be neutral, called it "interesting" and then was very curious, honestly curious, about what it was I loved about this guy whose passion ultimately led to his own destruction. Like any parent she was rightly worried about her child wandering off into dangerous, dangerous territory. But what I suspect neither of us knew, is that she had already given me an incredible gift- of gift of somehow sensing important boundaries and while being drawn to them, also knowing also when to step back from the edge. And while I was fascinated, FASCINATED by people like Jim Morrison, I have, mostly, been able to avoid becoming them.

And it was in college was when I really discovered this. It's now hard to even imagine how shocking it is to go from living at home going to high school and then all of a sudden within the period of a few short months leaving all of that behind and going to live in a different city,

going to a different school, and living entirely on your own where absolutely no one is going to care if you stay up all night or miss a class or two. For years I had dreamed about this kind of freedom. I had dreamed about being able to do absolutely whatever I wanted to do whenever I wanted to do it. But you know, the funny thing was, when I really did have all that freedom- it turned out that what I really wanted to do was go to class, do my homework, write my papers, talk with my friends- really pretty much what I had been doing. Only now I was choosing it, which of course made all the difference in the world.

But I remember one weekend in the Spring- one weekend where everything crystallized. One of my best friends from high school, Nykol, was coming down to visit. Nykol was a fiery red head, and she I were best friends from theater, and for a few years just did everything together. I was in her plays. We hung out all the time. We'd go over to the gay district in Dallas to this coffee shop with no name that we called Nepo's because the only sign in the whole place was an "Open" sign that was always backwards.

And then Nykol was coming down to Austin to visit. And it was Spring. And the bluebonnets were lining the highways like the sky itself had fallen down in pieces around us. And I don't know what I was expecting from our visit- but it turned out our paths had diverged somewhat. In college she had started experimenting with different drugs, and she really like it. And so she was coming down on a kind of mission to enfold me into this great new world of hers. She even told me the Ken she knew in high school seemed to be slipping away. Well, I was able to put her off until Saturday night. And we took a walk over to my favorite place on campus, the LBJ fountain. The fountain is this huge fountain in a deep bowl and shoots forty, fifty feet into the sky. The LBJ Presidential library, the LBJ school of government surround it

from the top of the hill. And then on the other side of the hill, a smaller building you can't see real well, was the campus police headquarters.

Well, sitting on that hill and watching the fountain all lit up shooting into the Austin night sky- this was not enough for my friend. She got out all her paraphernalia including a big bag that looked for all the world like loose green tea, and she was very insistent that I join her. Now, I was already uncomfortable about this whole thing, but with the police headquarters about 100 yards away- I pretty much freaked out. I really did. And Nykol got really angry. And we just had it out right there- me telling her how uncomfortable I was and didn't want to screw up my life, and her telling me she was sick of me judging her and had turned into a really uptight person.

Nykol and I spoke only one more time after this. I looked her up after I had gotten out of seminary. And it was an incredibly awkward conversation. Time heals a lot of wounds- but not that one. I'm still very sad about that night. But I'm not sad about stepping back from that edge. And I'm absolutely convinced whatever it is in me that did that- I'm convinced it came from my mom, it came from everything she and I lived through together. Of course I don't really remember her actually giving me that gift, and I'm quite sure I still don't, as of yet, understand it fully.

Sometimes the best gifts are like that.

I really believe this is the way to think about baptism- certainly about remembering it. Because see, even if someone can recall their baptism- it still doesn't mean they understand that gift anymore than someone like me who was baptized as a baby and can't recall it at all.

Because the phrase “Remember your baptism” doesn’t mean recall the moment. It just doesn’t. It isn’t that particular moment, the christening gown you were wearing or the hungover pastor friend of ours that baptized Will as a “she” before stuttering “he” that’s important- it’s the love of God flowing out behind and underneath the moment itself. Remembering your baptism means remembering that someone loves you and has given you a gift that you don’t yet fully understand. It means remembering when you are feeling alone, and lost, and worthless, it’s remembering that when Jesus came out of that filthy water- no matter the dirt, no matter the mess, the first words and the only words he heard were: “This is my very own, my beloved, with you I am well pleased.”

Children of God. Beloved children of God, remember your baptism. And if you haven’t been baptized, remember Christ’s baptism- and know that whatever God said to him, God says to you. (Use a fir branch to sprinkle the congregation.) **Amen.**