

One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism



**Baptism at the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist
Hingham, Massachusetts**

Dear Parents,

Congratulations on the upcoming baptism of your child. We're delighted to be there with you for this seminal moment of the Christian faith.

By seeking to have your child baptized, you have recognized that there is something deeper in this life than what exists on the surface. There is a divine presence among us, something greater than ourselves. Baptism is a wonderful first step in deepening our awareness of that divine presence and nourishing it in our children. For baptism is all about our relationship to God and to others.

Within the pages of this guide, you'll find some information about the history and meaning of baptism as well as some details about the baptismal rite. If you have any further questions please don't hesitate to be in touch with me at the parish office.

In Christ,



The Rev. Timothy E. Schenck
Rector

Admission to Communion

Since we believe wholeheartedly that baptism is full initiation into the Body of Christ that is the church, any baptized member may receive communion at St. John's. This extends to all who have been baptized with water in the name of the Trinity regardless of denomination or age. This understanding of initiation is consistent with the practices of the early church.

A Final Word

We recognize that as much as we prepare people for baptism, attend to the symbols of the liturgy, and pray for those to be baptized, it is God's grace alone that gives the sacrament of baptism its meaning. It is only "with God's help" that the truth of God's love is made real through baptism. And we are delighted to share this special moment of grace with you through the Episcopal Parish of St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts.



“Holy Baptism is full initiation by water and the Holy Spirit into Christ’s Body the Church. The bond which God establishes in Baptism is indissoluble.”

The Book of Common Prayer, Page 298

A Brief History of Baptism

While we understand baptism as the primary rite of Christian initiation, the rite of baptism most likely has ancient roots that pre-date Christianity. There seems to be a link with Jewish proselyte baptism as well as Jewish purification rituals. The Episcopal *Book of Common Prayer* links baptism to creation and the Exodus in the “Thanksgiving over the Water.” This prayer begins



We thank you, almighty God for the gift of water. Over it the Holy Spirit moved in the beginning of creation. Through it you led the children of Israel out of their bondage in Egypt into the land of promise.

There is certainly a connection with John the Baptist’s washing in the Jordan River, a baptism he proclaimed as repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Jesus’ own baptism points to a number of themes that are foundational to our understanding of Christian baptism. There is a connection established between the divine presence represented by God’s voice, the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove, water, and the humanity of Christ. There is also a sense of setting apart and commissioning for service.

The New Testament's description of the first Christians contains many stories of baptism. Baptism is a central theme in the Book of the Acts of the Apostles and it is tied to the Spirit-filled mission of the expanding church.

- ❖ Philip baptized the Ethiopian eunuch after explaining a portion of Scripture to him (8:34-39).
- ❖ After being blinded on the road to Damascus, Paul was baptized by Ananias (9:10-19a).
- ❖ After struggling with the issue of admitting Gentiles into the church, Peter is moved by the Spirit to authorize the baptism of Cornelius (10:44-48).
- ❖ Paul and Silas baptize Lydia and her household (16:11-15) and later the Philippian jailer and his household (16:25-34).

These are some of the many instances of baptism in Acts. The accounts certainly make clear the importance of baptism to the first generation of believers after Christ's death and resurrection.

Baptism in the early church always took place at a vigil which led to an Easter celebration at daybreak. Teaching was an important component and baptismal preparation took as long as three years. The Easter Vigil was seen as an especially appropriate time for baptism because of its celebration of the Paschal mystery, or the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus. In baptism the initiate is seen as dying to sin, as Christ died on the cross, and being reborn in new faith, as Christ was resurrected on the third day. This is powerful imagery that undergirds the very essence of the Christian faith. It also reveals that baptism is our participation in the life of Christ.

Then on page 303, the priest addresses the entire congregation asking whether they will support those to be baptized in their new life in Christ. This is an important moment in the service because it points to the communal nature of baptism. Baptism is not merely an act between God and the individual. It is set within the context of the community of all the baptized.

At this time all baptized members of the congregation renew their own baptismal covenants, on page 304. This is another reminder to the whole community that baptism is at the heart of its faith and worship. The congregation then prays for the candidates for baptism and the priest blesses the baptismal water. At this point the baptism takes place in the font and a prayer is said over the candidates. You will find the baptism itself on the bottom of page 307.

The prayer said immediately after the baptism is an ancient one which calls upon the Holy Spirit to give them the spiritual gifts necessary to sustain them in the Christian life. The priest then marks the sign of the cross on the forehead of the newly baptized, using the oil of Chrism which has been blessed by the bishop. This is a sign that the baptism is done in the name of the entire church and not merely the individual parish. The newly baptized are then welcome into the household of God by the entire congregation. After the Peace is exchanged the newly baptized are greeted and the service continues with the celebration of the Eucharist.

The Prayer Book recommends five occasions as being especially appropriate for baptism: the Easter Vigil, the Day of Pentecost, All Saints' Day or the Sunday after All Saints' Day, the Feast of the Baptism of our Lord, or at the visitation of the Bishop." At St. John's we use all of these occasions to baptize new members into the church. However, when one of these days is not amenable due to family circumstances, the parish uses any other Sunday (except during the seasons of Lent and Advent) as a potential occasion for baptism, as all Sundays are feasts of the resurrection of our Lord.

A Walk Through the Baptismal Liturgy

For the complete baptismal rite please refer to the section "Holy Baptism" on page 299 of the *Book of Common Prayer*. The rite begins as any service of Holy Eucharist with the people standing to sing an opening hymn. Those to be baptized and their godparents are seated in the front few pews, reserved for the occasion. This seating arrangement is significant because after the baptism takes place the newly baptized participate in the Eucharist as members of the community.

After the opening responses and the liturgy of the Word (which includes the opening prayer, the lessons, the reading of the Gospel, and the sermon), the Presentation and Examination of the Candidates takes place. You will find this on page 301 of the Prayer Book. Immediately prior to the Presentation, the parents, candidates, and godparents gather around the baptismal font. The parents and godparents of infants and younger children present the candidates for baptism. The priest then asks a series of six questions to the parents and godparents. Three of the questions are renunciations of Satan, of evil, and of sinful desires. The remaining three questions are affirmations of turning to Jesus, trusting him, and obeying him.

What Does Baptism Mean Today?

Baptism is first of all a sacrament of the church. By sacrament we mean a tangible sign of God's love and relationship with God's people. Baptism is a sacrament because it testifies to God's favor towards us. This favor is unearned and unmerited and can therefore be seen as a sign of God's grace.

Baptism is a sacrament of initiation. Through it the individual is "initiated by water and the Holy Spirit into Christ's body the Church." This initiation creates an "indissoluble" bond between God and the newly baptized.

Baptism is also a sacrament of membership. Through it the individual becomes a full member of the universal Church of Christ. In the Episcopal Church, this is expressed by the governing canons: "All persons who have received the sacrament of Holy Baptism with water in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, whether in this Church or in another Christian Church, and whose baptisms have been duly recorded in this Church, are members thereof."

Baptism is a sacrament of relationship. Through it God initiates a new relationship with the individual as a member of the church. In this way the individual's relationship with God is set in the context of the Christian community. The individual's new relationship with the community is that which nurtures the individual and communal relationship with God.

***MARKED AS CHRIST'S
OWN FOREVER***

What Does Baptism Mean at St. John's?

We place a strong emphasis on our baptismal covenants because we believe that baptism focuses our identity as a community of faith and worship. Baptism is the bond by which we gather as a community and by which we remain in fellowship with one another. We view weekly Sunday worship as a renewal of our baptisms through the Eucharist (Holy Communion) as we are continually called back to the service of God. For us, a community rooted in the baptismal covenant is one that outwardly shows its commitment to Christ through the service of others. We strive to be a community that takes outreach seriously, welcomes newcomers, and reaches out to the unchurched and the lapsed. We do this because we feel that these actions are signs and outward extensions of our baptismal covenant.

Baptismal Preparation

At St. John's we believe that baptismal preparation is central because the baptismal covenant is at the very heart of our individual and collective relationships with God. Baptism is not merely a social rite of passage but it is the essence of the Christian life out of which all else flows. By affirming baptism as the starting point of the Christian life, it makes sense that the significance of the rite is clearly understood by those who either receive the sacrament or sponsor others in its reception. For these reasons the parishioners of St. John's have deemed baptismal preparation to be an essential element of Christian initiation in this parish, the worldwide Anglican Communion, and the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church of Christ.

For those seeking the baptism of an infant or younger child, we offer a clergy-led baptismal preparation class for parents and godparents. Although the class is designed for both parents and godparents, it is understood that many godparents will not be able to attend due to reasons of geography. The chief aim is to help the families of those preparing for baptism to better understand the baptismal rite and the responsibility it demands. We believe that strong baptismal preparation assists parents and godparents in nurturing new Christians more fully into the Christian life. A secondary benefit of the class is fellowship with other parents of young children in the parish. Children are welcome to attend the sessions, though we also provide child care at the parish when the need arises.

Occasions for Baptism

The *Book of Common Prayer* recommends that baptism be “administered within the Eucharist as the chief service on Sunday or other feast.” We at St. John's view this as especially important because of the communal nature of Sunday worship. Baptism is the incorporation and initiation of a new Christian into the community of faith. As such, the Sunday Eucharist is the time when the community is more significantly gathered. Furthermore, there is a strong link between the two primary sacraments of baptism and Eucharist. Each time we receive the Eucharist our bond with Christ through our baptism is renewed. It is our belief that the Christian life begun in baptism is strengthened by the worshipping community and renewed through the sacrament of Holy Communion. Baptism and Eucharist are the foundations of our communal life which is best expressed through Sunday worship.