

**First Presbyterian Church  
Southampton, New York  
“Who’s Number One?”**

**Luke 3:15 – 17, 21 – 22**

**The Baptism of the Lord**

**January 11, 2015**

I want to begin this morning with a little quiz. You ready? What do these four college football teams all have in common? The 1971 Nebraska Cornhuskers; the 1972 USC Trojans; the 2001 Miami Hurricanes; and the 2009 Alabama Crimson Tide. Give up? They all won the NCAA National Championship. They were all able to say “We’re Number One!”

Okay, here’s another one for you. What do these four college *basketball* teams all have in common? The 1995 UCLA Bruins; the 1981 Indiana Hoosiers; the 1979 Michigan State Spartans; and the 1958 Kentucky Wildcats. You got it? *They* all won the NCAA National Championship. *They* were all able to say “We’re Number One!”

Okay, let me give you one more chance. What do these four college lacrosse teams all have in common? The 2002 Princeton Tigers; the 2010 Notre Dame Fighting Irish; the 1980 Virginia Cavaliers; and the 2005 Duke Blue Devils. You think you can figure this one out? Ha! Trick question! They all *lost* the NCAA National Championship game! *None* of them were able to say “We’re Number One!” However, they *were* able to say, “We’re Number Two!”

Now, there’s a pretty big college football game tomorrow night down in Arlington, Texas... once again for the NCAA National Championship. This game will settle the question of, “Who’s Number One?” for this season. Of course we all know that one of the teams playing for that national championship is none other than O...regon. The University of Oregon Ducks. They’ll be playing for their first ever championship in football.

Oregon is led by Heisman Trophy winner Marcus Mariota, and they’ll be a formidable opponent for the team that’s playing them. Oregon is favored to win by a touchdown. And I understand that Oregon will be wearing brand new gray uniforms for the game. Who knows? Maybe for the first time in history, Oregon will be able to say “We’re Number One!”

Now, I bring up this whole question of “Who’s Number One,” because, when all is said and done, that’s pretty much the question that Jesus was trying to settle... when He was baptized that day by John the Baptist. Not that Jesus was worried about the outcome of some football game, deep in the heart of Texas. And not that Jesus was interested in who won what National Championship, in what year, in what sport.

No, when Jesus considered the question of “Who’s Number One?” on the day of His baptism by John, what He had in mind was, “*Who’s Number One... in my life? Who’s Number One... in my heart and soul? Who’s Number One... for me; as I do my work, and go about my ministry?*”

That’s the “Who’s Number One?” question that Jesus was trying to answer, as He and John splashed around that day, in the middle of the Jordan River. And by submitting Himself to John’s

baptism, Jesus answered that question decisively. And His answer was: “*My Heavenly Father... is Number One!*” And that declaration would make all the difference in the world, from the first day of Jesus’ ministry... to the last.

And to understand how this is so, we need to remember what was really going on when Jesus was baptized. And the first thing we need to keep in mind is that Jesus didn’t *need* to be baptized at all... at least, not with the baptism that John was offering.

We’re told earlier in Luke’s gospel that John’s baptism was for “repentance,” and “for the forgiveness of sins.” Well, that’s fine, except that, A) Jesus didn’t need to repent, because, B) He hadn’t committed any sins. If ever there was anyone who didn’t need the baptism that John was performing, it was Jesus. Yet, there He is, wading out to John and saying, “*Come on; I want to be baptized, too.*”

Matthew, in his gospel, tells us that John himself was well aware of the fact that Jesus didn’t need to be baptized. According to Matthew, when Jesus sloshed into the river, John tried to prevent the baptism by saying to Jesus, “*I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?*” But Jesus responded with, “*Let it be so now; it is proper to do this to fulfill all righteousness.*” And then John consented, and the baptism was done.

Which brings us to the second thing we need to keep in mind, when we think about what was really going on with Jesus’ baptism... and that’s the question of, who was it that actually *needed* the baptism that John was performing? Well, sinners... right? People who’d done wrong, and who now wanted to make amends, turn over a new leaf, and hit the reset button on life with a clean slate.

The people who needed John’s baptism were people like *you*, and people like *me*: people who sometimes make mistakes; people who sometimes take a good thing, and completely louse it up; people who usually mean well, but wind up making a mess of things anyway. The people who were coming to John were imperfect, heartsick, guilt-ridden, and broken. And John was offering them a chance to start over; a chance to be *made*-over, from the inside out; a chance to leave the tear-stained muck of their lives behind in that cleansing river... and walk back out as new people, with new hope.

That’s quite a bit different than the situation that Jesus Himself was in, yes? Yet, there Jesus was, anyway. The sinners were out in the water... so Jesus went out in the water. The losers were being dunked by John... so Jesus was dunked by John. The broken people were shedding their filth in the Jordan... so Jesus entered the Jordan and allowed that filth to wash right over Him.

Which tells us the third thing we need to keep in mind when we think about the baptism of Jesus; which is that, Jesus’ baptism wasn’t really about Him at all... it was about, *us!* And in particular, Jesus’ *commitment* to us... His *intention* to *be* with us in our brokenness; and to *give* to us what we could never give to ourselves: mercy, hope, grace, and a truly new life, lived with truly new purpose.

As we said before, Jesus didn’t need to be there that day. He didn’t need to be baptized. Jesus was the Son of God; He was the blessed Messiah; His birth had been announced by angels, and attended by Wise Men. John’s gospel calls Him the “Word of God,” the holy “logos;” the co-creator with God Almighty of the entire universe and all that it entails. Paul the Apostle says that Jesus was *equal* with God, of the same divine “stuff” of God, a holy personage whose rightful

place was in the presence of God, sitting on a shining throne of heavenly splendor! In other words, Jesus **had** it all; Jesus could **do** it all; Jesus **was** all in all. But, where was He that day? Treading water in a muddy river with a no-account bunch of weak-willed knuckleheads. Jesus was treading water in a muddy river... **with us**.

Why? Why was Jesus doing that? Well, He did it to say, right at the very beginning of His ministry: *"I'm going to do things my Father's way... not my way. I'm going to do my Father's thing... not my own thing. I'm going to obey my Father's wishes... not indulge my own rights and privileges."*

Jesus was sent by Almighty God to love us, and to care for us, and to save us from the terminal sinfulness that threatened to alienate us from God forever. And God's way of accomplishing all that was for Jesus to join us... in this world, in this life, with all the joys and sorrows that we must bear. And through His life, and His death, and His resurrection... to rescue us from the muddy river; for new life in God's kingdom. It's a great plan... for us. But it was a personally costly plan... for Jesus; who willingly gave up everything in heaven, to bring God's love to us here on earth. And with His baptism, Jesus was saying: *"Okay. I'll do it. Your way... all the way. Who's Number One? You're Number One, Father."*

And Luke then tells us that Jesus' decision was confirmed by God Himself, as the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus in the form of a dove; and as God's voice spoke from heaven saying, *"You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."* And as the gospel record reveals... **that** was the story of Jesus' ministry, from that point forward. And it's **still** the story of His ministry... in this sanctuary, today. For Jesus, His Heavenly Father was "Number One." And because He was... you and I have forgiveness, and hope, and peace, and the chance for a life that really matters. And there's no football game anywhere that's ever going to give us that. **That's** what was really going on, with the baptism of Jesus. And that makes all the difference in the world... for us.

Which brings us back to this morning, another new day... on the threshold of another new year. And another opportunity for us to declare, as Jesus did that day with John in the Jordan River... who's number one, in our life; in our heart; in our soul. In just a moment we're going to renew our baptismal covenant; we're going to reaffirm who we are, and what we stand for, as baptized disciples of the Lord Jesus. And as we do so, I hope that we'll see it as a chance to recommit ourselves to Christ.

I hope we'll see it as a chance to say to our Heavenly Father, *"Lord, keep me focused on you, as I make my way through the year ahead."* I hope we'll see it as a chance to say to our Savior, *"Jesus, I know that you gave yourself for me; help me this year to give just a little bit more of myself for you."* I hope we'll see it as a chance to say to ourselves, *"Whatever it is that I'm doing, or not doing, that's keeping my faith stuck in neutral... I'm going to do something about it this year; and I'm going to grow in my relationship with the Lord."* I hope we'll see it as our chance to say, along with Jesus Himself, *"Who's Number One? You're Number One, Lord! This year... and every year!"*

If we can do that, then the coming year, our 375<sup>th</sup> year... really and truly will be great! And we'll move a little bit closer to being the disciples that our Father wants us to be! May that be our conviction, and may that be our goal; throughout all the days which are ahead! In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen!