

“Remember Your Baptism”

I

Do you remember your baptism? I remember mine.

Mostly I remember that it was *cold*. Early April is no time for outdoor swimming in Western Pennsylvania –but there we were, a small group gathered from my little church around a backyard swimming pool on a Sunday afternoon. We did not practice infant baptism –it was too churchy, too formal, too *Catholic* for dyed-in-the-wool fired-up fundamentalists such as ourselves. And although we never quite expressed it this way, you got the sense that we thought infant baptism was kind of dangerous. If you were baptized way back before you could walk or talk or have any say in the matter, well, you just might get a little presumptuous. You might even grow up thinking God was *not* angry at you. Where is the fun in that?

My church practiced something called believer’s baptism –meaning that you, as an adult, made the decision to be baptized whenever you were ready to be publicly identified as a disciple of Jesus Christ. It was a big solemn serious sort of business...so much so that a lot of us never got around to it. A lot of us never did feel ready for that kind of commitment.

So why did I do it? It’s kind of a funny story, actually. I did it to get into college. Already at the age of 16, I had some dim notion that I would attend Messiah College –a conservative Christian school, well-regarded by my church, about 10 miles south of Harrisburg. And they asked prospective students if they were baptized –there was a little box you were supposed to check off, right there on the application. They never said you *had* to be baptized to get in, but why take chances? Some kids go out for sports or work on the yearbook or study really hard for the SATs; I got dunked in a swimming pool.

And, like I said, it was cold. When it was my turn, I climbed down the ladder into some unspeakably frigid water and instantly lost all sensation in my lower extremities. Eyewitnesses later informed me that I actually turned blue. Pastor Dolby asked me if I wanted to be baptized as a follower of Jesus Christ and I somehow managed to force some sort of affirmative answer through my chattering teeth and then, without a whole lot of warning, they dunked me all the way under the coldest 4 feet of water in the state of Pennsylvania. I was reasonably certain that I was going to die...but after an eternity under the water, I emerged, clambered gratefully back up the ladder, and shivered straight until June.

Do you remember your baptism? Some of you do; a lot of you don’t. Some of you have been baptized as adults. I know, I was there. You made the same decision that I did, although probably not for the same reason. You just knew it was time to do it. Others of you do not remember your baptism at all. How could you? You were still in diapers when someone hauled you up to this font, or one like it, and you were handed over to some strange minister who whispered some words you could not possibly understand and splashed some water on your tiny little head. Maybe you screamed bloody murder, or maybe you slept through the whole thing. Maybe your parents were pleased and proud, or maybe they were just doing it to appease your grandparents, but none of that really mattered to you. Nobody even asked your opinion.

You were baptized. Remember?

II

Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan River. If we know anything about the historical Jesus, we know that.¹ And we know that it must be an important part of his story. Jesus' baptism is one of the very few events mentioned in all four of the Gospels. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John all say something about it.²

In Matthew's version—our text for today—this is the big entrance, Jesus' very first appearance as a full-fledged adult. The setting is the wilderness around the Jordan River, where John—wild eyed, clothed in camel's hair, living on locusts and honey—John is doing what John does best: quite literally scaring the hell out of people. He is practicing his own peculiar brand of tough love; baptizing sinners in the waters of the Jordan as a sign of their readiness to turn from their sins and embrace the reign of God. Dr. Phil he is not. “*You brood of vipers,*” he hisses, “*who warned you to flee from the wrath that is to come?*” John rants and raves and carries on; he talks a lot about the ax being laid at the root of the tree, about fire, about judgment. He warns sinners to get ready before it's too late.

And then along comes Jesus. And Jesus wants to be baptized by John. So he gets in line with all the prostitutes and tax collectors and various assembled lowlifes; he slides alongside the scum of the earth and patiently waits for his turn.

This is kind of awkward. Jesus really has no business being in this place, being seen with these kinds of people. And why should he be baptized anyway? John tries to talk him out of it —“you don't really want to do this, Jesus; you don't really want to go down into *that* water with *those* people.”³

But Jesus *does* want to do it. He insists. This is the way it is supposed to be. So, feeling a little bewildered, John takes Jesus down into the Jordan, and dunks him under the waters, and brings him back up, and then....

I guess you could call it a thin place —one of those rare moments when God seems to show up. The heavens suddenly open. The Spirit of God descends on Jesus in the form of a dove. A voice speaks from heaven: *This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.*”

None of the Gospel writers say so, but I like to think that John fainted.

III

Jesus was baptized. That is how his story begins. And his story continues in every single person who has been baptized since. We are baptized because Jesus was baptized. Our baptism finds its meaning in his. Whenever and wherever and however it happened to you—at an ornate font or in a muddy creek, in a sanctuary or a swimming pool—when we are baptized, we are united with Christ.⁴ From that moment, his baptism is our baptism. What happens to him happens to us.

So baptism matters. It matters enough to make it into all four of the Gospels; it matters enough to make it into the church calendar when, on the weekend after Epiphany, we always tell the story of Jesus' baptism, every year, rain or shine. It matters. But a lot of you may have missed the reason why. It's not your fault. When we baptized you, you were probably a little distracted; you had a lot on our mind. But that is why this weekend comes around every year. It offers us an opportunity to reflect on baptism; to think a little about why we did that to you and what it all means.

So what does it mean? Simply put, and with apologies to Garrison Keillor, baptism is about finding the answers to life's persistent questions –two questions, in particular: *Who* are we? And *what* are we supposed to do? Those are vital, urgent, crucial questions, the questions that will show up on life's final exam. But that is o.k. In baptism, we get a sneak peek at the answers.

First question: *Who* are we? Who are you? How do you answer that question? Maybe you tell people where you work, or where you grew up, or the name of your partner. Maybe you're known as "such-and-such's son" or "such-and-such's mom." Who are you? Maybe sometimes other people try to answer that question for you: You're a worthless loser. You're a dirty queer. You're a parent who will never provide enough; a child who will never be good enough. You're fat. You're stupid. You're lazy. You're nobody.

Who are you? Let me tell you who you are. You're a beloved child of God. You're the one with whom God is well pleased. You are a unique and precious creation of God; the apple of God's eye. When we baptized you we said all of that, or words to that extent. And we only said those things about you because God said them first. In the waters of our baptism, we find out who we truly are.

And that brings us to the second question: *What* are we supposed to do? Most of us think we already know the answer to this one. We have been hearing it all our lives, from our parents and our peers, from our teachers and coaches and culture: Get into the right school. Get a good job, something respectable and reasonably well-compensated. Buy a nice house in a good neighborhood and then in ten years buy a bigger one. Raise a little crop of perfectly groomed and obedient children. Save enough money to retire in style. Break yourself off a little piece of the American dream. That is what we have been told to do. And most of us will spend our entire lives doing exactly that. Oh we may wonder—every now and then, late at night, all alone—we may wonder if maybe we were meant for something more. But not for long. The feeling will pass, and we will go back to living the lives we were told to live.

What are we supposed to do? Well, when Jesus rose up from the waters of baptism, it was to go out and get busy in the business of God.⁵ If you share in his baptism, you have been claimed for the same work; that mission has been handed off to you. Your life is not just about you anymore; you are caught up in something so much bigger. Your baptism made you a member of the church, the community that keeps on doing what Jesus did. We have been entrusted with the message of God's inclusive love in a world that desperately needs to hear it; we have been given God's mandate to care for those on the margins –the widow and the orphan, the outcast and the stranger. We will bear witness to God's reign of peace and justice until that reign comes, on earth as it is in heaven. That is what we are here to do. And you have a crucial part to play. You are irreplaceable. As you live into your baptism, your life will matter more than you can ever know.

You were baptized –just like Jesus before you. So remember. Give thanks. And get busy.

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Notes

¹ But don't take my word for it. Even Marcus Borg—one who tends to err on the side of skepticism when it comes to the historical Jesus—acknowledges that Jesus was most likely baptized by John. See Marcus Borg's discussion in *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: The Historical Jesus & The Heart of Christianity*. (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), p.27.

² Admittedly, John does not say *much*—but what it says is revealing enough. John's Gospel never describes Jesus' baptism, but John clearly alludes to it in 1:32: *I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him*. John may not tell the story of Jesus' baptism, but the Gospel assumes that its readers are familiar with it. Raymond Brown discusses the issue of John's relationship to the Synoptic Gospels on this point in *The Anchor Bible: John I-XII*. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), pp.65-66.

³ Indeed, Matthew alone of all the Gospel writers includes John's attempt to talk Jesus out of it. F Dean Leuking, *The Lectionary Commentary: Theological Exegesis for Sunday's Texts*. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), pp. 16-19.

⁴ So you can count on Calvin—who sets union with Christ at the very center of his theological system—to draw it out of this story. *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark and Luke*. Volume I. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1998), pp.201-206

⁵ A point that M. Eugene Boring highlights in his discussion in *The New Interpreter's Bible, Volume VIII*. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995), pp.159-161.