

## WHY WAS JESUS BAPTIZED?

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."

Matthew 3:13-17 NRSV

Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his teaching.

Thus says God, the LORD, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it: I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness. I am the LORD, that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols. See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them.

Isaiah 42:1-9 NRSV

At funerals, I often get the comment, "I could never do what you do." I guess the comment comes out of a sense of confusion about what it is I, as a minister, am doing at a funeral. I reply that officiating at funerals is not a depressing task but a rewarding one. Although the event is often sad and a time of grief, it is also an important time in the lives of all who are present—all who loved the one who died. I'm honored, as the minister to be invited into such sacred moments where lives are recounted and honored. Although such times are sad, at funerals where I serve as minister, I'm not grieving in the same way as I would if the deceased person were a close friend or family member. If I were, then I would be in need of a minister and could not serve as one. When I am serving as a minister at a funeral, I see my role as helping those who are grieving to articulate the deep feelings of their hearts through words and rituals.

Yes, it is an honor to serve as the minister at funerals, just as it is to serve at all of the rituals of the church that help us mark the sacred in our lives. I've learned, however, that people tend to do a better job honoring another person's life after their death than they do honoring someone while they are still alive, just as they rarely see their own lives for the sacred wonders they are. At its best, the church provides the means for people to honor the sacred both in death and in life, in themselves and in others. The rituals of the church--funerals, baptisms and weddings--are ways of experiencing the sacred, and God gives us these rituals, along with others we create as needed, to take note of the intersection of the sacred and the ordinary that occurs in our lives.

In our Western post-enlightenment religious traditions we sort of "pooh-pooh" rituals. Especially this is the case with free churches like ours who said, "Let's get back to the basics. Let's strip down all that ritual stuff and just get down to what really matters, how the first Christians did it." We tend to forget the power of ritual and what it means for us to mark the sacred moments of life.

Churches perform many rituals, both consciously and unconsciously, but it is these three—baptisms, weddings and funerals that are the most common. Out of these three, weddings and funerals seem to be the clearest in the public's awareness: weddings are the public commitment of two people to live their lives together, and funerals serve to honor someone's life and allow loved ones some closure. It is important to note that these two events need not even involve the church; there are civil or non-religious ceremonies for both. Baptism, however, is a different story; there are no non-religious baptisms. Perhaps it is because there is no secular analog for baptism that this ritual remains so foggy in the average believer's understanding. Or perhaps it is because our present religious milieu invites the blending of traditions and the crossing of doctrinal boundaries that the meaning of baptism is unclear. Or perhaps the church just does a poor job explaining it. Maybe it is all of these things and more.

Because baptism is always religious and because there is no secular version of it, I fear that it is often dismissed as something antiquated, something left over from the past that we just can't quite let go of. I think this is the case especially in churches like ours where we believe that the water is not holy water but rather just plain old water. For us, there is no magic or supernatural element in the water itself; it's symbolic. Based on these views, we can dismiss the power of ritual. We can begin to think that what really matters is what you believe, what you intellectually assent to and what is in your mind. When we do so, however, we forget that God created us as more than a disembodied mind floating out there. We are minds compacted into a body that has spiritual elements in it, whether we wish to call it a soul or a spirit or whatnot. Therefore, a ritual, whether it is the exchanging of rings, whether it is the closing of a casket, whether it is the sprinkling with

or the immersing in water, it involves our whole selves--our minds, our bodies, and our spirits.

Baptism is just such a ritual, because it involves all the parts of who we are. Baptism involves our soul and spirit, because through it we connect with the divine. It involves our minds as we make promises and confessions about who we are and what we believe. It involves our bodies as we dip our heads beneath the water or feel it dripped upon our brows.

Do you remember your baptism? Some of you were adults when you made your own decision to be baptized. Perhaps you were immersed in water. Maybe you were like me and you thought you knew what you were doing and got dunked but really had no clue until later what was going on. Maybe, you were like my sons and you were baptized as an infant. Promises were made on your behalf and only later did you accept them as your own, in something like a confirmation. Well, no matter how and when you were baptized, this morning I want to ask you to remember your baptism. Even if you can't really remember it because it happened when you were a baby, I want you to reflect back somehow on the spiritual sense of what happened when that water touched you, symbolizing that you belonged to God.

Different traditions approach baptism in different ways. Depending on the denomination or the individual church, baptism can occur by means of sprinkling water on someone's head, pouring water over them or immersing them fully in a body of water.

For Orthodox and Roman Catholic Christians, baptism is a sacrament, a means of God's grace, necessary for salvation that occurs only through the church. For churches of a reformed theology, like the United Church of Christ congregation I served before coming here, the church where my sons were baptized as infants, baptism is usually done for infants but is not understood as necessary for salvation. Instead, baptism is a time for the church and the family to recognize that these children belong to God already. Together, they covenant with God to raise the child in the faith, until the child can make the decision on her or his own later. For churches that subscribe more to an individualistic understanding of faith, such as ours, Baptists, Pentecostals and others, baptism is also not understood as necessary for salvation, but rather it is part of an individual's profession of faith, a profession that occurs when a person is old enough to make such a decision of her or his own free will and understanding.

It is this last form of baptism that concerns us, since it is the way our denomination does things, although practices can vary among churches and have even varied in the life of this church. The Disciples of Christ out of their desire for Christian unity and out of their distaste for doctrines that exclude others accept new members regardless of what kind of baptism they may have had. It matters not by whom, in what way, where or under what doctrine you were baptized, just as long as it happened, that's enough for us. Yet, for our young people and new members who have not been baptized, there is a preferred way for doing things. We immerse or dunk the one being baptized, and we believe that the act is

only symbolic of an inward spiritual grace already given by God and received by the one being baptized. The water is not magic. It is not holy water blessed by a priest. It is just water, plain and simple, but it symbolizes the power of God to cleanse us from unrighteousness and to provide us with a new spiritual birth. It is also the ritual of initiation into the church as a full member. These meanings and more are what Disciples believe

There's a danger in this understanding of baptism, however. If we are not careful, we can fall into the trap that our beliefs about baptism somehow encapsulate all there is to know or experience about baptism. The water is ordinary water, but that doesn't mean it is bereft of spiritual power. The act of baptism is only a ritual expressing a faith decision someone has already made, but that doesn't mean the ritual is void of meaning. If baptism is understood only as the window-dressing for an intellectual belief that already exists, then the mystery and power of the ritual is lost and so is the opportunity for blessing.

I believe that if we want to recapture the power, the mystery and the blessing of our own baptisms, in whatever form they occurred, then we need to look back to Jesus' baptism. Yet doing so comes with a lot of questions, not the least of which is "why was Jesus baptized?" Just a few verses prior to this morning's Gospel passage, it says that John was baptizing people in the wilderness who came to repent of their sins. Repenting or turning away from sins is a part of what baptism means for churches that practice baptism the way our church does, but what did Jesus have to repent of?

The answer to that question depends on what you believe about Christ. A few weeks ago I offered a sermon about the Trinity where I explained the differences between "high" and "low" Christologies. The first type is what's called a "low" Christology, where one believes that Jesus was a prophet or teacher and not divine. From this point of view, Jesus was only human so perhaps he did have something to repent of; therefore, the Gospels' efforts to show that Jesus was greater than John and did not need to repent of anything are later embellishments. The second type of Christology is a "high" one, where Jesus is understood as both human and divine, fully part of the mystery that is the Trinity. If you accept this point of view, you are presented with a problem, because it is not entirely clear why Jesus felt the need to be baptized.<sup>1</sup>

If we choose to hold to a "high" Christology, we have to look closely at Matthew's account of Jesus' baptism to find a possible answer. In Matthew's account, we find John protesting that he should be baptized by Jesus and not the other way around, but Jesus

gets John to officiate in order “to fulfill all righteousness.” That’s a pretty vague phrase. If you hold a “high” Christology, isn’t Jesus already righteous enough by being God?

Righteousness in the biblical sense is more than just personal piety; it is God’s work in the world. A better translation that gets at the meaning of the words here is “to bring to fullness all justice.”<sup>2</sup> Tom Long writes that righteousness is God’s commitment to set right all the things that are wrong in the world.<sup>3</sup> It is the kind of righteousness that the prophet Isaiah wrote about when he described the servant of God being “a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.” Understood this way, Jesus gets baptized as a part of God’s work in the world to set things right. What would it mean for us if we understood our baptisms this way? What if we understood our baptisms, however and whenever they occurred, as more than just symbolic representations of our own faith decisions or as rites of initiation into the church or a means of keeping our kid from going to hell? What would it mean if we understood our baptisms as a part of God’s redemptive work in the world? Think of what it might mean if we truly understood ourselves as a part of God’s work to heal creation, rather than as only individuals with our own individual choices and beliefs.

Jesus’ baptism was the beginning of this earthly ministry. It inaugurated his work in the world; work that would culminate in his death and resurrection. Jesus’ story, as unique and amazing as it is, was connected to the larger story of God’s work in history. Jesus could have been dunked underwater anywhere, but he went out into the wilderness to the Jordan River. In the same way politicians running for President may kick off their campaign at a special site, such as the capital building or perhaps like John Edwards who began his campaign down in New Orleans to emphasize the neglect of the victims of hurricane Katrina, Jesus’ choice of location for the beginning of his work was entirely purposeful. The Jordan River was just as significant for Israel’s history as Plymouth Rock or the bridge to Selma, Alabama to our own.

Walter Brueggemann writes that Jesus’ baptism reenacts the whole history of Israel.<sup>4</sup> After the wandering of the children of Israel in the wilderness, it is at the Jordan that Moses interprets the Torah. When the Israelites cross the Jordan into the promised land, it parts just as the Red Sea parted for them when they escaped from Egypt. Just across the Jordan is where the prophet Elijah is taken up into heaven and his protégé Elisha receives his master’s spirit and power. When Elisha returns into Israel, the water parts for him. Again and again, the parting of the waters—especially the waters of the Jordan—occurs at significant times in the history of Israel.

The events of Jesus' baptism recall all these events, yet in the Gospel story, it is the sky not the river that parts. The very sky parts and breaks open. Our reality and that of the supernatural collide. God speaks directly to Jesus, just as God's spirit hovering over the waters spoke at creation and parted the waters revealing dry land. These stories are recalled to memory, just as Jesus' baptism and the parting of the skies that accompanied it would be called to memory when later the curtain in the temple is torn and God's presence is freed to interact directly with all people. Similarly, the parting of the sky at Jesus baptism will be recalled eventually at the end of time when the skies will open again for the final barriers between God and humanity will disappear. From creation to the end of time, God is at work and Jesus' baptism is a part of that greater story. What would it mean for us, if we understood our baptisms as not one act in our own particular story but as one thread in the greater tapestry of God's saving creative activity in the universe?

My sons, Julian and Jameson, have been baptized. Before coming here, I served in a United Church of Christ church which practices baptism according to the reformed understanding I mentioned earlier. In those services, Jennifer and I made sacred promises to raise our sons in the faith and to cherish them as blessings of God, and they were accepted into the community of faith. We also had a time for those present to offer words of blessing. One after another, people got up to offer their wishes for our sons—first our parents and then church members that had supported us through the adoption process. We videotaped those services for our sons to watch some day. I hope they will understand that their own story is connected with the story of the community of love that baptized them and that community's story is connected still with other stories of faith.

Also in New York, a friend of mine from high school showed up one Sunday morning to surprise me. He had driven up from Virginia on a lark to see me. My friend Doug had become a Christian through Young Life and had never been a member of a church. In fact, churches intimidated him and he often asked me to move back to Richmond so that there would be a minister there that he knew and could trust. Doug had been a believer for years, but he had never been baptized. He mentioned this fact after church that Sunday and that he wanted to be baptized but didn't have a church. I told him that I could baptize him right then. He and I entered the sanctuary together in silence, and as I dripped the water onto his forehead, making the sign of the cross on him, a sacred moment occurred. In that moment, we shared our stories of meeting, becoming friends and remaining friends over the years and what each had meant to the other. Our stories of faith and our experiences of God were connected. Doug's story was greater than he, just as my story was greater than me. Our stories as individuals and our story as friends

are a part of God's story, and in that moment of baptism, we recognized how all the stories—his, mine, ours and God's—were connected.

After Jesus is baptized, he hears the words from God that declare, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." The words here echo those read this morning from the prophet Isaiah. The declare that Jesus is the chosen one, who will come to serve and to suffer, to provide light to the blind, and to free those who are held captive in darkness. We can view these words as relating only to Jesus, but I think they are meant for anyone and everyone who chooses to follow Jesus.<sup>5</sup> We too are chosen and beloved by God. We too are called to join the work of Christ in the world to bring light and to free those held in darkness. We are called to join our stories with God's story of love and acceptance. What would it mean for us, if we understood our baptism as our time for God to declare to us that we are beloved and chosen for the work of bringing light to a world lost in the darkness of violence and selfishness?

This Sunday morning I call you to remember your baptism. Even if your baptism occurred when you were too young to remember it, I call you to recall that it did in fact happen. Whether you made the promises or the promises were made on your behalf, your story was joined to the larger story of God. You were baptized so that the justice of God could come into its fullness. You were baptized so that you could come to know that you are loved and cherished by God and you are called to a great destiny of bringing hope, love and grace to a world that desperately needs it. Why was Jesus baptized? He was baptized so that each of us could know these things and experience them bodily, intellectually and spiritually. Remember your baptism. Remember that you are called and beloved by God.

Amen.

Rev. Chase Peeples  
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), St. Joseph, MO  
Epiphany Sunday, January 6, 2008

---

<sup>1</sup> Books about Christology are numerous and finding one to recommend is difficult. They tend to either focus on Christology from the perspective of biblical texts with little thought to how it plays out in theology in general and the church in particular or they approach Christology from a theological perspective with little regard for the biblical texts much less the practice of the church. Of course, there are many books about Christology written for the church that give no thought to either the theological issues or biblical texts involved—for those see your average Christian bookstore. For an overview of the theological issues involved with Christology, I recommend Monica Hellwig, "Christology" in *A New Handbook of Christian Theology*, eds. Musser and Price (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), 83-88. For an overview of Christology and the New Testament, I recommend James D. G. Dunn, "Christology (NT)" in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 1, ed. David Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 979-991.

---

<sup>2</sup> Brad Braxton, "Ready for Revolution," *Christian Century* (January 2, 2002), 18. You can read the full article on-line at: <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=2252>. See also, John R. Donahue, "The Beginning Holds the Future 1," *America* (January 7, 2002). You can read the full article on-line at: [http://www.americamagazine.org/content/article.cfm?article\\_id=1377](http://www.americamagazine.org/content/article.cfm?article_id=1377).

<sup>3</sup> As quoted in Braxton, "Ready for Revolution."

<sup>4</sup> Kathleen Norris, "Living by the Word," *Christian Century* (January 1, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> Henri Nouwen has a wonderful sermon about what it means to be called "beloved" by God. Out of his work with disabled people, he learned that all of us hear messages from our culture that declare we must prove we are worthy of being loved. God's words to Jesus and to us declare that we already are worthy of being loved, simply because God has called us beloved. You can read his sermon, "The Life of the Beloved," on-line at: [http://www.csec.org/csec/sermon/nouwen\\_3502.htm](http://www.csec.org/csec/sermon/nouwen_3502.htm).