

“Baptism: A Sign of Divinization”
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Baptism of the Lord, Year A
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Is. 42:1-9, Ps. 29, Acts 10:34-43, Matt. 3:13-37

I thought I'd start this morning by reviewing some of what I said in my Christmas Eve sermon. And this will be on the test!

As I said, Christmas is about God becoming human so humankind could take an evolutionary leap into becoming more truly human, like Jesus. This transformative process is our divinization. It's about becoming who we are in union with God, born again in the Holy Spirit as fully realized children of God. Thank you, Jesus!

I also talked about the need for us all to be mothers of God since God is always needing to be born in this world. Being a mother is much more than giving birth of course. Mothering means nurturing, protecting, and socializing children. It means “raising up” the fullness of life inherent in every child.

Some psychologists describe human beings as “interdividuals” since our lives are both individual or personal and social, communal. When we raise children, we also create the very culture that in turn shapes us.

The scriptures are clear that social, or cultural resurrection is every bit as essential to Jesus's mission as personal salvation. They simply cannot be separated. Sadly though understandably, we humans evolved through imitating one another to such a degree we created a culture rooted in competition, and ultimately in violence and death.

But, miracle of miracles, in God there is no death. At least not death as we understand and experience it – as losing the ultimate battle for survival. In God there is always re-birth and raising up to new life if we will only embrace it. So, Christ calls us to taste this reality of dying into new life through baptism.

Today we celebrate Jesus's baptism by John the Baptist in the Jordan River. Like the Baptizer, many Christians question why Jesus would seek baptism for the repentance of sins. Don't we believe Jesus, as the Son of God, was like us in all but sin? Well, yes and no. In most religious households now, as I'd guess then, vexing one's parents falls at least into the “minor” sin category. And scripture tells us the very human tween-aged Jesus vexed his parents. Probably more than once.

Our New Song prayer of confession includes an even more important element that likely went into Jesus's decision to be baptized for the repentance of sins. Every Sunday we say, “We repent of the evil that enslaves us, the evil we have done, and the evil done on our behalf.” Jesus surely understood he benefited from being part of the Jewish culture. A religious culture

that in his time was in many ways corrupted, but that still provided valuable guidance, protection, and status to Jews.

While Jesus perhaps wasn't enslaved by sin the way the rest of us are, he surely knew being part of a humanity enslaved to sin would bring him temptation and suffering. Still, Jesus wanted to publicly declare his kinship with humankind. He wanted to make clear his intention to take on the sin of the world so we could be set free.

I wonder if there was also a very personal reason Jesus chose to be baptized by John. John was Jesus's cousin, about his same age, so probably a good friend. Many scholars today believe John was also likely Jesus's spiritual mentor in their young adulthood. John's father Zachariah was a temple priest and so John was immersed in priestly culture growing up.

John declined that vocation and ultimately rejected the dominant understanding of what it meant to serve God as a good Jew. He may even have lived with the separatist Essene community at Qumran for a time. If so, he chose to return to society, albeit around the edges, to call for personal renewal and religious reform.

Jesus was set to follow this same path -- with one essential difference. John understood God to be a god of exacting judgment and harsh punishment for sin. He believed in the coming of a warrior messiah who would vanquish both the Romans and the corruption of the Jewish temple. And John believed Jesus was the One to fulfill that role.

While Jesus undoubtedly loved John and had learned much from him, he had also come to know God as his Abba. Jesus related to a spiritual Father who guided and perhaps even chastised him, but who always loved him into more and deeper life. His Abba God loved him in an utterly self-giving way that Jesus knew himself to be called to embody.

Jesus also knew that any Messiah of the one true God would come in peace. That the Messiah would choose to suffer himself rather than inflict more of the same domination and violence wrapped in religiosity that John hoped for.

So, it's likely that by the time Jesus went to John to be baptized, he knew they would be parting ways. Perhaps being baptized by John was in part a way for Jesus to show his love and respect for him. Maybe it was a way to honor what he'd received from John and to receive his and God's blessing. Even as Jesus chose to go another way.

This impending departure would have made the affirming voice and descending Spirit from heaven even more poignant for Jesus. And reassuring that he was on the right path.

Of course, Jesus' baptism really had two parts, as that same reassuring Spirit immediately led him into the wilderness to come face to face with the universal forces of human sin. And to practice clinging only to God to nonviolently resist the lure and wiles of evil. Talk about baptism by fire!

In a recent zoom study group, a guest biblical scholar talked about what Jesus's baptism in the Jordan and experience in the wilderness might have meant to him in light of his changing relationship with John. And I found tears running down my face. I was touched by the anguish and loneliness Jesus must have felt as he was letting go of his dear friend and mentor, and essentially his whole culture. And then to immediately be asked to dramatically die to himself so he could learn to survive in the sinful wilds of this world.

But I also wept in relief and gratitude for Jesus's courage and perseverance. I was again awed by Jesus's willingness to cling to God alone and so to show us the possibility of living in a new world even in the midst of sin and suffering.

As many of you know, my last stop before retirement was as pastor of First Baptist Church in Iowa City. I definitely never expected to become a Baptist in my life-long spiritual wanderings, but gladly did just that once I got to know them. To my – somewhat arrogant -- surprise, I found several theological and liturgical gems in the American Baptist Churches, USA.

Like the teaching of "soul freedom," which allows each person and congregation to interpret scripture and discern their call to follow God with the guidance of the Holy Spirit and their faith community. This freedom flows from a deep trust in God to guide. And it allowed our congregation to perform marriages for LGBTQ people even though the denomination sanctioned only heterosexual marriage at the time.

First Baptist also introduced me to the baptism of believers, which I found to be profoundly meaningful. Being done by full, and often fairly precarious immersion made it somehow even more moving.

I now think the Church's turning to the baptism of infants in the 4th century was a sad mistake. This new practice had a lot to do with the church's conversion mania that went with empire-building, coupled with a simultaneous turn toward getting-to-heaven as the paramount Christian goal.

In the earliest church, baptism was about consciously committing yourself and your way of life to God. Something no one, not even your parents, can do for you. Early Christian baptism was modeled on the baptism John and Jesus's disciples offered to adults who felt called to turn to God in a new way. It was offered to those who wanted to renew their own being and to join with others to build God's commonwealth on earth.

Baptism was never meant to be a rote rite of passage or an incidental commitment. It is a knowing consent to being re-born in the Spirit in a way that will re-shape your life forever. Then and now, baptism means saying "yes" to your divinization and agreeing to participate in that life-long transformation consciously and conscientiously.

So, as we renew our baptismal vows here today, I invite each of us to dig deep. To ask ourselves if we're really intending to make a new commitment to God in Christ from the depth of our being, even if we've made it umpteen times before.

The beginning of our Episcopal baptismal renewal is embedded in the familiar Nicene Creed, which can lull us into thinking our declaration of "belief" is just a recitation of what we think about God and Jesus. But the word "believe" is from the same root as "love." It means to "hold dear" and to maybe more importantly "entrust oneself to." These are action words, not merely thoughts or even just intentions. And thankfully, our renewal rite follows up with some "will you...?" action-questions. Will you?

We might want to take our bulletins home today to pray with these baptismal commitments; to ponder how specifically we're called to fulfill them in this time and place. If we sincerely ask, God will surely, once again, help us die to our lesser selves and raise us more fully into our divinized, Christ-selves. Then together we can bring God's divinized culture alive on this earth as in heaven. May it be so. Amen.