

<Isaiah 42:1-9; Psalm 29:1-11; Matthew 3:13-17>

*Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Holy One, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.*

What, if anything, do you remember about your baptism? Or perhaps a question that would generate a more engaged answer, what do you remember about a child's baptism or another one you've witnessed in your life of faith? Most certainly you would remember water, and the minister proclaiming something along the lines of, "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." You might recall a fussy child or a sleeping child. You may even remember some other unique aspect of the event. And hopefully, if we ministers have done our job well, you might even recall that baptism is about family. And if we ministers have *not* done our job well, any of us might walk away from a baptism thinking that it's about meeting criteria and joining an exclusive club.

In seminary in Austin, Texas, while working with the collegiate fellowship group of the church I was attending, there was a master's student from University of Texas who was attending regularly, named Erin. Erin had not grown up a Christian, had no home church she belonged to before coming to Austin, and had never been baptized. But she was there with us, each and every week, faithfully participating in worship and helping out with any and all activities outside of worship. If you didn't know any better, you might have presumed she was a lifelong child of the church.

One Sunday morning, coming out of the discussion group we were both a part of, Erin asked me, "why should I be baptized? It seems like I already have all the benefits of being a part of this congregation." And in a way she was right; as I mentioned, she was a faithful and active participant in worship, in mission, in fellowship, and was engaged in the planning of many events of the life of the church. What would baptism bring to her that she was not already experiencing?

I confess that, at the time, and despite being a good seminarian and student, I found myself at a loss for how to answer her question. I think I stammered and muttered something about 'belonging' and 'family' and 'commitment' but I can't be sure anymore; my mind has blocked it from memory. But I have to imagine that, on that occasion, I had the best chance ever of relating to John the Baptist, seeing Jesus come to him for baptism and stammering, muttering, wondering why it should be that way and not the other way around.

How might you describe the role and purpose of baptism to someone, curious as to why it would be a benefit to them? Why it would be a next step to take?

For a very long time, the answer to such a question would be wrapped up in understandings of belonging and connection, with a degree of 'soul-insurance' mixed in; to be a member of the community at large, to be a full and welcome citizen as well as church member, could not be realized without likewise being baptized. And, the baptism should happen as soon as possible to prevent a soul from being sent to purgatory and stuck there for a time, or worse, condemned to damnation. Wrapped up in all of this understanding, wrapped *around* this understanding was a degree of fear - fear of not being accepted, fear of not being welcomed, fear of being an outsider, and even fear of damnation. But as Father Richard Rohr comments, "We can't start a spiritual journey on a negative foundation. If we just seek God out of fear or guilt or shame...we won't go very far. If we start negative, we stay negative" ('You Must Start With Something Positive' Jan. 11, 2015).

Reading the story anew of Jesus' baptism, and remembering our own baptism and the invitation of God to draw closer, it is imperative that we start on a positive note. We cannot begin, and attempt to draw close, primarily from a place of fear or guilt; we must first begin from a foundation of joyfully accepting the invitation. I'm not saying that we each need to create false happiness or empty mirth, pretending that everything in our lives is ok when maybe it isn't, especially after we have lived through the past ten days in our world. But we do need to recognize and remember that the invitation to baptism, and even its remembrance, is one of joy and celebration. We are invited to journey into the new and renewed life that is before us. And that truly is an offer of joy.

This joy is seen reflected in Isaiah's proclamation to the people of God, as well, when he declares the vision of what, and who, is to come, the vision to which we adhere and claim through baptism. "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...See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare."

And for the people of God, this would be no mere exercise of the imagination. For them, the waters of their daily living still reflected an understanding of water as primordial chaos, the stuff from which the created order was fashioned by God at the beginning. Water represented uncertainty, unpredictability, and dying. But through them and from them, God has done - and continues to do - a new thing. From such waters now come creation and being and life.

The act and remembrance of baptism is stepping into the ongoing invitation to the transformative love of God. It is a joyous celebration; it is a warm invitation; and it is a committing to new and abundant life in the family of God. Former Presbyterian minister and theologian Eugene Peterson puts it this way, "When we are baptized, we are immersed not just in water but into a whole new way of being in the world." Through baptism we proclaim and realize this new creation, this new way of being, and we participate more fully in the new things God is declaring.

Each year at this time, I remember my own trip to the Jordan River, and even after more than a decade, I can hardly believe that I stood alongside those banks, that I stepped - even timidly - into those waters, placing myself in the same cosmic space in which John made his proclamations, and in which Jesus himself was baptized. To say that my own life was transformed by this experience would be an understatement; my life is still being transformed by it, now eleven years later. And in this is a mystical reality of baptism to be remembered, as well.

We are naturally inclined to view baptism through the physical experience, and once complete, to leave it at the experience we've had. But it is so much more than that, and through our baptisms we likewise commune with Christ across time and space. Our lives are transformed anew, each and every day. Even back in seminary, when I wanted to explain and endorse baptism through academic and theological arguments, I neglected to mention much about the mystical. But it's there, the reality of God present and at work in the life of the individual, in the life of you, and me, and us, in ways which can be recognized but not predicted or limited. The Holy Spirit, leading and guiding an individual toward the "more" that exists for each of us in our lives of faith. And the loving grace of Christ, which surpasses any boundary we might try to tie around it, redeeming us and uplifting us through no work of our own. On paper, it makes no sense; but in faith, it is the very foundation of who we are and who we are created to be: transformed ourselves for the transforming of the world.

Each and every day, but perhaps especially on this day when we remember and proclaim Christ's baptism as well, we are invited to live into the freedom that baptism offers: freedom from sin and guilt, freedom from fear and anger, freedom even from the sting of death. We are brought through the primordial waters of chaos and invited, ushered into the fullness of life and the presence of God. We are joyously invited, still. Amen.

*(Sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Jason Cashing at Clarence Presbyterian Church)*