

Reflections on Baptism

I hope you'll indulge me this morning as I reflect in a personal way on baptism. I want to relate to you my own experience of baptism, to which I hope some of you will connect, as well as some rumination on what that event meant to me at the time and the broader understanding I have come to over the years. And, fascinating though I am sure my experience will be to everybody, I also want to consider how baptism speaks to all of us who have experienced believer's baptism as well as those whose baptisms came at the beginning of their lives and who had the experience of confirmation. If you have no personal experience of baptism or confirmation, I hope that our consideration of this rite of the Church will cause you to evaluate what place such an act might have in your own life.

I think I've mentioned in this place before that I presented myself for baptism when I was 9 years old, in fourth grade, in a little Southern Baptist mission church called North Shore Baptist Church in King's Park, NY – "Doing the King's Business in King's Park" was our motto. I don't remember how many of my peers in the juniors group were already baptized but it certainly wouldn't have been unusual in that time and place for several of them to have been and it's entirely possible that peer pressure played a part in my decision, particularly since we'd just moved back to the States from England and I would have been trying to fit in. Knowing me, however, it's just as likely that I would have discounted any such influence – I was a pretty fierce individualist even then.

I don't remember fear having any part in my decision. Again, as I think I've said here before, our pastor at North Shore, Brother Don Miller, was an old-fashioned Texas evangelist. His sermons contained a fair amount of talk about hellfire and damnation. But the dire consequences he preached were always well-leavened with the message of God's great love for all of us and it was that message, as I remember, that caught my heart. I committed my life to Jesus not because I was afraid of Hell but because I couldn't imagine not doing so after the sacrifice Jesus had made for me.

I remember being baptized was something that I had looked forward to for some time but also something that I had been counseled by my parents and Sunday School teachers to wait for. It was important, I was taught, to understand what a commitment I was making in baptism, a life-long commitment to living in a way that pleased God, living as a disciple of Jesus. It was not unusual at that little church for the teens and adult who presented themselves for baptism to weep copiously as they unburdened themselves to the congregation of stories of the most egregious sins. Our church had an active ministry to recovering heroin addicts and we attracted a lot of people in recovery, people who'd lived a criminal life and so on. I remember that at the evening service when I "came forward," that I wept, too, not because I had any huge grief or sin in my life – I was a pretty well-behaved, well-adjusted 9-year old kid – but because I was aware that somehow this was a momentous step that would have impact on my entire life. I was overwhelmed by the weight and possibilities of the future, as well as by my sense of God's incredible love for me.

I remember my baptism, too, which also, I think, took place in an evening service some weeks later. Our little church didn't have any of the white baptismal robes which are so prevalent in Baptist churches. Instead, I was baptized in a clean pair of jeans and a white shirt, barefoot. I remember the water being cold – I don't know if North Shore didn't have a heated baptistery or

if Brother Don just didn't believe in warm water for baptism. The Didache, a very early work of Christian belief and practice written around A.D. 70, calls for cold: "baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit in living water [that is, in running water, as in a river]. If there is no living water, baptize in other water; and, if you are not able to use cold water, use warm. If you have neither, pour water three times upon the head in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." Of course, the Didache has no instructions to aid the embarrassed 9-year old boy whose pant legs have retained air during his descent into the water and ballooned up alarmingly around his waist, as mine did. Nor does it give instructions to the congregation on how to behave when the pastor's enthusiasm in dunking literally sweeps the baptized child off his feet, exposing both his ballooned jeans and his bare feet. My dear church family at North Shore laughed pretty heartily – I could hear them under the water – but that didn't matter. I remember the light, the light breaking through my tightly clenched eyes as my head emerged from the water and the warmth of the air on my head after the chilly bath. I remember a sense of elation, a sense of accomplishment and a warm sense of belonging. I was way too excited to be much embarrassed over my unconventional showing in the tank. Now I was a Christian, a real follower of Jesus, and nobody could deny that or take it away from me.

Of course, my experience was in some ways inevitable. The presence or lack of peer pressure, parental expectation and salvation-oriented preaching notwithstanding, I was practically a certain candidate for baptism. As a serious-minded, dutiful son of active Southern Baptist parents, I was culturally a Baptist long before I could make any reasonably substantiated claim to being a follower of Jesus. Just as a Jewish boy looks forward to bar mitzvah, just as a child raised in a Roman Catholic family looks forward to first communion and confirmation, so I expected baptism as an appropriate part of my journey to adulthood. With my experience of believer's baptism, I became a part of a long and honorable heritage – what is sometimes called the Radical Reformation, the Free Church and Anabaptist movement that produced what we know as Baptists.

Baptists have alternately traced their history to the English Separatists John Smyth and Thomas Helwys who travelled to Holland and became convinced of the Anabaptist doctrine of believer's baptism, or to earlier groups of officially-denounced heretics such as the Hussites and the Waldensians who also adhered to the practice, or even to John the Baptist himself. Whatever the origins of our movement, it is the basic principle that is important. Because Baptists understand each human being to be competent to form their relationship with God, to interpret scriptures and to build their belief systems, and to possess free will, we are free to choose God or to choose against God. In believer's baptism, we announce our choice for God to the world.

We announce our choice to the world. In a curious way, we also announce our choice against the world but also for the world. In baptism, we proclaim that we recognize God as Lord of our life, as "the boss of us," in more modern terminology. By doing so, we set ourselves apart from those who do not seek to put God in charge of their lives, those who do not follow the way of Jesus. We become, in the words of I Peter, "a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people." We are set against the world. And yet, by aligning ourselves with Christ, we also become those who are for the world, those who are to love their neighbors as themselves, even to love their enemies. In baptism, we announce that we are on God's side but also on the

side of all those who are oppressed by that which stands against God: cruelty, pain, systemic evil, death.

If, in our baptism, we align ourselves with God, the story of Jesus' baptism serves as yet another example of how God came to stand in solidarity with humankind. Orthodox Christian belief holds Jesus as sinless, yet he participated in a baptism by John that was specifically announced as the sign of μετάνοια, of repentance, of turning away from sin and brokenness and toward life in God. Why? In part, perhaps, to continue to fulfill what the angel had revealed of his nature: Immanuel, God With Us. In a sermon on the story of Jesus' baptism, Rev. Dr. Scott Black Johnson wrote: "God got baptized? What could that mean? Well, for one thing it means that God intimately knows the trials involved in being a humble servant working for a kingdom that has yet to be fully realized. But, perhaps more important, Jesus in the Jordan demonstrates that the Christ will never ask us to go somewhere that he is not. Knowing that God has been washed by the waters of baptism reminds us that we're not called to fight the dragons alone."

In entering into believer's baptism or in choosing confirmation, we become a part of the Church, the Body of Christ. But that means more than simple assent to membership in a group of humans. Our participation in the powerful symbol of baptism also signifies our participation in the ongoing life of Christ Jesus. In baptism, according to the writer Kari Jo Verhulst, we get written into the story. In her writing, Ms. Verhulst specifically references our Old Testament passage for this morning in Isaiah as well as the famous interpretation of baptism by Paul in Romans: "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life." "In baptism," Ms. Verhulst wrote for *Sojourners*, "Christians become one with Jesus in his life, death, and resurrection. We get written into the text, becoming the covenant Isaiah writes of, 'given...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.'"

Jesus told John that he had come for baptism, "to fulfill all righteousness." I spoke two weeks ago of how Matthew's use of the word "fulfill" refers not to some idea that Jesus is superseding the promises of Torah and the prophets, but of how he is embodying them, recapitulating and deepening them, filling them out. So it is for his fulfillment of righteousness in baptism and so it is for us. The Lutheran scholar Joseph Sittler tells the story of a time he was in Jerusalem and his car broke down. He took it to a mechanic to have it fixed. When the mechanic had finished and started up the engine to hear it running perfectly he said, "Zadik." *Zadik* is the Hebrew word translated as righteousness. In this context it means simply: "it works." By entering into baptism, by choosing to follow Christ in obedience to the Father, we allow our lives to become *zadik*. They work. When we pattern our lives after the life of Jesus, when we seek to emulate him in love as well as in baptism, when we stand in solidarity with our fellow humans, even at our own cost, just as Jesus did, then our lives work in a way that they simply do not when we follow the often-selfish, broken desires that the worse part of our hearts and the world teach us.

Baptism as part of our heritage, baptism as alignment with Christ, baptism into the life of the Body of Christ, baptism to embody righteousness – all of this is pretty heady stuff. It seems a long way from my simple child's desire to follow Jesus out of love and gratitude. One of my

former professors and a fellow member of Crescent Hill Baptist in Louisville, Bill Leonard, has a daughter named Stephanie. “Stephanie,” Bill has written, “is a person with special needs, with learning and motor skill disabilities. Concepts do not come easily for her. Because of that, I supposed she might never receive baptism... But on the third Sunday in December, 1991, on the way home from church, Stephanie, aged sixteen, announced to her mother and me, “I think it’s time for me to be baptized.” We talked about it, and she was resolved, so we went to see our pastor, whom Stephanie loves dearly, and he was everything a pastor should be for such a moment. He did not speak of what she had to *know*, but of what she wished to *be*.” Later in the article, Dr. Leonard writes, “If pressed, I must admit that I know more about sin and salvation, history and theology, doctrine and dogma, than my daughter ever will. But I am not certain that such knowledge makes me any closer to grace than she was (on the day of her baptism).”

So it is for all of us. The commitment we make when we choose baptism is not about what we know; it is about what we want to be. When I was 9 years old, what I wanted to be was a follower of Jesus, a part, though I would not have phrased it this way then, of the Beloved Community. Here in this place, we are a part of that Beloved Community, the part of the Body of Christ known as Good Shepherd Baptist Church. My prayer this morning is that we would all be as resolved as that 16-year old special needs child, resolved to follow Jesus, in baptism and through all the walk of our life, no matter what may lay before us, no matter who may travel with us, with no turning back, no turning back.