

The Meaning of Baptism

Welcome to Epiphany! I've been especially aware of the transition between the twelve days of Christmas and the liturgical season that follows them this year. My friend Manny Santiago, pastor of University Baptist Church, has been eagerly awaiting Epiphany as much as most of us await Christmas. In his native Puerto Rico, Epiphany is celebrated as El Dia de los Reyes, the Day of the Kings, and commemorates the visit of the magi to the baby Jesus with their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. In a tradition far older than that of the northern European Santa Claus, for children in Puerto Rico and other Hispanic cultures it is the Kings who bring them presents if they've been good and charcoal if they've been naughty and this happens on the last day of Christmas rather than the first. In Puerto Rico, the little ones put out grass for the kings' horses rather than milk and cookies for Santa. As Manny began to anticipate his celebration of this special day in his new home, he was a little apprehensive that he would be lonesome but I'm happy to report that he found a group of friends to honor the occasion with him.

I've also been involved in a Facebook conversation with a friend from our Louisville days about the post-Three Kings days leading up to Lent. My friend Annie posted on the day after Epiphany that now Christmas was over she was preparing for the spiritual darkness of Lent. Another clergy friend and I encouraged her to remember the season of Epiphany rather than hurrying into Lent a good two months early. At this dark time of the year, when days are still so short and, here in the Northwest, generally gloomy, it would seem too cruel to dwell on the approach of death for Jesus and on our own complicity in evil and deep need for repentance. Instead, the season of Epiphany has to do with the Light that has come into the world – the Light, as we read last week, that enlightens everyone; the light that shines in the darkness and cannot be overcome; the Light that is the $\Lambda\omicron\gamma\omicron\varsigma$, the Word, Jesus. In the season of Epiphany, we remember the stories of how Jesus was revealed to eyes of faith as the Light of the World. The lectionary may point us to the testimony of John the Baptizer or the wedding in Cana, depending on the year of the cycle. In every year, however, the story cycle of Epiphany ends with the Transfiguration and it begins with the story of Jesus being baptized by John.

It seems to me that if there is one time during the year that all Baptists should take note of the Liturgical Cycle, this is it. As we proudly carry forward the name of our 400-year old movement, we cannot help but be identified with that very special ordinance that gave us our collective name. Be it English, Dutch, Swedish, German, American, Southern, Cooperative, General, Free Will, Missionary, Primitive or Hard Shell, we are all Baptists; all insisting on Believer's Baptism as an ordinance and on immersion. We take our cues from this story and from Matthew's only other mention of the rite as well as from the multiple stories of baptism in the Acts of the Apostles and in the theology of the act as sketched out by Paul in Romans. This morning, I want to consider how the Baptism of John and its Jewish antecedents continue to inform our own experience of baptism, how Jesus' own baptism established the model for us to follow and how that other mention of baptism in Matthew's Gospel challenges us as Good Shepherd Baptist Church as we embark on another year together.

The act of baptism, although it was not, of course, called that, was not unknown in Judaism at the time John the Baptizer began his ministry. The mikvah, or ritual bath, is established in Torah as the way to cleanse anyone who has become ritually unclean. Contact with a corpse is one of the types of uncleanness that call for the mikvah, as is menstruation and sexual intercourse. It was also necessary to undergo the mikvah if a man was being ordained as a priest as well as for

The Meaning of Baptism

the priest about to perform the ceremonies of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. By the First Century, the mikvah was also required for converts to Judaism. John took these traditions one step further. As Matthew records the story, John called all people to come and be baptized as a part of a ritual of repentance, made necessary because the kingdom of heaven had come near. No one was immune from this necessity, not the common people, not the religious leaders, not the rulers of the land. In his ministry, John was a model for Paul, who wrote to the Romans, "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." If God's kingdom was to be established on Earth, then the people must turn from sinful ways (the true meaning of repentance) and be made as ritually clean as the priests who performed the most sacred rituals.

It seems to me that those who heard and responded to the call of John provide a very important example for us. I don't mean by their action of feeling sorry for what they had done and publicly proclaiming their need for God's forgiveness, although that is certainly important. The act of facing the consequences of one's own misdeeds, of taking public responsibility for them and seeking to change is a key not only to our own faith and practice but of many other philosophies and religions as well. But there is a deeper significance to participation in the act of baptism. When we or those who were baptized by John submit ourselves to that immersion, we are proclaiming not only our need for change but our belief that God has the power and the will to wash away our impurities and to accept us as worthy of divine love. I have known people who bewailed their own inadequacies or faults, who have groveled in the realization of their sinfulness, but who could never quite believe that God could wash it all away and love them as new and spotless beings. This is a great tragedy. As another Biblical John wrote, "If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." If I was restricted to just one message to give the world in my life, it would be "God loves us and forgives us."

Of course, all this talk of turning away from sin or brokenness and being forgiven raise the eternal question about this story: Why was Jesus, whom we believe to have been without sin or need of forgiveness, baptized by John? I believe there are 4 different possible answers and that each has something to teach us this morning. I would categorize Jesus' reasons for baptism as Obedience, Identification, Inauguration and Example. By the way, these categories are not exclusive. The ideas overlap and some of my arrangements are strictly arbitrary. So if you find any of them useful, feel free to rearrange them.

First, obedience: One possibility is that Jesus was baptized by John to fulfill the general call to baptism. If all those who wanted to be counted part of the Kingdom of Heaven were to be baptized, then Jesus was going to be there, regardless of whether or not he had sins to repent. For Jesus, meeting the expectations of other humans was not important. It wasn't important to him that John might not want to baptize him (as Matthew records); it wasn't important to him that other people would think he was a sinner with something to repent. It was only important that he was obedient to God's call. So he humbled himself and went down. The great hymn in Philippians tells us that Jesus humbled himself when he took on the form of a slave, his mortal life. Here, he humbles himself again, going down into the valley of the Jordan, one of the lowest points on the face of the earth, down into the water as if he were an ordinary sinner. Just days later, the devil takes him up to the heights, the pinnacle of the temple and the peak of a mountain and tempts him. But Jesus understands that "God's way is humble service; Satan's way is

The Meaning of Baptism

prideful self-service.” Jesus is humble and obedient to the Father. He’s not looking to be recognized as King of the World (although of course, he is). He’s looking to be the Father’s obedient servant. His humble obedience is a striking paradox after the way John has announced his coming as a powerful judge.

Next, Identification: By volunteering for John’s baptism, Jesus, the sinless one, stands in solidarity with those who have confessed their sins and not just the ones who have gathered at the banks of the Jordan. Jesus descends into the water, just as he descended from heaven, to align himself with all humankind, with all of those who will turn away from sin and towards God. In this act of identification, Jesus reminds us that he is fully human as well as fully God. His sinlessness does not separate him from us. On the contrary, it points us toward our own potential. Jesus fulfilled the potential righteousness of all humanity by his unswerving obedience to God. We emerge from our own repentance as clean from sin as Jesus. Until we let sin into our lives, we are the crown of God’s good creation.

There is a sense of inauguration in Jesus’ baptism, a sense of beginnings. Most obviously, it is the beginning of his public ministry. The account of his baptism gives us a clear indication of what Jesus’ ministry is to be by pointing us back to the words of the prophet Isaiah with his predictions of the obedient suffering servant: In Isaiah 42:1 (which, incidentally is part of the Old Testament lectionary passage today), God says “Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations.” Luke records that at the synagogue in Nazareth, Jesus himself identifies himself with the servant foretold by Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor.”

There is also another sense of beginning here: the sense that Jesus has inaugurated the Kingdom of Heaven on earth. His passage through the waters of baptism recalls other important beginnings in the salvation history of Israel. Israel was brought out of Egypt through the waters of the Red Sea and into the Promised Land through the waters of Jordan. So, too, is the new Israel, the community of Christ, brought out of bondage and into abundant life through the waters of baptism. Indeed, all of human kind has received a new beginning before through water. Just as in the story of Noah, a dove brings the good news of salvation to humankind. For Noah, the dove brought an olive branch, a symbol of a fresh start and of peace with God; for Jesus, the dove brought the Spirit and the voice of the Father with a word of love. The Kingdom of God, which Jesus has begun to institute on earth as it is in heaven, is characterized by peace on earth to those in God’s kingdom and a realization of God’s steadfast, amazing love for all of us.

Finally, Jesus baptism stands as example to us. Jesus’ baptism is a model for Christian baptism. His ministry begins with his baptism and it ends with his Great Commission in Matthew 28 to baptize all nations. When I was a boy, all good Southern Baptists knew the passage by heart. In the old King James Version, it reads, “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of

The Meaning of Baptism

the world.” Just as Jesus himself institutes the core church tradition of the Lord’s Supper by his personal participation, he institutes baptism by his personal participation. Jesus wants all persons in all nations to follow him in baptism and he leads by example. That is why all Christians practice some form of baptism and, while I would argue that believer’s baptism by immersion, as practiced in the Baptist tradition, is closest to the model Jesus gave, I have come to understand over the years (thanks to a very patient and long-suffering teacher) that the practice of infant baptism combined with the process of confirmation at the age of accountability is as deeply spiritually meaningful for those who obey the command in that manner.

How then do we respond? The first response required of us, clearly, is to repent from sins and to follow our Lord in baptism. Most of us here today have taken that step. But although our baptism into the community of believers is a one-time event, repentance is not. We are not yet perfected. We are still working out our salvation with fear and trembling. All of us need to hear the call to turn away from sin, brokenness, self-centeredness in all their guises on a regular basis because as we grow in Christ, we come to realize that aspects of our lives that had previously seemed innocuous may be separating us from the perfect love of God. The process of walking more and more fully with Jesus will only end when stand before God’s throne at the end of our earthly lives.

We are also called to follow Jesus in righteousness. Just as Jesus’ baptism marked his entry into public ministry, so our baptism marks our entry not into private Christianity, but into public witness, into the public mission of Jesus in the world. In accepting, indeed demanding, John’s baptism, Jesus took up the mission that John proclaimed. Luke records that John said to be a baptized person is to give a coat to anyone who is cold, to provide food for anyone who is hungry, to look out for the weak and the powerless and the hurting. That is the ethic of the baptized. Like John, Jesus carried this message of a new way to live out into the world and so are we also called to do. Matthew tells us that Jesus called it “making disciples.” Some will say that this call of making disciples and teaching all of Jesus’ commands is a task for ordained leaders only but as a good Baptist, I disagree. The understanding of our movement has always been that we Christians are a nation of priests – as our bulletin says every week, “every member a minister.” Not only do we all share in the responsibility to love our neighbors by treating them with respect and by feeding, clothing and housing those in need but also to love them by teaching them the way of Life, to share Jesus’ teaching with them and to guide them in the way of discipleship insofar as we are able.

Please hear me carefully. I am not advocating a return to the bad old days of walking up to complete strangers and asking them if they know Jesus or of toting around a pocketful of tracts detailing “The Four Spiritual Laws.” Each of us have our own ways of communicating and subjects as deep and personal as who holds the key to life are best discussed with those who’ve seen that what we say we believe actually makes a difference in how we live. But I am convinced that none of us who willingly follow Jesus into baptism are excused from following his ministry. We are to be about the business of making disciples for Jesus by being living examples of what that means and by encouraging those who know us to join us in following him. Can we really say that we love our neighbors if we do not share that which we love best with them?

The Meaning of Baptism

The season of Epiphany is upon us. It is the season in which we remember how the Light that came for all humankind was revealed to the world. One of those epiphanous moments was the one in which Jesus went down into the water, for the sake of fulfilling all righteousness. He called his disciples to follow his example and to teach others to do the same. This command they fulfilled and so it has been done year after year, century after century for nearly two thousand years now. We were baptized by men and women of great faith, who in turn had been baptized by men and women of great faith. Our turn in the water has come and for many of us it remains a shining memory, a moment, if you will, of epiphany, when we came to experience the presence of God in our lives in a new way. Now it is our turn to take the Good News of God's love and forgiveness out into the world, to prove it true by loving our neighbors with our deeds and with our words, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost and teaching them to observe all things that Jesus commanded. May the love of God and the grace of Christ Jesus our Lord and the companionship and encouragement of the Holy Spirit propel us into our own fulfillment of God's will. Amen.