

The Baptism of Christ
January 10, 2016

"REMEMBER YOUR BAPTISM"
by Mary Anne Biggs

Acts 8:14-17
Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

I've moved our Baptismal font forward this morning because this is the Sunday that we remember the day Jesus was baptized. Every year ... the first Sunday after Epiphany in the Christian calendar of worship ... celebrates the "Baptism of Our Lord." Epiphany is the season between Christmas and Lent. The word "Epiphany" comes from the Greek *epiphaneia*, meaning "manifestation" or "appearance." During Epiphany we recall the ways that Jesus' true identity became manifest in the story of his life. And nowhere was his identity clearer than when he came to the Jordan River to be baptized by his cousin John.

Baptism was already an old ritual when Jesus came to John. The Jews baptized new converts to their faith from other religions. The Essenes, a conservative sect who rejected the other Jews as corrupt beyond saving, were baptized repeatedly at Qumran, their enclave in the desert near the Dead Sea. And this is remarkable, considering the scarcity of water in those parts. In both of these cases, baptism meant immersion in the *mikvah*, the baptismal pool. And in both cases, baptism symbolized a spiritual cleansing ... a washing away of sin. In this sense, it also represented a new beginning ... offered by God ... and a sacrifice of the self ... offered up to God again.

Jesus' cousin, John, was called "the Baptist" because he used the ritual as a symbol of repentance, forgiveness, and cleansing from sin. Through the ages this has raised the question ... why was Jesus baptized? We believe that he was without sin ... so why did he need to submit to this ritual of spiritual cleansing? Some say, because it was a way for Jesus to identify with ... and affirm ... the ministry of John. Some say, it was because it gave John the opportunity to announce who Jesus was. Others say that Jesus wanted to set the example that we should follow. And these are good answers ... but they are too simple.

Like fire, water is an almost universal religious symbol. It carries not one, but many meanings. This is true in our biblical faith. In Genesis One the Spirit of God hovers over the deep. God creates the world out of the watery chaos ... separating the dry land from the waters ... and shutting out the waters in the sky with the fixed firmament. A few chapters later, humanity destroys creation by moral choices that defy God's differentiated order. God opens "the windows of the heavens," and the flood covers the earth. Israel was delivered from the Egyptians when God parted the waters of the sea ... but the sea destroyed their pursuers. Israel crossed into the Promised Land when God led them safely across the Jordan. To the ancients, the sea waves gobbling at the beach seemed bent on destroying the dry land. The storms lashed at the earth and the floods destroyed their cities. Water was a symbol of death.

But like fire, water was also a symbol of life. In that arid region, battles were fought over wells ... towns sprang up beside streams ... droughts meant widespread suffering ... and access to water was never taken for granted. Remember Jesus' meeting with the woman at the well? *'Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again,'* Jesus said, *'but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.'* The woman said to him, *'Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.'*" (John 4:13-15). We want water so we turn on a tap. But in that place ... in those days ... the ever-flowing fountain was a powerful symbol of endless life.

Thus Jesus participated in the form of an old Jewish ritual ... but transformed its meaning by adding to it. Baptism still means for us ... repentance and forgiveness, cleansing and renewal. But it also means ... as it meant for Jesus ... death and life ... cross and resurrection. One of the universal themes of the human story is that our journey ends where it began. As T.S. Eliot noted in his poem, "Four Quartets"

We shall not cease from exploration

And the end of all our exploring

Will be to arrive where we started

And know the place for the first time.

Or, as he says elsewhere: *"In my beginning is my end"* Baptism was the beginning of Jesus' mission for God ... his answer to God's call to give himself for the world. And where did he begin? He began with death and resurrection. Buried with him in the Jordan ... his former life in the quiet carpenter shop at Nazareth, normal human dreams and desires ... perhaps to marry, have a family, grow old and watch what his children might become. Also buried with him in the Jordan ... the freedom to abuse his power ... to demand submission from the world ... to avoid the way of the cross. This is where the cross was decided ... where Jesus laid down this life in service to God. But he rose from the water to a new life ... a new mission ... his destiny before God.

Marcus Borg says that Jesus had a conversion ... not in the sense of changing religions or being lost and saved ... but in William James' sense of a "process, whether sudden or gradual, whereby religious impulses and energies become central to one's life." The innocence of childhood long past ... the adolescent search for self completed ... the young adult career begun ... Jesus turned to the ultimate quest ... "Who am I and what does my life mean?" He answered: "I am a child of God, and I am about God's work." And God approved. In other words, Jesus' baptism was his wholehearted immersion into his messianic mission ... the acceptance of his vocation.

The practice of baptism by immersion, clearly practiced in the early church, disappeared in the church for several reasons. Water was scarce in many places. As a rite of initiation, it was applied to Christian infants, and who wants to immerse a baby? Oh, here and there different fringe sects practiced immersion. But during the Reformation a group of free-thinking Christians

had a theological conflict with the Catholic and Protestant churches. They said Jesus was baptized by immersion as an adult when he accepted his vocation before God. They said an infant cannot choose faith or accept an identity. So they decided to be baptized as adults upon their profession of faith, as adults, that Jesus Christ was their Savior and Lord. "Anabaptists," the others called them, meaning "the rebaptized," since most of them had been baptized as infants. They were verbally abused and persecuted by the Christian powers of their day. In some places, the Magistrates decided that since these people loved being baptized so much, they would just hold them under the water until they were baptized to death. Can you imagine that? People willing to lay down their lives for the right to have a free faith?

What does baptism mean for us? Repentance and forgiveness. Cleansing and renewal. A remembrance of the death and resurrection of Jesus and the prospect of our own ... for this is where we also begin and end ... dying and rising with Christ. For us, as for Christ, the baptismal font is a symbol of sacrifice ... where we lay down our lives for God ... and take them up again to live according to God's purpose. We are somebody in the world. We are here on a mission. We are the baptized.

And if you are one of the baptized, every time you witness another baptism ... every time you walk into the sanctuary and see the baptismal font ... you remember your baptism and renew it. This is who you are ... where you began ... where you are headed ... what you are doing in the world. You are the baptized.

Jesus took another old Jewish symbol, Passover ... and participating in it ... transformed it. We have only two sacraments in the United Church of Christ ... Baptism and Communion. Both depict the same reality ... the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ ... our identification with him ... our willing acceptance of his identity and vocation before God ... to belong to God ... to be a child of God ... to sacrifice ourselves for God's sake ... loving God by loving the people God loves ... which is all people.

Of course, upon baptism we are "wet behind the ears" ... brand new, still learning, too ignorant to be arrogant ... too needy to be proud, we are neophytes. And we are always still a little "wet behind the ears" ... beginners still trying to figure out what it means to live as Christ in the world ... still new at loving, not yet fixed or formed or finished ... but willing to learn, waiting to be molded by God. We are too new to be proud ... too inexperienced to be arrogant. We are, all of us Christians, just one step or two beyond the baptismal font where we began ... and depending on God to help us.

In early Christian art, the church is symbolized by a boat ... the ark ... those who are saved through the water. We baptize during our worship service, in the presence of the Body of Christ ... which is to say, we are not baptized to God alone ... but with one another. We have accepted a vocation to serve one another. Unlike our culture, which teaches us to go it alone, we do not live unto ourselves. We are connected, obligated to one another.

We are all in this boat together, and what one of us does, for good or for ill, affects all of us. Who you decide to be in the world has consequences for all of us. You are always free to decide who you will be, but God invites you to follow Jesus' example ... in taking up the destiny for

which you were created. As members of the body of Christ, we have identity ... we have vocation ... we have meaning in this world. We are the baptized. Let all the baptized see this font today, and remember who you are. Let those who are not, hear the invitation of Christ, and remember the words of the Ethiopian Eunuch, who, when he heard the good news of God's love for him in Christ ... and the possibilities of life through Christ ... told the apostle Philip, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?"

May we pray?

O God, we thank you for the ties that bind our hearts to you and to one another in abiding love, and for the rituals of our faith, rich symbols which remind us of that love. Visit our hearts today and help us remember our baptism. Renew to us the joy of your salvation and the call to embody your love in the way we live so that you might live through us. As we have been baptized with water, let us be also baptized with fire ... that the light of Christ might burn brightly in us. This we pray by the true name you have given us, the name by which we find identity and community and destiny, the name of Jesus, the Christ. Amen.