

Baptism of the Lord – Christina Smerick

Isaiah 43:1-7; Psalm 29; Acts 8:14-17; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

As some of you know, I am one of those creatures who has been baptized twice—once as an infant in the Catholic Church, and once as a teen in the Nazarene Church (well, actually, in the giant non-denominational church next door that had a huge baptismal pool, in the chlorinated sense of the word, into which I was fully immersed). I never realized it was a big deal, that maybe there was a theological problem with that second baptism, until I was in college, and my friend Heather did the grunge version of clutching her pearls when she found out. She spluttered something about how ridiculous and unnecessary it was, and I found myself feeling, not for the first time (and not her fault!) like I was in a foreign land with customs I did not understand (this land being the Holy Bible Belt of evangelical Protestantism). I tell you this story because I really don't want to preach on the 2nd reading today from Acts, because I don't know what to do with it (Martin Marty even says not to even try to unpack it in a sermon), and because this whole baptism debate (or series of them: infant or adult, sprinkling or immersion, etc., etc.) still seems foreign to me, like mountains being made of molehills. Yet we all know that the passages we most want to avoid are usually the ones we have to pay attention to. So I'm going to try to be faithful, with trepidation, as I wend my way toward that double baptism of water, and then Holy Spirit. Me and the Samaritans, I suspect, may have quite a bit in common.

So why that two-step baptism? Why them? As every commentator out there points out, baptism in Acts happens in all sorts of ways: water first, Spirit first, both at the same time... But in no other place is there this **gap**, this 'only', this necessity of a second group of dudes having to be sent out to foreign territory to lay hands and THEN the Spirit comes. Some points to note: this is the first mission into non-Jewish land. This is the first mission out of the apostles' territorial comfort zones, and it's a doozy. We all know, I think, the scandalous history of Judea and Samaria. It is the story of brothers estranged (a theme that runs throughout the Old Testament, you may note). Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau, the prodigal and elder son... Scripture is fraught with brothers against each other, antagonizing each other, and Samaria and Judea play this out as peoples.

History lesson: Samaria, before it fell to the Assyrians in 722 BCE, was Israel. The tribes there were cut off from Judea, left behind to assimilate and develop their own worship of Yahweh while Judea stumbled along for a little while longer until it fell, in turn, to Babylon. When Judeans were allowed back in the land in 522 BCE, and prepared to rebuild the Temple, Samaritans showed up to help...and were promptly rejected by the newly re-devoted Judeans, for whom PURITY of practice and blood had become paramount. Samaritans would tattle on Judeans, Judeans on Samaritans, and a feud developed that led, now, in 35 CE, to Samaria being considered, in a word, GROSS. Worse than Gentiles. Fakey fake fake apostate proto-Jews who inadvertently blaspheme against God by their very worship. And THAT's where Philip goes.

So Philip goes to Samaria and does something kind of unthinkable, on the level of Peter's eating with Gentiles. He brings the Good News to old enemies, and baptizes them in the name of Jesus. The easy, cheating reading of what happens next is that, maybe, those dirty ole Samaritans, perhaps like that teenage girl, need extra baptism. The first one doesn't take all the way. But I'm going to present a contrary reading here, one that is not justified by anything but my own reading of it (so I have no commentary to blame for this and you can write it off in your head if you think it sounds too nuts). But I think it actually aligns a lot more with the overarching theme in Luke-Acts. And that is this: just as the shepherd goes after the lost sheep and rejoices, just as the father holds a feast for his prodigal son, the upside-down coming kingdom of God makes the Samaritans **more important**. One visit, one time, is not enough. It's not enough to heal the rift of centuries, not enough to ensure that the Body of Christ that is the Church is truly one body. I wonder if the reason for this second visit is more along the lines of the baby church's needing these relationships bound more tightly, via repetition and Peter and John, if the Holy Spirit moves here not in initially **denying** itself to the Samaritans, but in **requiring** the (still likely prejudiced) Judeans to trek to THEM, to go into enemy territory **twice**, to make the effort to make SURE that this is no forgotten faction, but that these new Christians truly know they are part of the Church.

You don't have to decide now whether you agree with me. Just hold that thought, somewhere, and let's talk a bit about God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

The Synoptic Gospels vary in their telling of Jesus' baptism, and Luke's is the most terse, the least dramatic. It's not even clear if John himself baptized Jesus in this version! There is no description of Jesus going under the waters of the Jordan. There is only the apocalyptic description of wheat and chaff and fire... and then the lectionary skips over where John goes to stinking PRISON... and then Jesus, with all the people, is baptized. And then he prays. And it is during his praying, not during the baptism itself, that God opens the barrier between heaven and earth, tells Jesus he is both king and servant, and the Holy Spirit appears, bodily, to everyone and descends upon Jesus. Some points of note: 1) Jesus stands in line. He is not first, it doesn't seem, and he is not singled out. He, with all the people, gets baptized. This shows us the character of Jesus as one of us, not separate. 2) The Holy Spirit arrives when Jesus prays: one could say that this prayer of Jesus' in Luke is his first act of ministry. He doesn't go out into the wilderness immediately. He prays. This shows us quite clearly how prayer is absolutely central to the life of a Christ-follower. Jesus prays a LOT in Luke. 3) The wheat and the chaff bit—this I want to spend a little more time on, because I know my tendencies whenever I read anything like this in Scripture. I tense up. I feel gross and chaff-like. I feel shame, wondering if I am going to be discarded. Many a sermon over the course of centuries has read this in the judgiest possible way: sheep and goats, hellfire, bad people and good people, dead fig trees—and on and on. Which is why I'm so grateful to Paul Nuechterlein and other scholars who approach Scripture via Girard, because he blessedly turns this on its head a bit. So put this in your hopper, along with that crazy Acts theory: the wheat and the chaff are not different kinds of people; they're different parts of YOU.

Separating the wheat from the chaff is not casting thousands into hell—it's refining YOU to be more like Christ. Nuechterlein points out that we have an awful tendency to read descriptions of God's power in very human terms: lots of wrath and being ticked-off, and lots and lots of judgment and disappointment and the clutching of pearls. A Girardian reading of Scripture requires us to recognize that God's fire is **not** human holocaust; that God's power is **not** the lording over and the domination and the drones and the bombs and the snipers of human power. God's power manifests itself as JESUS—the lowly servant. And Jesus' refining fire seeks not to destroy, but to beautify, to, yes, glorify, to illumine. Jesus comes to separate our wheat from our chaff so that we can receive the Spirit that is in Him and with Him and in us and with us, and that we can pass it along, even in enemy territory. Especially in enemy territory.

Need more proof that God's love, God's power, is directed in love, in beatification, in reconciliation? Let's read Isaiah 43 again.

I've been haphazardly working my way through some preliminary Ignatian exercises, and this was my VERY FIRST one, this reading. Father Kevin O'Brien puts forth this 'grace' to ask for when reading this passage: "to be more aware of how God is near; to trust in God's personal care and love for me." He asks the reader to ask these questions of themselves: who is God for me? How does God see me?

Who is God for me? Who is God in these passages? This God is a God who presents us with an alternative vision of ourselves (moving the Judeans from hopeless abandonment to beloved servants in their OWN MINDS). This is a God who comes to the water with us, who claims us, loves us, calls us by name. This is a God who goes out to the enemy, and calls that enemy brother, friend. This is a God who empowers the apostles to cross boundaries, customs, and hardest of all, internal prejudices, because the Church **needs the Samaritans**, as the Samaritans need the church. Maybe I'm wrong about Acts, and maybe those dirty Samaritans really did need a double dose. But over time, I've come to accept my own double-baptism, not as a sign that one wasn't enough for a sinner like me, but rather that going under the water again and again, with my brothers and sisters, may be a way we make ourselves a church. Whenever we baptize here, we call upon the congregation to remember our own baptisms. Maybe here, too, we must see not the judgment of God but the abundance He pours out, the again and again he allows, the blessed repetition that forms us into the body of Christ. Amen.