

Remember Your Baptism – Teresa Holden

Isaiah 42:1-9; Psalm 29; Acts 10:34-43; Matthew 3:13-17

When it comes to baptism, here at St. Paul's we dunk OR we sprinkle, and frequently everyone gets wet. Dunking takes place off-site in warm weather months. A baptism here in our sanctuary, if you haven't witnessed it, involves sprinkling, and usually ends with the children of our church walking down the aisles with pine branches that are doused with water, with which they delightfully splash all of the congregants. No one enjoys this more than Pastor Rick, who, while this is happening, will usually remind us to "remember your baptism." I will admit that the first time I experienced this it was a bit off-putting. I was not prepared to get wet in church that day, and I was puzzled with the invitation to remember my baptism. Why should I remember my baptism? And why was I getting baptized all over again? Today's Gospel reading tells of Jesus's baptism by John the Baptist. John, too, has questions. *I need to be baptized by you [he says to Jesus] and do you come to me?* What did baptism mean to Jesus and John?

I've always been a little confused about why John was baptizing anyone to begin with. From what I had I learned when I was baptized as a child, back in the Calvary Baptist Church in Oswego, Indiana, baptism was a way of entering into the life and death of Christ. My baptism represented my willingness to die to sin and live for Christ. But why was John baptizing before Jesus had even died?

Clearly, John was famous for baptizing, since he is most often designated as John the Baptist. In Matthew 3, it says many, many people went to the Jordan River to be baptized by him. This included Jerusalem, all of Judea, and all of the district around the Jordan. Something about John caused people to want to be baptized by him. Further, verse six says that *they were being baptized by [John] as they confessed their sins*. Baptism had a particular meaning for those who were experiencing it at that time, and similar to what I learned as a child, it had to do with a symbolic washing away of sin.

The Jewish Encyclopedia defines baptism in the context of purification of one's body and clothing. It points out that before Moses and the Israelites received the Ten Commandments, they first washed themselves and their clothes (Exodus 19:10). Then, just before Moses ascended Mount Sinai, he sprinkled the people with the blood of bulls that had been sacrificed (Exodus 24:8). This was another form of baptism, one that points most directly to the sacrifice that Jesus would make on the cross centuries later. Further, for those who wanted to convert to Judaism in the ancient world, baptism was a requirement, along with circumcision and animal sacrifice (<http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/2456-baptism>). These actions demonstrated their desire to be a convert.

Why so many people flocked to John the Baptist and his ministry is hard to tell. What seems clear is that he was a radical who represented change and empowered people to consider how they could bring about change in their own lives. The people who followed John the Baptist were subjects of a cruel empire. Their religious tradition gave them hope that the Messiah would come, and alleviate their suffering from the arbitrary leadership of emperors, kings and sometimes church leaders. John assured them that this would happen, but they must first repent,

be willing to change their own lives. *Repent* means to change one's mind or purpose. This suggests something more than being purified, what baptism had always meant in the Jewish tradition. For John the Baptist the water of baptism symbolized both cleansing and turning toward being a more faithful person. The crowds found John the Baptist and his message to be compelling, a call to action.

Why did Jesus insist that John the Baptist baptize him instead of vice versa? Since Jesus was free from sin, and since he was already intent on the purpose that God had given him, why was it necessary for him to receive the baptism of repentance? Jesus must be baptized by John to display that he was both fully human while also being fully God's son and divine. Being fully human meant that Jesus had entered into the same disappointing, self-focused world where those who were oppressed had limited power and were constantly victims of their oppressors. Being divine meant that Jesus brought God's perfect love, perfect justice and all of the other attributes of God into the world. The presence of the dove, a symbol of the Holy Spirit, that appeared when Jesus emerged from the water, and the voice from heaven assure us of Jesus's divinity. The importance of this becomes clearer when we consider Jesus's baptism in the context of the other lectionary passages.

The Isaiah and Acts passages emphasize the concepts of justice and impartiality, which are two sides of the same coin. In the first four verses of Isaiah 42 the prophet mentions three times that Jesus will bring justice. Biblical scholars say that this justice could be interpreted to mean that Jesus will bring a just order, a particular way of life that emphasizes being fair and impartial.

This type of justice is what Martin Luther King, Jr. was referring to in his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." Remember that King was put in jail in April of 1963 for leading a protest against segregation and discrimination in Birmingham, Alabama. Jailing him was a way to try to silence him, to keep him from talking about the just order that he imagined and that Isaiah 42 talks about. King had obviously thought deeply about the nuances of God's justice. He says in that famous letter, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly." As King suggests, this is why justice is so important—because injustice that exists anywhere has a deeply negative effect everywhere. Injustice, the lack of equitable treatment for anyone, is a perversion of the just order that God intends.

We jump into the middle of a dramatic story in Acts 10 when Peter announces, *I truly understand that God shows no partiality*. The story starts at the beginning of that chapter with a description of a Roman centurion named Cornelius who was stationed in Caesarea. A centurion was a military officer who led a "century," a word that described a battalion of 100 soldiers. Scholar Oleksandr Kyrychenko says that Caesarea was a "Roman city in a Jewish land." The influence of Judaism can be seen in the life of Cornelius and other Romans who did not convert to Judaism, but who did share in Jewish beliefs. Specifically, Cornelius observed monotheism, prayed to the God of Israel and offered alms at the Jewish synagogue. (Kyrychenko, [The Role of the Centurion in Luke-Acts](#)). Luke, who wrote Acts, describes Cornelius as being devout and God-fearing. One day Cornelius saw a vision of an angel, who told him that his prayers were honored and that he should send some of his attendants to Joppa to the place where a man named Peter was staying.

In the meantime, Peter himself had a vision. Acts 10 says that Peter was praying and became hungry. As food preparations were occurring, he also had a vision. In his vision he basically saw a picnic sheet laid before him of every sort of critter that was strictly prohibited for Jews to eat. A voice told him to kill the critters and eat them, but Peter protested, saying that never in his life had he ever eaten anything unclean. The voice said to him, *What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy* (NASB). This same vision occurred three times.

The vision was shocking to Peter. Acts 10:17 says that Peter was *greatly perplexed in [his] mind as to what the vision ... might be* (NASB). And then he learned that the unknown men sent by Cornelius were there. God directed him, saying to *accompany them without misgivings, for I have sent them Myself* (NASB). So Peter went with the men back to the home of Cornelius where he found a whole gathering of people, Cornelius's household and others he had invited. By this time, Peter had figured out the meaning of his vision, and he said to Cornelius, *You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a man who is a Jew to associate with a foreigner or to visit him; and yet God has shown me that I should not call any man unholy or unclean.* It is after Cornelius told Peter about his own vision that Peter spoke the words from our lectionary saying, *I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all.*

Peter was publicly acknowledging that what he had previously believed and practiced for his entire life had been turned on its head. God's order meant something new and previously unimaginable. The impartiality (or fairness) that he talked about opened the door for all of humankind to be evangelized and to find Jesus. The Jewish Messiah was meant for everyone. Those Gentiles who believed would not have to practice the ceremonies of Judaism to demonstrate their belief in Christ.

Putting myself in Peter's shoes, I'm interested in the perplexity that he experienced after he received the vision of the picnic cloth with all of the unclean critters. I can imagine that everything in him resisted the idea that the voice had told him, *What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy* (NASB). Everything he had learned from his parents, his rabbi, his community, his culture, all of his traditions argued against this revelation. How did he overcome the pull from everyone and everything he held dear to accept what God was telling him?

I can imagine that it was not the vision and voice from heaven alone that influenced him. As he sat there, perplexed, and as he traveled to Caesarea, I can imagine that Peter experienced a series of flashbacks in which he remembered all of the unclean people that he had seen Jesus minister to. Perhaps he even thought of them in categories: people who were unclean because of their sins—like the tax collector; people who were unclean because of both their sins and their race—like the Samaritan woman at the well; people who were unclean because of the illness for which they were seeking healing—like the leper, or the menstruating woman who had had the issue of blood for twelve years. She had even dared to touch Jesus's cloak and make him unclean, too. But he hadn't seemed to be concerned by this, and his response to her was filled only with love. He had even called her a term of affection. *Daughter*, he had said, *your faith has made you well: go in peace and be healed of your disease* (Mark 5:25-34). I can imagine that between the vision

and his arrival at Cornelius's house, the entire ministry of Jesus began to make more sense to Peter.

The purpose of baptism is to symbolically make us clean from all of the sin that accompanies our humanness and to demonstrate our intent to follow Jesus. Jesus's baptism was to remind all of us throughout the ages that Jesus was both human and divine. In his divinity, Jesus demonstrated what God's justice looks like—he doesn't deny anyone. As Peter said, *Jesus Christ ... is Lord of all*.

It is right for us to remember our baptism, our continuous need for cleansing and repenting, and our responsibility to maintain the attitude that *anyone who fears [God] and does what is right is acceptable to [God]*, bearing in mind the example of Jesus, who accepted everyone who drew near to him, even while they were unclean.