

First Sunday after the Epiphany, Year A
January 9, 2005
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Baptism and Being the Family of God

When John baptized Jesus, a story which we've just heard in the Gospel reading, he was doing something the people of God had been doing for over a thousand years, and which we continue to do. Let's talk about that for a bit, because what John was doing was different from what his ancestors had done, and it's different from what we do today.

In the Old Testament, we find lots of references to men and women undergoing a process of ritually cleansing themselves, especially prior to some interaction with God. When we read these accounts, it makes sense at a practical level. In the nomadic lifestyle of our ancestors, who often lived in the harsh desert climate, dirt was as common as ... well, dirt. Because hospitality was important to them, they would clean up before entertaining guests and visitors. Because their religion was even more important, even more would they want to be "clean" before going to God in worship and prayer. And it didn't matter if the cleansing was a symbolic rinsing of the hands or feet, or a total immersion of the body, it was thought that cleansing yourself was the proper way to prepare yourself for an encounter with God. Apparently, the old adage that "cleanliness is next to godliness" has deep roots.

These cleansing rituals were thought necessary because a person could become ritually impure or unclean through any of a variety of means. For example, accidentally coming into contact with a human corpse made you ritually unclean. Giving birth made a woman ritually unclean. (Talk about a patriarchal bias!) Contracting leprosy made you ritually unclean. And, I mention these three to point out that a person didn't have to *intentionally* do something sinful or wrong to become ritually unclean. Sometimes it just happened, and for those occasions there was a prescribed form for becoming clean once more.

The familiar Bible story of how Naaman, the Syrian General, was cured of his leprosy by washing himself seven times in the Jordan River (2 Kings 5:1-14) is a good example of how the people of God really believed in the restorative powers of ritual cleansing. And, interestingly, many religious rites have their basis in secular events. For example, in his historical novel, The Physician, Noah Gordon describes how the treatment of patients was immeasurably improved when doctors learned, and probably through trial and error, of the benefits of washing their hands between patients. Although the patriarchs of our faith didn't have Mr. Gordon's book available, nevertheless, and probably by trial and error as well, they had learned about the benefits of personal hygiene, and reasoned that if it worked for the body it might work just as well for the spirit.

However, by the time we read about John baptizing people in the Jordan River, it seems to me that the emphasis surrounding the ritual had changed. John is providing people a baptism for the repentance of their sins. John wasn't preaching to those who had become unclean or impure

by accident; rather, he was talking to people who had willingly turned away from God. And the baptism he offered, was to be a sign and public demonstration of their re-commitment to God. This is different from how his ancestors viewed baptism: they saw the ritual cleansing as an actual *agent* of change, something which actually purified a person; John saw baptism as a *sign*, a public admission, that a change had *already taken place*. Knowing this helps us understand some of the disputes John had with the religious leaders of his day, people whom he described as “white-washed tombs. They wanted all the benefits of baptism, without having to first go through the process of personal examination, repentance, and conversion, and John didn’t like that.

But, about thirty years later, when St. Paul is teaching and preaching, baptism seems to have gone through another change in its meaning and significance. St. Paul writes that a person was baptized “into Christ,” into union with him, into possession by him, and into all the benefits (e.g., justification and sanctification) which flowed from being linked to Christ. Baptism became a rite by which a person identified with Christ, and joined with Christ “for better for worse,” and our Prayer Book describes how this works. In our modern baptismal liturgy, the priest says this prayer:

“We thank you, Father, for the water of Baptism. In it we are buried with Christ in his death. By it we share in his resurrection. Through it we are reborn by the Holy Spirit.” *Book of Common Prayer, page 306.*

I get the sense, when I read Paul’s letters, that the person being baptized was declaring that, whatever Christ went through, I’ll go through as well. If Christ had to suffer, then I’ll suffer with him. If Christ had to die, then I’ll die right alongside him. And if Christ was raised from the dead, I’m confident that God will raise me as well. Now, ideas like this may seem foreign to us in the twenty-first century, but for the members of a young church, who lived in a time when publicly acknowledging you were a Christian often meant being persecuted (and sometimes severely), these new notions about baptism gave their real meaning to any suffering they might have to endure.

You and I live in time and place where personal hygiene is easy to come by, and where being a Christian doesn’t mean that our name will appear on the menu for the next gathering of coliseum lions. In addition, we’ve had two thousand years to study the teachings of Jesus, and the writings of the early church fathers, and see things like baptism in a new light. So, it makes sense, and it shouldn’t surprise you, that baptism has undergone yet another shift in its meaning and purpose.

Today, our Prayer Book describes baptism as “full initiation by water and the Holy Spirit into Christ’s Body, the Church.” Although there are things that we need to renounce before being baptized, and things we need to affirm, the greater sense that I get from our Prayer Book is that baptism is the doorway through which we pass in order to become members of a community.

So, for the last three or four thousand years, we’ve seen baptism change from being a ceremonial rite of cleansing and purification, to becoming a sign of a person’s conversion and

repentance, to becoming a way of giving a church under persecution some meaning to their suffering, to what we have today in the Episcopal Church, a rite of passage, a sacrament of belonging, a welcoming into a family. Thinking about baptism, and how it's changed over the years, has given me a new appreciation for how we think about baptism today.

In the fifteen years I've been a priest, the sacramental act I've enjoyed most is baptizing people. In the ten years I've been at St. Luke's, I've baptized nearly seventy people; a lot of those people are in this room this morning. Although there have been many high points in my career as a priest, the highest was being able to baptize my own two daughters: of holding them over the font, sprinkling the "living water" of baptism across their forehead, and hearing the congregation say to them, "we receive you into the household of God." It doesn't get much better than that!

Over the centuries, God's family, the church, has had more than its share of highs and lows. I think what's kept us together during the lows is the fact that we are a sacramental church, and that baptism is one of our core sacraments. Whether we were baptized as infants or as adults, it has been important to our unity and strength that we have a rite that not only welcomes us into the family of God, but also celebrates the fact that we are, indeed, by the grace of God, a family.

Let us pray: We thank you, God, for welcoming us into your family. We thank you especially for the love, comfort, and companionship we derive from being a part of this body. Strengthen the bonds of our unity, and enable us to look beyond our differences and find, instead, all those things which draw us together in you, and your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.