

January 10, 2010
Luke 3: 15 – 17, 21 – 22
Baptism: A Way of Death and Life

Baptismal Prayer

Almighty God, who by our baptism into the death and resurrection of thy Son Jesus Christ dost turn us from the old life of sin: Grant that we, being reborn to new life in him, may live in righteousness and holiness all our days; through the same thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen. **(From *The Book of Common Prayer*)**

Everyone I have ever met has a “water story”. By this I mean that everyone has had some type of water experience – an extreme experience related to...water. Perhaps it was a frightening remembrance of being thrown into a pool of water without being able to swim or “touch bottom”; an event that made you fear for your life. Maybe it was an experience of great relief and refreshment after a time of dehydration when water was returning you to life. What about that story of a “flood” in your house that ruined everything thus changing everything. Maybe as you ride along on a great body of water in a ship enjoying the serenity of the calm seas and the company of friends water graces you with fond memories. “Water stories” run deep in the human story and psyche.

In scripture we read of water stories in both the Old and New Testaments. From the great cleansing flood to the parting of the Red Sea to the storms on the Sea of Galilee, the concept, the reality of water iseverywhere. For the Christian water is a specific, salvific, life giving, means of grace. When accompanied by the Word and God’s Holy Spirit it creates the death creating and life giving cure to our original sinful states. Water to the Christian symbolizes both death and life; something we often fail to embrace when we think about what it means to granted grace in baptism.

The Greeks had a verb for immersion which was “baptizo” and another verb for “sprinkling which was “rantizo”, and yet another verb for “pouring” which was cheo, from these three words baptizo, rantizo, and cheo, Christians choose the word baptizo to best describe what water, the Word and the Spirit was doing to the new converts to the new faith. These early Christians found a word that spoke of total immersion where the act of holy washing was not just a ritual but an experience akin to drowning. Converts were held under the water until their life breaths were almost depleted. Upon being lifted out of the water these newly washed Christians were gasping for breath, gasping for a new life. It is said that they felt as if they had died and been brought back to life. In the movie “O, Brother Where Art Thou?” one of the lead characters, an escaped convict, participates in a group baptism in a river. He stands watching and listening to the folks around him as they agree to this life taking and life giving experience. He decides he wants to die and be born again. While this clip in this movie is meant to provide the observer with a moment of comedy, one cannot help but be moved by the earnest relief,

joy and change of heart which occurs in this recently baptized person. This convict now vows a change of life and thus a life without fear because he was dead but now is alive. This is the feeling the belief which propelled people such as St. Francis and Mother Theresa to work with and live with the lowest of society's outcasts. They immersed their own death and life into Christ and simply had nothing to fear.

I wonder how many of us remember our own death and life experiences with the water, the Word and the Holy Spirit. Luther calls the Christian to a way of life that is nothing less than a daily baptism. Our committed relationship with God as marked, as identified in our baptism has profound and practical implications which must be lived and worked out in everyday life.

This Epiphany Season we will be spending time in worship, with our liturgy, our hymns and the proclamation of God's word reclaiming what it means to be baptized into the body of Christ. Today we hear of the first steps Jesus took as he began his earthly ministry. His first steps of commitment to the mission and ministry to which he was called were taken.....in water. Listen again to the words of Jesus baptism:

¹⁵The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Christ.¹⁶ John answered them all, "I baptize you with¹⁷ water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. ¹⁷His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

¹When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened ²²and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

Baptism is shrouded in mystery, it is more than just a naming exercise.. In baptism nothing special is seen with the naked eye. In baptism everything becomes new in Christ and we pass on into a new relationship with the One who loved us first who claims us as his own for all time. Baptism is wrapped in mystery and is an instrument of conversion and blessing from God to his children. As Lutherans we believe that baptism is a means of grace, the way that God and the Holy Spirit create faith in the heart of the Christian, forgive sin, give eternal life and causes us to grow in the Spirit. Purely out of God's love and mercy we are washed whiter than snow and joined with God for all time. God "deals" with us through this means of grace called baptism, an act which when understood as utterly basic and central in the life of a Christian, breathes life into the church. Baptism, a gift of life from death shrouded in God's mystery.

Our closing thoughts today come from Episcopal Chaplin Penelope Duckworth:

“If I could tell you what this (*baptism*) meant, this threefold phrase (*in the Name of the Father, the +Son and the Holy Spirit*) this fluid touch, this moment sanctified by promise, you in your infant distraction would certainly dismiss it, and I the priest who dried your head then lit a candle for remembrance, might realize again some things are taught but others are best lived and learnedstill, something happened on this day of such great simplicity, it might pass by unrecognized. Clearly there was not birth and death with human severance and pain. But, portals opened that are unseen and forces moved to befriend your soul. You were enrolled into God.” *The Christian Century*, 2/7-14, 1006

Let us pray:

Holy one, untamed by the names I give you, in the silence name me, that I may know who I am, hear the truth you have put into me. Trust the love you have for me, which you call me to live out with my sisters and brothers in you human family.* Amen

Ted Loder, *Guerrillas of Grace: Prayers for the Battle*, p. 24.