

Baptism of Christ 2016

Today is the feast of the Baptism of Christ. For obvious reasons it is one of the traditional days in the church in which we baptize... The other baptismal days are the Great Vigil of Easter, Pentecost, and the feast of All Saints. That is not to say that we can't baptize on other Sundays, or weekdays for that matter... But the church holds up certain days in its liturgical life in which baptism is most appropriate... Today is one of those days.

So, a little history as to the water Rite of Baptism: Water rites have existed for thousands of years. As long as there has been a religious consciousness there have been rites involving water. Baptism wasn't begun by Christians or in Judaism for that matter. The ancient Persians held water to be sacred... the source of life... into which the faithful were immersed to be cleansed from the evil that infected their world... the Hindus practiced water rites to represent health and longevity and integrity of Spirit... The ancient Phoenicians, the maritime neighbors to Palestine, drowned an effigy of their god in the water, and then raised it up out of the water as a symbol of new life... resurrection, we would call it... In ancient Judaism, one who was being initiated into the faith would walk down the steps of the Mikvah, a pool, and cross to the other side and exit via similar steps... as a symbol of crossing over from slavery into freedom... remembering the deliverance of the people of Israel crossing the Red Sea... from slavery to freedom... from death to life... Water was, and still is, a powerful image to humankind... It has the property of destruction while at the same time it is the source of life... It is in this ambiguity I think that it captures the mystery of life... and it is into this mystery that all of us are called to live and move and have our being, consciously and purposefully.

When the Church became the religion of the Roman Empire, Baptism became the sole means of initiation into the church... and it became a means of exclusivity.... The church by the fourth century with its new found imperial authority had assumed the aegis of determining who would be privileged to obtain life after death... Augustine of Hippo, a bishop of the church, eventually living in Rome, had coined the theology of "original sin", maintaining that all are born sinful, fallen from grace because of Adam and Eve's disobedience in the beginning of the human enterprise... For Augustine Jesus' death was the atoning sacrifice for this original sin... and his resurrection was a promise, for some, that as members of Christ's church they too would rise from death... Baptism was the

outward and visible sign of salvation... and salvation for Augustine meant the bestowal of life after death for those predestined....Not all would receive this gift.... But all should be baptized to cover their bases, as it were, just in case they were indeed in the elect of God... Augustine was the one who argued for infant baptism... to make sure that if death were to come early, the child would have been marked as one of the faithful... and if the child's soul was one of the chosen, then the child would go to heaven.... Of course that theology has followed us from Augustine to Aquinas, to Calvin, and on into the modern church... that to be baptized is to be saved from human wretchedness (maybe)... and in the post Enlightenment modern era, the age of the individual, the age of the autonomous self, this theology is all the more prevalent... that salvation.... Baptism the outward and visible sign... that baptism is all about me... all about me and my salvation. Baptism, the mark of who's in... and who's out.

Now if God is that way... then we are all pretty much up a creek...So, let me say what I think baptism is according to the gospel accounts of baptism, and recognizing the history of the practice of baptism in the ancient world... First and foremost baptism is an initiation into a community... and it is an initiation into a particular type of community, a community that stands against the evil of the world... the rite of baptism is at its heart an exorcism... setting apart the individual as a part of a community that stands for the good and one that resists evil... In the early church baptism had nothing to do with so-called life after death... It had everything to do with how one lived one's earthly life... The kingdom of heaven in the gospels is an earthly reality, happening as we speak.... Jesus is baptized into a community who believes in kindness and mutuality and justice and shared wealth, a community that values the well-being and dignity of their neighbor... It is an activist community that calls out power gone wrong, a community that resists the structures of their world that demean and abase... It is a community that believes in sacrifice for the good of the whole...These are Communities that believe that Salvation is not about us...That it is about the people we are called to love.... These communities are about a movement that would undermine the pretenses of elitism and power, and stand for the life affirming presence of Love.

Jesus for us is the archetype of this movement... There is no Jesus without the people who follow in his way... who follow in the way of the ones who practice imaginatively the Good. Baptism is not a private solitary sepiam moment, but a public witness to the reality that goodness and love will prevail from generation to generation... Jesus is baptized into the line of the prophets and the faithful come before him... people of the good way... and we too, no less than

Jesus of Nazareth, we too are baptized, initiated into an activist community that believes that love is stronger than fear and hate and death... and that God's vision of a world governed by love and non-violence is not only possible, but a vision to which it is worth giving one's life.

There are many things in life, in the vast sweep of creation, that are unseen.... But God is not one of them... The vocation of the baptized is to make God, who is love, visible in our world.... Our vocation, our true humanity, is to bear God's saving love to those given us so that the world is changed for the better... changed to the way God sees the world, the way God dreams of it... a world free from violence and coercion; a world in which God's gracious abundance is shared; a world in which all are privileged; a world that tends to the healing of its wounds; a world that celebrates the birthright and dignity of every human person.... God's love is enlightened activism.

Ava, Emerson, Lytton, and Jackson, we are this day throwing you into a mess...into the mess that is life.... Into the chaos from which life springs. And as Luke puts it... We, as the gathered faithful, are full of expectation... Like what was expected of our brother Jesus... We expect you to carry the fire of the good... We expect you to stand up for the disenfranchised... we expect you to speak for the voiceless.... We expect you to welcome to a fault... we expect you to serve your neighbor ahead of yourself... we expect you to live without fear... free to be fully human... We expect you to change the world... In short, we expect you to love.... Don't doubt that the world waits for you... What we are saying today in this ancient rite... Is that you are Spirit and Fire... You are the next generation to carry God's love to the world.... Take courage because you'll need it.... But know that we'll always be there with you... All the people of God past present and yet to come will be there with you... standing for the good... living for love.... Until all manner of thing will be well.