

Epiphany I Year A

“Let it be so now, for Baptism is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.”

Today is the day in the life of the church in which we celebrate the Baptism of the Christ. All of the scribes of the four gospels account for Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist. For these writers Jesus' baptism is a touchstone, a harkening back, a typology, a remembrance of the people of Israel's deliverance from slavery in Egypt....a journey through the perilous waters of the Red Sea into freedom....a journey from death into life.... from darkness into light. For these Christian Jewish scribes Jesus' baptism is the archetype for all the faithful initiated into the church....an initiation into a way of life that is the true calling of Israel, the true calling of humanity...a people set about bearing justice to the world, as Isaiah artfully puts it....justice which means in its pure form...right order....It is the faithful, the baptized who bear right order to the world....and the rite involves the symbol of water... water both terrifying and life giving... both destructive and creative....for such is the way of things in God's mythic mind.

It is the mythic proportions of baptism upon which I want us to reflect on today. The idea of Baptism....that is: death by water and life through death is nothing new in the cultural and cultic history of human consciousness. Artists from the dawn of time have spoken of such a reality. In early ancient Greek and Phoenician culture water rites symbolized the cycle of death and resurrection... the

never ending turning of the wheel into darkness and then turning into light...of lives and seasons... of psyche . In ancient Greek mythography, the figure of Theseus must descend into the dark labyrinth and face the horror of the Minotaur, the man with the head of a bull...He must face the grim and terrible horns of death in order to save himself and his world...it is a story of facing death as the means of life...and the means of setting right the cosmic order of things through sacrifice for the good of the whole.... Sacrifice, the vulnerable opening to possibility, the means of true life....In Homer's *Odyssey* Odysseus endures deathly trials in his exile at sea in order to return to life healed and whole and empowered to rule in the new order breaking upon his world, the just, egalitarian city state....In Shakespeare Hamlet must die to his illusions in order to apprehend reality and act upon it, Hamlet is everyman...Prospero in *The Tempest* must face exile and certain death in order to be reborn into life renewed, a life of a community set right... restored...In Dante's *The Divine Comedy* the lonely pilgrim must face the brutal darkness of the Inferno before he can experience the joy of paradise...The way up is the way down...The gypsy seer advises the protagonist in Eliot's *Wasteland* that he must endure death by water in the quest towards healing and wholeness and life. There are countless other examples shot through the lore of human speculation.

Myths teach us who we are...who we were...who we are, and who we might become...Myths speak of mystery, the etymology obvious...and truth may only be

apprehended in mystery.... By whatever glimpse, whatever taste...such is the expediency of Myth..... Myth's tell the one story....the story to which all stories bear witness....In the myth of Baptism we are taught that we, no different from the Christ, no different from the gods and heroes of mythic lore... we are taught that we must descend into the roiled waters of chaos and death only to be transformed a new creation full of life and hope... to become witnesses through practice and experience bearing word from the source....word that moves among the hollow and vacant places of our world begetting life and light and love... powerful word raising the dead to life....and no evil can stand against such a word.... And this is true not only for us as individuals, but it is true for communities and nations... Isaiah speaks of the suffering servant who brings about salvation... He is speaking of all of Israel, the suffering people whom he calls servants, who are chosen by God to be the servants through self-giving... servants of salvation for the world.... Jesus too, for Matthew represents a people... a people who must collectively descend into the waters of chaos only to be reborn into the new creation.... In Baptism we are initiated into the ambiguous journey called life... its suffering and its joy... but in Baptism we meet the journey, not alone but as community... believing for each other... holding each other up in solidarity for the Good that we serve....To be a Christian, one is tied, sworn to a community with all of the human drama that comes with it... One can't be a Christian alone!

Baptism then is not a once upon a time thing ensconced in ritual sentimentality, neither for Jesus nor for us... It is the outward and visible sign of the deep truth of what this journey is all about... the deep truth of what the process of God with us is all about... the way the universe lives and moves and has its being... The creation entire and we in it are of a dance between the myriad manifestations of death, and the vital and vibrant life engendered by it... And we walk this journey one day at a time as honestly and courageously and authentically as we can empowered by the very spirit of God.... Wallace Stevens declares that death is the mother of beauty... He is describing baptismal life... And this life into which we are led... the life into which we are called only exists to give away... it is for us... we who have faced the dark in our heroic quest... it is for us to share the new life into which we are drawn with the world around us... so that the world around us may be set right, rendered just... That is baptismal life.... the way up is the way down... and all of us must descend into the water, and rise to the life God intends for us.

There is a study from the university of Houston that has explored the nature of happiness... it has studied happiness as a measurable aspect of human life using scientific methods. Among other things the research shows that the region in the brain in which we experience happiness is the same region in which we experience suffering and emotional pain... the two are intimately related... we can't

experience one and not the other....That is the physiology of baptismal life. To live into the fullness of our humanity we must experience, dare I say, embrace the whole of life, death and rebirth; the dark and the light... and to willingly do so is to call forth the courage essential for such a noble journey...such is the life of the baptized, and all who would take courage to face the minotaur in the labyrinth of existence... such is an authentic life ever turning in the circles of history...all else is illusion, all else false.... All else is subject to fear.... The true life casts out all fear.

Dear brothers and sisters....I tell you this as one who, like many of you, has, in my journey, descended into the labyrinth...I have, like you, looked upon the pale, grim and angular face of death...I am a witness to the things I say to you today...I am here to tell you that there is nothing to fear...that in the valley of the shadow of death, life and hope spring inevitably and surely...it is the way of things, the right and just order....it is the way the creation is made....a way we can trust always...It is true for you and me, and it is true for this parish; true for our nation and true for our world....and something for which we may be profoundly grateful...Let it be so now... take heart...have courage because when death comes, however it comes, as it will surely, know that there is always new life... always hope...always God bringing about the new....That is our story...That is the one true story...One we can trust... Always.

