

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 strophe, 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 terrible and life giving... both destructive and creative....for such is the way of things in God's mythic economy.

It is the mythic proportions of baptism upon which I want us to reflect 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.... The means of sacrifice, the vulnerable opening to possibility, the ultimate 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, 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...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 bearing word from the source...word that moves among the hollow and vacant places of our world begetting life and light and love...and no evil can stand against such a word, such a life.

Baptism then is not a once upon a time thing ensconced in ritual, neither for Jesus nor for us... but yet another secret revealed as to 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 life eternal engendered by it...Death is the mother of beauty, the poet proclaims... The 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.

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, 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.

Dear brothers and sisters....I tell you this as one who has descended into the labyrinth...I have 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... 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.