

Baptism of Christ Year C 2025

Today is the Feast of the Baptism of Christ. It is one of the principal baptismal days in the church, the others being: The Great Vigil of Easter, Pentecost, and All Saints Sunday. Long before I lost my mind and went to seminary, I was in business in Dothan Alabama. For twenty three years I gave myself to the family business founded by my father in 1953. But all during those years, I would often leave the office and go by the church, Nativity parish, just to see what was going on. On one such day, I walked into the church office, and Mel Harper the rector said... "O good, I'm glad you're here.... I've got a baptism and I need a witness." We went into the church, and standing by the baptismal fount was a young man, around thirty years old. He said that the Spirit had led him to the church to be baptized. I thought about asking Mel, the rector... shouldn't this be done after some instruction, and as a part of the congregation on a Sunday morning... but Mel was resolved. "You be the congregation," he said. He poured water into the fount, and before he began the rite for baptism, he looked at the young man and said... "You know, don't you, that there is no turning back?" Though most of the newly baptized now are infants, there is still something moving about the baptism of an adult, one who has made the conscious decision to join a community that endeavors to follow in the way of Jesus.

So, a little history as to the 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 have practiced water rights to represent health and longevity and integrity of Spirit... The ancient Phoenicians, the maritime neighbors to Israel, 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... 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, literally, the capacity for destruction while at the same time it is the source and sustenance of life... It is in this ambiguity, this paradox, that water as the means of sacrament, captures the mystery of life, the mystery of faith... and it is into this mystery that all of us are called to live and move and have our being, consciously, honestly, and purposefully. At our baptisms we enter the flow of life as it is meant to be.

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 proposed 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 such 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 the wretchedness of the human condition in the next life.... Maybe. In the post Enlightenment modern era, the age of individualism, the age of the autonomous self, as Hegel coined it, this theology is all the more prevalent... that baptism is all about personal salvation. In our culture it has become emblematic of our obsession for self-interest.

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, recognizing the history of the practice of baptism in the ancient world... First and foremost baptism is an initiation into a community... and, for Christians, people of the Way, it is an initiation into a particular type of community, a community that lives a certain way, a community

that stands for the truth, and against the evil of the world... the rite of baptism is at its heart an exorcism... cleansing the individual from the evil that infects the world, affirming our God-likeness, in order to become a part of a community that stands for the good and the true, and a community 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... in intentional community... The kingdom of heaven in the gospels is an earthly reality. It is now, and the baptized (and all others of conscience, for that matter) are the citizens of this community Jesus is baptized into a community that believes in kindness, and honesty, and mutuality, and justice and shared wealth, a community that values the well-being and dignity of their neighbor... It is an activist, countercultural community... a counter-cultural movement that calls out power gone wrong, a community that challenges the structures of their world that demean and shame... It is a community that believes in sacrifice for the greater good... a community that believes that Salvation is not about us, a personal badge of honor... But that it is about the people we are called to love and serve.... This community bears a social, economic, and political movement that would undermine the pretenses of elitism and power, and stand for the life affirming presence of Love. The Baptized reject the love of power, and embrace the power of Love. And the community of the Baptized is here gathered to expect such a practice of each other.

Remember, Jesus was baptized under the auspices of repentance... that important word... metanoia, in the Greek... which literally means a turning towards

“reasonableness.” But the English doesn’t do the word justice. Metanoia also means a turning toward that which is true, calling on one’s higher nature, which I would name as the Imagination, which is predisposed to discovery and mystery. At his baptism Jesus is giving himself outwardly and visibly to the possibilities of his true humanity. We are to do the same.

Jesus for us is the archetype, the model of this way of life...But 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 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, people of the flow... 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 shame 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. God knows the world needs the likes of us right now.

Luke’s account of Jesus’s baptism has God speaking God’s approval from the heavens: ‘You are my Son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased.’ But God is not reveling in Jesus’s uniqueness, his purity, his otherworldly nature; his being set apart... God is reveling in the choice Jesus has made; the simple choice to live for the world and not himself... to choose to enter the flow of life as it is meant to be... to choose to be

one of the 'good people' who care about their world. This isn't about God being proud of his supernatural Son. This is God celebrating Jesus's choice for the good and the true, lived in a community of like-minded people. We are the same. We have the same choice.

There are many things in this life 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 God's Love may take root in the world; that such love will stand against violence and coercion; that such Love will tend to the healing of the world's wounds; that abundance might be shared; that privilege may be for, not just a fortunate few, but for all people... It is love that celebrates the birthright and dignity of every human being..... In short, God's love is enlightened activism and advocacy.

In Baptism we initiate our fellow travelers, our people, into the chaotic waters of life embracing, for each other, a promise that Love is stronger than sin and death. In baptism, as a sacrament of the church, we leave our legacy of the faith for the next generation...We invite them into a serious life, a life bent upon the truth, a life emptied out for the good of our neighbor.

Brothers and sisters, don't doubt that the world waits for you...You are Spirit and Fire... With you God is well pleased... You are the next generation to carry God's love to the world.... Know that all the people of God, all people of integrity, past, present, and

yet to come will be there with you... standing for the good and the true... living for love.... At your baptism the heavens were opened to make way for the truth; to make way for love.... And, there is no turning back.