

01/13/13 Baptism of Jesus Sunday

“*Overwhelming Waters and Unquenchable Fires*” -- Rev. Seth D. Jones ©

Isaiah 43:1-7; Acts 8:14-17; Luke 3:15-22

The great Reformer of the Church, Martin Luther, when he was overcome with doubts, despair and depression - which was more common than you might think - used to say to himself, “*Remember you are baptized*”. In the overwhelming floods of grief that can consume us and in the fires of trial and temptation and trouble, Luther says, “*remember your baptism*”, if you have been baptized as an adult, or, “*remember you are baptized*” if you have been baptized as an infant. To remember your baptism meant a great deal to Luther and to those who say it. I say it whenever I have the opportunity to do a baptism. “*We who are baptized into the Christian faith are called to remember we are welcomed into the family of Jesus Christ every time we are witness to a baptism.*”

I am going to hazard a guess, however, that in Martin Luther’s time, people had a much better understanding of what baptism was and what it meant than we do today. Today we celebrate the baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan, so I wanted to spend some time reflecting on the meaning of baptism and what is going on when we baptize someone.

Let me make some qualifications first. I realize there are many views of what baptism is and what it means, so I am going to do my best to reflect the Reformation view of baptism combined with my personal view, which admittedly has some shades of Lutheranism, Quakerism and Catholicism in there, but you won’t be able to tell which is which because I can’t either.

I am also not going to take a definitive stand on infant baptism or adult-believer baptism, although you may begin to get a sense why both might be valid in what I say today.

And finally, I want to recognize that our ritual and liturgy of baptism is intended to make explicit things which are implicit in the story of Jesus’ baptism.

To begin, I will define baptism in this way:

baptism is an act of God which invites us, through the example of Jesus Christ, to align our expectations of our spiritual life with participation in Christ’s earthly church and in the Divine Mystery of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. By water and Word baptism welcomes us into and makes us responsible to the family of Jesus Christ.

Notice how I began my definition: *baptism is an act of God*. This is important. Baptism is by God’s initiative *first*; baptism is not by our initiative and therefore not even necessarily by our belief. The actions of God are where baptism starts; our actions in response make us responsible to our baptism. So when we remember our baptism, we remember first what God has done, which is to love us and bring us into the loving embrace of our adoption by God. Isaiah puts it this way:

Do not fear for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you...bring my sons from far away and bring my daughters from the end of the earth -- everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made. (Is 43:5-7).

God reaches out to us. We respond in the way of Christ's example - by having water poured upon us combined with the words of God. We participate in the life of God by participating with those who have also followed in the example of Jesus Christ.

So **first and foremost**, I want us to understand that *baptism is an act of God* towards us before anything else. Any expression of faith is secondary to God's primary act of our sharing in the words Jesus hears from the heavens, "*You are my beloved child. In you I am well-pleased*". When we remember our baptism we are remembering God loves us.

Secondly, we align our expectations of a spiritual life with the life of Jesus Christ when we are baptized and when we remember our baptism. Normally, when I have expectations about something, say, the Boar's Head festival, I have a sense of predictable outcomes. I try to align my expectations with potential problems while maintaining confidence in past Boar's Head festivals. In doing so, problems and difficulties happen in a secure, safe and expected realm. My expectations are met when nothing happens which does not defy those expectations.

But when we are talking about aligning our spiritual lives with the life of Christ, we are seeking to align our expectations, our hopes and our dreams with a **mystery**. We are giving ourselves over to the unknown. We go with a certain confidence which defies security and safety, because that confidence is in what Isaiah tells us today and what Christmas is all about, that *God is with us*. But if we know our Scripture even a little bit, we know very well that the alignment of our lives with God and Christ is not a call to safety and security. It is like stepping into complete darkness while blindfolded.

We do, though, have expectations of God's kingdom. We have an expectation that the light of *God's kingdom* will make itself known to us in our lives together, in our service to others and in the love we share with the world. We have an expectation that *Christ will be present* with us wherever we gather together in His name and when we share in the bread and the wine of communion. We have an expectation that the *Holy Spirit will be active* in our lives and in the fruits of the Spirit we have been given. This is all true.

What we cannot know, however, is what the specific outcome will look like; only that if we are truly aligned with our expectations of a spiritual life and we have been baptized into a life with Christ, the outcomes will begin to look like the presence of Jesus Christ as revealed to us in Scripture, in our loving interactions and in our relationships.

In the first several centuries of the church, baptism was preceded by a long period - upwards of three years - of catechism, or teaching. A catechumenate, or a new Christian, would have a mentor who would pray with you and would bring you to worship services. The new Christian would gather with other catechumens and they would study Scripture, pray and learn about the faith together. Then, on Easter eve, the group of new Christians would gather together before midnight. They would pray together in an isolated area of the church, in the back and away from the sanctuary. Then, just before midnight, they would be asked to strip off their clothes and would be led down a long dark hallway. At the end of the hallway was a large tub filled with cold water. Naked, and in darkness, but in view of the members in the sanctuary, the new Christian would have the words of baptism spoken over them, "*I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*". They would be completely submerged, then brought up out of the water and dressed all in white. The newly baptized Christian would step out into a brightly lit sanctuary very early on Easter morning. The gathered assembly would welcome them and

all the church would share communion together for the first time with the newly baptized. They would become participants with the family of Christ and participants in the mystery of God.

So **thirdly**, in remembering our baptism we remember that *we are, by the invitation of God and God's people, participants in the family of Jesus Christ*. We are participants in that 'communion of saints' to which we testify whenever we say the Apostle's Creed: *I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, in the communion of saints...* This, our participation in the baptized community of Jesus Christ, is what that phrase refers to.

This means baptism is a **communal act**, something that is always done in the context of the gathered body of the church. In our individual baptism, we share what Christ has done in his baptism all those many years ago, and we also share it with one another. This is why remembering your baptism is **not** necessarily dependent on your conscious recollection of your personal baptism - the memory is carried by the community for you. By participating in the life of the baptized you are remembering your baptism.

We also participate in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ in our baptism. Luther used to speak of our daily rising and dying in Jesus Christ. By this he meant what Paul meant in Romans 6:3-4:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in the newness of life.

In participating in Christ's death and resurrection, we participate directly in the divine relationship between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. We are incorporated into the Trinity. The dance of creation, redemption, resurrection and salvation which are the expression of the love of the Trinitarian God is expanded to include each of us in that dance, or *perichoresis*, as the Church Fathers called it.

In many liturgically focused churches - Catholic, Lutheran, Episcopalian, some Methodist churches - there is a baptismal font at the entrance of the sanctuary or meeting house. This is so, with each entrance and exit of the worship space, a person can remember their baptism and remember they have been baptized by touching the water and then drawing a cross on their forehead. In doing so, the gathered community of Christ can remember *who they are* and *whose they are*.

So **fourthly**, remembering our baptism and remembering we are baptized is all **about our identity, who we say we are**. Who are we, then, in our baptized lives together? The Gospel of Luke told us today:

You are my child, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.

We have a hard time, I think, hearing that these words are about us. But remember our series on the Holy Spirit. The reason we spoke about the fruit of the Holy Spirit is to more deeply understand those things we share with Jesus Christ. Because Christ was baptized, we are baptized; therefore, because Jesus Christ heard the words "*You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased*", we therefore also hear the words, "*You are a beloved child of God in whom the Lord is well pleased*" when the waters of baptism touch your head.

Did you realize these words said to Christ were also meant for you?

Repeat after me,

“I am a beloved child of God in whom the Lord is well pleased.”

These are words of baptism. If the phrase “Remember your baptism” is confusing to you, then say the words of baptism themselves to yourself.

Repeat after me,

“I have been baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

Who are you? What is our identity as Christians? We are beloved children of God, a God who is pleased in our participation in the work, the blessing and relationship of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, for the sake of Jesus Christ and the whole world.

My definition of baptism was:

baptism is an act of God which invites us through the example of Jesus Christ to align our expectations of our spiritual life with the participation of Christ’s earthly church and the Divine Mystery of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, and by water and Word welcomes us into and makes us responsible to the family of Jesus Christ.

I don’t expect you to remember all that. What I do hope is that on this day when we celebrate the baptism of Jesus Christ, you *remember your baptism and you remember you were baptized.*

God has claimed you and baptism is the sign of that claim God has made upon you. For Martin Luther, it was a lifeline in times of trouble.

When the waters of life overwhelmed him, he remembered his baptism.

He remembered the water he had put upon him was, by the mystery of the eternity of God, the same water which was part of Jesus’ baptism.

He remembered his baptism was first an act of God towards him.

He remembered that his baptism was the alignment of his spiritual life with that of Jesus Christ.

He remembered that he was a participant in the great history of the communion of saints of the Christian faith.

He remembered who he was.

He remembered he was a beloved child of God who participates in the work of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit with a group of people who have gathered together to do the same.

May each of us remember this also, that we have been baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, so we might participate joyfully and completely in the great mystery of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.