

Baptism is Dangerous

Mark 1:9-15, 1 Peter 3:18-22 by Patty Friesen (First Lent Feb. 21/21)

Today on this First Sunday of Lent, we begin a season of spiritual preparation for Easter. Through the lectionary texts, we follow the life of Jesus to the cross beginning today with his baptism and the reminder of our own baptism. Theologian William Willimon has said this about baptism: When you join the Rotary Club, they give you a handshake and a lapel pin. When you join the church, we half drown you with water. We do not regularly practice immersion in our particular Mennonite tradition, but rather pouring and I believe in pouring and pouring until the water soaks the top of your head and runs down the back of your neck. We try to make sure it is lukewarm at least! With those gathered around laying on hands and the congregation praying, one knows that one has been really baptized.

We practice baptism because Jesus first received baptism at the Jordan River in Mark 1. And Jesus received baptism because it was a regular part of a cleansing ritual in his Jewish tradition. At the temple in Jerusalem were huge baths, where the priests blessed the water and folks stepped in to cleanse before coming to worship in the temple. They were baptized every time they came to worship. The Catholics have a large bowl of water as you come into church as a reminder of their baptism and many people dip their finger in the bowl and cross themselves with the blessed water. Baptism in the temple in Jerusalem was like that - a weekly ritual of cleansing.

So when John the Baptist is out in the wilderness by a muddy river offering a once in a lifetime - good forever baptism, it is a very radical thing. John the Baptist was a member of the radical Jewish community called the Essenes who had moved out to

the desert to find the kingdom of God apart from the religious centre in Jerusalem.

They were religious hippies - reading Torah and imagining the kingdom of God in new ways. They were hated by the religious authorities. Any acceptable person went to Jerusalem. Only fringe folks went to the Jordan River. From the get-go Jesus is identifying himself as an unacceptable person with a fringe religious group.

John had just been preaching that he baptized with water but from his reading of Isaiah someone would come who is more powerful who would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. So when Jesus shows up in the line-up of sinners humbly asking to be baptized, John is thrown for a loop. He refuses to baptize Jesus saying, "Wrong script Jesus - you are supposed to baptize me." But Jesus says, Let it be so now to fulfill what I am supposed to do beginning with this humble act of baptism. From there Jesus will go through the humility of battling the devil in the wilderness, and eventually crucifixion.

Jesus' baptism is a bit of an embarrassment for the Gospel writers. Matthew, Mark and Luke barely mention it and the Gospel of John doesn't mention it at all. John bears witness that he saw the Spirit descent like a dove upon Jesus and the voice of God calling him beloved but he doesn't mention that Jesus was climbing out of a muddy river at the time. Scholars say that all this embarrassment is our surest proof that Jesus really was baptized because when someone tells us something that is not in their best interest for us to know, like Jesus humbling himself like a sinner, then we can be reasonably sure that they are telling us the truth.

Baptism for Jesus in some form whether in the temple or the river was a given. It was part of a traditional ritual within a religious community. It was expected that one entered the Jewish community through circumcision and through child dedication in the temple and regular cleansing of baptism before worship. While Jesus didn't choose circumcision or child dedication, he chooses baptism in the tradition of his Jewish upbringing. Some aspects of our faith we don't choose as our parents haul us to Facebook church or Zoom Monday School. But when we get old enough we choose to either go or not go. And for many of us, choosing not to go was empowering and self-differentiating from our parents' wishes.

The second observation of Jesus' baptism is that while he values tradition, he puts a new twist on them. He makes an individual choice how he will participate in them. He chooses to go outside the baptism at the temple to seek a once and for all cleansing by the Spirit of God among a bunch of religious hippies. And in so doing, the Spirit of God is made manifest to him personally. The Spirit of God will always visit each one of us and come to roost on us in unlikely places and in unlikely ways whether we are following baptism tradition or not!

The third observation is the wonderment of God coming like a dove. It feels like a natural thing in an outdoor setting. We are reminded of the dove that brought the olive branch of new life to Noah in the ark. I wonder if Jesus had been baptized in the traditional way in the temple in Jerusalem, if the Spirit of God would have visited him like a dove since doves were sacrificed in the Temple! Mary and Joseph sacrificed doves in the temple at Jesus' dedication since they could not afford a lamb. Here at Jesus' baptism - we again meet a dove, a sacrificial bird, a humble bird as the symbol of God.

This stands in contrast to the axe-wielding, fire-breathing God John the Baptist proclaimed!

The song of this humble bird is the voice of a proud parent. God is the one who gives Jesus to the world saying, "This is my Son, my beloved with whom I am well pleased." God isn't proud of Jesus because of what he has done because he hasn't done anything yet - nothing worthy of the Gospel writers noticing from age 12 to 30. Finally at age 30 Jesus is making a career choice and God is proud of Jesus - proud of his humility - that he is willing to get into the water with other sinners out of love for them.

Baptism marks us as belonging to the people of God. It is our humble act of joining the family of faith which is extremely odd in its' own right. It's the kind of family only God could love. In this worldwide family of faith, there are people who speak a multitude of languages and who dress for church in everything from robes to cut-offs. There are Bible-thumping fundamentalists and Bible-throwing feminists. There are pacifists and soldiers. There are gay people and straight people and everyone in between. There are people in this faith family you couldn't stand to be in the same room with for more than five minutes. But like them or not, agree with them or not, this is the family you become part of when you are baptized. We call it the church. And it is not our church - it's Christ's church and Christ got baptized, healed, washed feet, died and rose again to have a family as odd as this.

This is the connection between baptism and communion. In communion, we receive Christ's gift of love. Baptism is a response to that love and where we receive

Christ's family. Both are a choice in the Mennonite church. While we adore our children and they are raised a part of our church family, we do not automatically make them Christians. They choose to come to worship or youth or do service with us or take communion and they choose to be baptized and join the community of faith. They can always choose not to participate and not to take communion and not to be baptized but God will never leave them alone, following them around like a dove, loving and guiding them and waiting to roost upon them throughout their lives.

Baptism is dangerous and is a difficult decision - the introverts among us are terrified of having to stand up in front of the church and give some kind of coherent testimony and expose ourselves in such a vulnerable way. I know this practice is holding some back so we often talk at deacons of a smaller gatherings in homes for baptism and if that feels safer to folks, please consider this an option and let us know. We are still in the process of a Faith Exploration class if anyone still wants to join us. We will be Zooming with the deacons in two weeks who are sharing their faith stories so interested folks are welcome to join us for that.

However baptism occurs, our new Voices Together worship guide #203 teaches us: Baptism with water upon personal confession of faith follows a process of preparation. Baptism is a sign of initiation in the church and should be practiced in the presence of a gathered faith community. It can take place in a variety of locations. Baptism can take the form of pouring or immersion. In either case, the person is baptized in the name of the triune God. Members of the church then offer a gesture of welcome to the newly baptized. Baptismal commitments may be reaffirmed regularly by all who are

baptized. Occasions include Sundays when new baptisms are celebrated, when congregational covenants are renewed, or when there is a connection to baptism in the Scripture readings, such as Pentecost or Jesus' baptism.

As we remember our baptism during this Sunday of Jesus' baptism, let us also remember those discerning their life with Christ and with the church. In our Faith Exploration Class, we have been praying #934 in Voices Together, the prayer for those preparing for baptism and invite you to pray for all of us these next weeks and months.

This is printed in your worship resource #934:

Leader: God of wanderers and seekers, we pray for those who are exploring faith and those preparing for baptism. Be with them in their questioning, in their doubting, and in their wondering. Be with them in their confidence, in their desires, and in their hopes.

People: Be with us in our common life and guide our counsel. Open us to faith as it grows in ways both familiar and new so that we may journey together as your beloved children. We ask this in the name of Jesus who prayed that weight be one by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Hymn of Response: Spirit, Open Up My Heart #636 VT