

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for “Baptism of the Lord” Sunday, January 13, 2008
Lessons: Isaiah 42:1-9 and Matthew 3:13-17

STARTING POINT

Two Sundays ago, we baptized a baby girl. That day, I said in the sermon that the primary symbolic action of baptism is not just cleansing but dying and rising – that is, going under the water to represent drowning and coming up again a new person with a fresh start in life. “For anyone who is in Christ,” Paul writes to the Corinthians, “there is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come!” In Jesus’ own parable we call the “Prodigal Son,” the father exclaims when the rebel has returned home, “Let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!” Baptism is a return home to be welcomed, not only by the community of faith, but by our God who has redeemed us in Christ.

Why, then, does an infant need this symbolic dying and rising, death and resurrection? Why does she need even cleansing from her sins?¹ What sins has she committed? For that matter, what faith does she confess when she is too young to believe in Jesus Christ or even understand what is being done to her?

In our Reformed tradition of Protestant Christianity, God’s grace is always primary. The believer’s faith is a response to God’s grace and so is secondary. We love our children before they are old enough to understand love, and God loves them before they are old enough to have faith in Christ. Because of the overwhelming greatness of God’s grace, God’s love and mercy, we baptize infants as well as people mature enough to believe.

But how can the old person symbolically die and the new person rise from the waters when there is no old person? A baby has no old life to leave behind, no past to redeem. Yet, in a very real and important sense, there is even for a baby a self that dies symbolically in Baptism: the person she would have become apart from Christ, outside the grace of God. That person she is never to be. Rather, she is to grow up as a child of God, discovering the grace that has laid claim to her and responding to the Christ who calls her to follow him, be his disciple, and show his love in the world.

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” But Jesus

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

What’s going on here? John objects because he recognizes Jesus as the “one who is to come,” the one sent by God to make all the difference, to bring the will of God to fruition in Israel and in the world. Jesus’ reply sounds flat and almost perfunctory. Is he getting himself baptized just because it’s the thing to do? Does he just want people to see him there being baptized to show how religious he is or something? In modern terms, is he there for the photo op? Maybe someone’s throwing him a party after the baptism?

No, after the baptism and his affirmation from God, Jesus will go into the wilderness and be tempted, and I think his temptations offer us real insight into the significance of his baptism. Jesus will have no respect for superficial righteousness performed to be seen; nothing, in fact, will annoy him more. But righteousness is not a synonym for religiosity but has to do with right relationships and valid, faithful responses first to God and then to other people. John baptizes for repentance, and the biblical word for “repent” means “turn.” It is a turning toward God and away from anything and everything that comes from rejecting God and living as though our own wills should alone govern our lives, attitudes, and choices. Jesus will not be a person, a man, on his own terms. That man he might have been by his own will is put to death in his baptism, drowned in the waters of the muddy Jordan.

The temptations that follow reveal the magnitude of Jesus’ decision and his struggle to live by it. He is the beloved Son sent by God for the redemption of Israel and the world. He is the one. Do we have any idea how hard it is to be the one and yet live by God’s grace alone? Look at the temptations to arrogance and folly ever present to our own leaders with power and even to our celebrities with nothing more than passing fame. With everyone around them telling them constantly how important they are, how can they think and live as real human beings?

Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ. His coming is indeed to make all the difference in the world. Yet, he is a man, a human being just as you and I are. That’s the whole idea. He is not a veiled deity hiding in a disguise of flesh. He is human for real. So, what kind of Christ will he be? That is the question, and his temptations are struggles with the alternative possibilities. Will he go for power and prestige, which certainly seems the wise choice? How else can he influence the most people for the greatest good? Surely, he needs to get to Jerusalem and then to Rome, doesn’t he? Rome rules the world. Should not the Christ be at the center of power? Has he not come to rule? No, Jesus has not come to rule but to serve. He will not reach for power or seek fame and prestige. He will take the form of the servant.

Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my spirit upon him;
he will bring forth justice to the nations.
He will not cry or lift up his voice,
or make it heard in the street;
a bruised reed he will not break,
and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;
he will faithfully bring forth justice.

Baptism is Jesus' starting point, and he starts out by drowning the Christ he might become on his own terms, and up out of the water he comes to begin his ministry on God's terms, by God's grace alone. This is the fulfillment of righteousness.

Now, Jesus calls us to follow him, to be his disciples and his church, and as he reminds us, "A disciple is not greater than the teacher." The church went to Rome and in time seized power. The churches in America are severely tempted to seek power and prestige, and to the extent they yield to that temptation, they become false churches following the Christ Jesus chose not to be. Always there are excuses, mainly to "glorify his name" by glorifying themselves and imposing his name upon society, but Jesus' name is glorified only by humble service. He is forever the servant, the Christ according to the grace of God. To be following him, we have to be going his way and doing it his way, in the manner and spirit of the servant. There is no arrogant Christ and so should be no arrogant church, either. There is no dictatorial Christ, no celebrity Christ, no Christ who brushed aside compassion for poor and sinful people in the name of some greater good. That Christ went under the waters of the Jordan and drowned, never to be. The emergence of the servant Christ who would live, teach, and heal humbly is our starting point. Only from there can we go forward correctly and faithfully. To re-vision our life and identity as a church, we must start there. To find our way as individuals and families, we need to start there, also. The way of the servant is the narrow path few choose. We are called to take it by Jesus, the Christ who took the form of a servant and lived by God's grace alone. Amen.

1. The church's answer to this question came to be formulated in terms of "original sin." Baptism washed away original sin, inherited from Adam and Eve, and Confession (a sacrament the Protestant churches do not have) enabled the person to repent of committed sins and receive the grace of God's forgiveness. Though we have lost the "biology" of original sin, we still need to recognize human nature with its inclination (and often determination) to turn away from God's grace and deify the self, the ego. Baptism does not mechanically or magically change our nature but does represent the "death" of that nature and our new life, not in perfection by any stretch of the imagination, but by God's grace in Christ.