

The Lord's Baptism

In Genesis, the Spirit of God roamed over the waters at the beginning of all creation.

In Matthew, Jesus, the Word of God, enters the waters as the Spirit hovers above and God begins again the miracle of creation.

This time, the Creator has become one with the created.

This is baptism. This is the meaning of baptism.

This is the miracle of baptism.

In Genesis, having been given all the wonders of creation for our use and enjoyment, it didn't take long for us to go our own way.

"Thanks for everything, God!" we said, "but we'll take it from here." And we did.

We built the Tower of Babel to reach the heavens, and to show who was in charge.

We build great cities and raise up kings to fight glorious wars, create classes of people (a few rich, mostly poor), we make money and guns and all forms of entertainment to keep ourselves occupied in a life that seems increasingly pointless; increasingly without meaning.

It's come full circle today with the latest commercial by the makers of Jeep automobiles.

Genesis tells us that we are made in the image of God.

Have you heard the latest Jeep commercial?

"The things we make, make *us*," it says.

I scratch my head.

How far we have traveled since Eden.

Which brings us back to Matthew. Which brings us back to baptism.

Once again, God's spirit hovers over the waters. Once again, the Word of God speaks.

Baptism is all about making new. It is all about a new allegiance being born.

It is all about a new choice in whom we will follow: will it be the society that says "our ***things*** make us"; or will it be the community that affirms that we are made in the image of God.

Make no mistake. The choice is a stark choice. It is a revolutionary choice.

John baptized in the desert. The desert is where insurrections were planned, away from the prying eyes of spies; in the lonely places.

Jesus joins John, in the desert, and by his baptism, Jesus rejects the power of Herod and Caesar; he rejects the power of Hollywood and Wall Street; he rejects the nonsense so often peddled today that God wants you to be rich, that God wants you to be materially well-off, that God wants you to prosper in the ways of this world.

Jesus, by his baptism, rejects the justifications and rationalizations we created ever since we told God: "Thanks for everything, but we'll take it from here."

Instead, in his baptism, which begins his life's work, Jesus takes on the mantle of God and embraces forgiveness, accepts the nobodies, travels with women, welcomes illegal immigrants and rejects violence of every kind.

Put simply, Jesus, the Word made flesh, the same Word through whom all that is is created, lives the life we were always meant to live: a life of self-sacrificing service.

A life of obedience.

A life that trusts God in all things, in all circumstances, for all needs.

He invites us to live that life today.

It requires a choice, on a daily basis. And more, it requires us to peel back the so-called reality of our present culture; the so-called "reality" that claims to be the only reality.

The "reality" of consumerism, of military might, of financial security. This is not reality. It is an illusion.

As one man said: " The Land of Propaganda is built on unanimity. If one person says "no" the spell is broken."

John the Baptist cut through the propaganda of his day. That propaganda said that the Jewish people, as children of Abraham, were assured of salvation.

Crazy John the Baptist replied: "God can make children of Abraham out of these stones!"

Just so for us today.

Jesus calls us to choose, as he chose. To choose the empire of God over the empires we create.

The waters of baptism wash away not only our personal sins and failings; the waters of baptism wash away the filth and infections of our distorted rationalizations and justifications.

Rationalizations and justifications like: "Might makes right", and, "God helps those who help themselves."

Rationalizations and justifications that allow us to put our faith in guns and money, glory and fame, rather than in the preacher from Galilee who began his career with 12, ended with 11, and who died a convicted felon on Rome's version of our electric chair.

One evening the New Testament professor from Princeton Seminary visited a high school youth group.

After the professor finished speaking about the significance of Christ's baptism as a revelation of God's presence in Jesus, one of the student's said, without looking up,

"That's not what it means."

Glad that the student had been listening enough to disagree, the professor asked,
"What do you think it means?"

The boy replied:

"The story says that the heavens were opened, right?"

"The heavens were opened and the Spirit of God came down, right?"

The boy looked up and leaned forward, saying,

"It means that God is on the loose in the world. And it's dangerous."

After his baptism, Jesus went into the wilderness, and it was dangerous.

Jesus taught in the temples, and it was dangerous. Jesus healed on the Sabbath, and it was dangerous.

Jesus confronted the authorities and turned over the tables, and it was dangerous. Daniel D.Chambers

Baptism calls us out of the empire of the world, and into the empire of God, where the rules are completely different; where the rules are upside down compared to the rules of the world.

And that makes us dangerous to the empire of the world. It makes us subversives, you and me; we Christians.

Baptism, this initiation into the empire of God, is a call to turn around; to come home by a different way. It is a call to change.

In the language of the Gospels, it is dying and rising again.

It is dying to the idea that God is a God of punishment and revenge and violence.

The empire of the world loves that view of God, because it justifies our own punishments and revenge and violence.

The empire of God raises us in the truth that God loves all of humanity, and each human person, immeasurably, without condition.

It is dying to the idea that God is a God who requires an eye for an eye and rising to the truth that God overflows with reconciliation, with gentleness, with forgiveness.

It is dying to the idea that you and I, by ourselves, can achieve and maintain a relationship with God.

The empire of the world loves this notion, each of us an island unto ourselves, because alone, we are no match for it.

Baptism into the empire of God raises us into the truth that God calls us to be, all of us together, the Body of Christ.

Such is baptism. In it, the Empire of God has drawn near. Through it, the veil that separates heaven from earth is pierced. By it, the Spirit of God descends like a dove and the voice proclaims:

“This is my Son, the beloved, with whom I am well-pleased. Listen to him.”

Come, let us listen, and in the listening, let us change our allegiance from the empire of this world to the empire of God.

May it be so.

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