

Why Baptism?

Well last week we had the great joy of baptizing young Tate, after he worried for 7 years that I would literally drown him in the font.

And today we celebrate the baptism of our Lord, with old John the Baptist dunking folks into the Jordan River, drowning them away from one kind of life and lifting them up to a new.

And in between all of this, we have both the prophet Isaiah and the Psalmist recalling the miracle of the Exodus, when God indeed drowns the slave masters as he liberates a bunch of nobodies – so that they may become God's somebodies.

It is this connection between Exodus and Baptism that helps us to see exactly who we are and exactly who we are called to become.

So many folks think of baptism as just another kind of initiation ceremony, like learning the secret Mason handshake or unlocking the mysteries of the Rotary Club's decoder ring.

But in fact, baptism is our "yes" to God's freedom movement, to our own, individual and collective, liberation.

Baptism is our stepping into a life in which God is on the move, which is why in our reading from Acts today, it takes the baptism in the name of the Spirit to really get things going, because the Spirit is God on the move.

Baptism takes us from our narrow, self-centered pre-occupation with what we say is good and evil and takes us to places where we can witness the majesty of what God calls good and evil.

Before baptism, good and evil means what's good or bad for me and my own.

After baptism, good and evil means what's good and bad for the other: for the neighbor, for the stranger.

We begin to see that the majesty of God alights on the poor, the oppressed, and the slave.

And so Exodus comes alive again and again through the miracle that is baptism.

Exodus comes alive in the civil rights movement that we celebrate this month.

Do you remember that Easter Sunday back in 1964 when 5000 people wearing their Sunday best marched from the church to the jail cell that held the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.?

"The marchers set off in a festive mood when suddenly they saw the police, fire trucks and firemen holding fire hoses blocking their path.

Bull Connor, the notorious police chief of Birmingham, Alabama, bellowed: 'Turn these people around!'

Andrew Young recalls it this way:

Wyatt Walker and I were leading the march.

I can't say we knew what to do.

I know I didn't want to turn the march around....

I asked the people to get down on their knees and pray....

Suddenly, another minister jumps up and hollers 'The Lord is with this movement!

Off your knees!

We're going on!

A stunned Bull Connor yells that they be stopped, but none of the police move a muscle.

Even the dogs that had been growling and straining at their leashes stand perfectly still....

I see one fireman, tears in his eyes, the hose just drops to his feet.

Our people walk right through those red fire trucks, singing 'I Want Jesus To Walk With Me.'

The police refuse to arrest us, the firemen refuse to hose us, the dogs refuse to bite us....

I'll never forget the old woman shouting out as we march through the barricades:

'Great God almighty done parted the Red Sea one more time!' Andrew Young, *An Easy Burden*, 223.

The transforming power of God through Exodus and baptism is again alive at Dr. King's 1963 speech at the Washington Monument, where, to Mrs King, "it seemed that the words Martin spoke came from some higher place — a gift given to the weary people before him.

Yes, heaven itself opened up that day and we were all transformed.'" P. Lehman, *The Transfiguration of Politics*, 182-3.

It happened in East Timor when the Indonesian government brutally suppressed the people of that tiny island in the late 1990's; when a reporter listens in "at the broken heart of a small city, while a priest tries to persuade his threadbare listeners that suffering is rewarded, and that there is such a thing, even for them, as resurrection.

"You are like the people of Israel who suffered for peace, suffered for freedom, suffered so that they could have their own land." S. Mydens, *NYT*, 10/4/99.

It's happening here, today, in what Nella Kleinschmidt calls the Little Engine That Could, thinking about this our parish and the small but important work we are all of us doing in this community.

In baptism we are all invited to become part of the Exodus story.

In baptism, we are allowed to move from the petty and the selfish and the stupid into a way of living that seeks the best for each other, that is rigorous in self-examination, that is utterly confident that what we cannot do for ourselves, God can do for us.

But to get there, some dying needs to be done.

A bishop gives a baptism class in the Deep South.

He reads from Paul's letter to the Romans:

"Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?

We were buried with him by baptism into death.

Our old self was crucified, we have died with Christ." Rom. 6

The bishop is greeted with blank stares.

Desperately, he asks: "Has anyone here died to become a Christian?"

I know we didn't pour enough water on you to kill you when you were baptized, but did any of you have to die?"

A timid hand comes up, and the white man says:

"When the schools in Jackson were integrated, I thought I would die.

I knew enough to know that on the day black children went to school with our children, the world I knew was dead.

But now, my black neighbor is my best friend.

An old world dies, but a new world is born." Willimon, Peculiar Speech, 14.

And then there is the woman who was terrified of sleeping alone in her home when her husband went on business trips.

If he left, she always took the kids to a friend's house to spend the night, so deep was her fear and anxiety.

And then her daughter died of leukemia, and she never again was afraid to be home alone; and when someone asked why, she replied:

"Well, when you've died, what else is there to fear?"

When you've had to let go of your most precious possession, what else could happen that would be worse?" Id. at 15.

And finally there is 12 year old Sven, home alone doing farm chores one cold, snowy day.

Working in the barn, he hears the wind grow loud, and then, horrified, sees the family home on fire.

Running from the barn to the house, a blizzard in full swing; he is disoriented, and lost in the swirl of white.

He knows he will die.

In his panic, he runs face first into the side of the barn, breaking his nose.

He awakes hours later, tucked under the family cow, face bloody, holding his busted nose.

As an adult, "Sven never forgot his confrontation with death."

"Having lost his life, he entered a new one with a sweet disposition.

He planted trees, raised cattle, married, had seven children, and seldom spoke a harsh word.

His nose was never set.

He pitched ten tons of hay on the day he was married; in their wedding picture he sits, smiling, his eyes bright behind his ruined beak, a man who took a hard wallop and now everything is easy for him." Keillor, *Lake Wobegon Days*, 208.

And perhaps that is the heart of baptism.

While we often speak of our faith as a slow growing process; it is just as often a hard smack: some kind a loss or injury or death; that really gets the whole journey on its way.

In ways I will never understand, it seems we need this kind of crisis, because without the crisis, we just don't develop the eyes to see the new world that God invites us into.

Without a broken beak, or a broken heart, we tend to see only what is in front of our straight noses: things like jobs and family obligations and wounded feelings and common sense.

It is the hard smack of death, that comes in so many different ways, that helps us enter a world where kindness reigns, where forgiveness is the path to peace, where violence is rejected, where friendship is the norm.

It takes the death of the world we know to find ourselves in God's new world.

Baptism is the gateway into this new world; a world that God creates; the world intended for each of us since the beginning of time: it is our Exodus from the old life to the new.

In baptism, we are each of us called by name and made a child of God.

But we are, at baptism, also called to become a people of God, and it is in that journey, that transformation, from a child of God to the people of God, that the fire of Jesus saves us.

You heard it from John this morning: "The one who comes after me will baptize not with water, but with fire, and the Holy Spirit.

We often forget this part of baptism's power: the power of fire.

The fire that Jesus brings is the fire that burns the chaff in our lives.

The "me first" chaff – the "us vs. them" chaff; the chaff that causes us to be anxious and afraid; and as that chaff burns, we begin to discover that despite all appearances, service and humility are the path to real peace; and surrendering what I want in favor of what others need is the key to God's Kingdom.

This is our Exodus.

This is our baptism.

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