

The Baptism of the Lord

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A Divine Drenching

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My father, who would have been 100 years old if he were still alive, was raised in a Mennonite family, so he wasn't baptized as a baby. Baptism and church membership was an adult thing. But that didn't mean religion was put on hold until adulthood. No he was raised with nine sisters and two brothers, and there was a great deal of religion in that family that he grew up in, and there always was.

When I was home visiting my family the week after Christmas, my sister reminded me of this story about my Dad. When he was 13 he attended a prayer meeting where he was completely overwhelmed by a feeling of the love and presence of Christ. If there had been an option for baptism, he likely would have jumped right in the water. But he was still a bit too young, and then I think life happened – the death of his mother, the onset of World War II, which split many of the peace churches. Then he came back from the war and married a Catholic . But he couldn't quite bring himself to join that church, though he told my Mom that he would, and then backed out.

All while we were growing up my Dad attended Catholic Mass with us, but never took Communion. He gently withstood our questions as to why he wouldn't join the church.

But he gamely accompanied us to our baptisms and first Communions and Confirmations. He wrote us letters on youth retreats and came to our teen liturgies and events.

He was nearly 60 when he announced to us that he wanted to be baptized and officially join the church. He had just survived a heart attack that forced him into early retirement. One day on a "walk and talk" with my sister Anna, he stopped and said to her: Do you know why I decided to be baptized? It was because I saw in you girls and in your mother so much joy in your faith that I wanted it too."

He had been watching us for signs of that same drenching he received in the love of Christ that he experienced so long ago. And when he saw that it could happen in his adopted church, he joined it.

All of that is to say that the faith and the ritual don't always line up at just the same time. In our story from the book of Acts, a group of Ephesians had received the baptism of John but not the outpouring of the Holy Spirit which usually accompanied baptism back then, and which Paul helped facilitate.

In my father's case it took the baptismal water a long time to catch up to the Holy Spirit that had long fueled his deep reservoir of faith and love. For others of us, who were baptized as infants, we were brought to the water long before we could make those baptismal promises for ourselves. Instead someone wanted them for us, wanted them so deeply that they would stand in for us, and raise us in a community that would carry faith for us until we could taste it ourselves.

If you were baptized as a child, someone brought you to the water because they desired eternal life for you –they saw you as beloved child on whom their favor rested. They wanted you to be able to renounce evil and embrace love with God's help. They wanted you to be able to fall into the arms of Christ to discover a God you could trust and follow and serve, without being too specific on how you might work

that out. They knew you'd probably need saving— divine intervention beyond what they could provide, grace and mercy only God can offer.

They wanted you to be part of a body that had dedicated itself to God in a particular way, and they wanted you to be held by that community, and formed and shaped by it, and they wanted you to bring your own gifts there and be part of the holding and shaping of others.

If you were baptized as a baby someone wanted that for you and made those vows for you until you could make them for yourselves. Which is why we turn to them again and again in our liturgy, so that the covenant is more than a wish someone had for us but a relationship that we want for ourselves. These words that we will say after I'm done preaching sound a lot like our creed in fact, and it's from the baptismal covenant that the creed was formed.

Mark tells the story of Jesus' baptism the way he does because he wanted Israel – and us -- to know that their savior, their messiah had come to restore the relationship between God and Israel.

Theologian NT Wright considers this moment of Jesus's baptism, when the heavens are torn open, to be an experience of the dimension of God that is always just behind our earthly reality. In Jesus' baptism it's as though the curtain is parted and the love and yearning of God that is always there is suddenly visible in all its glory. And God says "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

"A good deal of Christian faith is a matter of learning to live by this different reality even when we can't see it," Wright says." Sometimes, at decisive and climactic moments, the curtain is drawn back and we see, or hear, what's really going on"<sup>1</sup>

I think this is what happened to my own father when he was 13.

But Wright reminds us that most of the time we walk by faith, not by sight. And we have to trust the God that is just behind the curtain and imagine that divine voice directed to us. Because God didn't just love Jesus as a child, he loved Israel whom Jesus represented as a child, and God loves us as beloved children.

Wright challenges us to imagine God saying those words directly to us. And so I'd like us to try that today. Get a little comfortable, close your eyes, imagine the sky parting like curtains and hear the divine voice call you by name – you, just you. And then God says You are my child. You are beloved. With you I am well pleased." Try it again... How does that feel?

Because this is what Jesus wanted everyone to know about his Abba, his God – that God was already that in love with humanity, and was making a way for it to respond in love.. And it's not because we deserve it, or earned it, or were baptized into it even, but because that's what's always just behind the veil of our world, that is what' God is always feeling and willing for us. That is what Jesus was trying to make possible with something even better than John's baptism, and John in his wisdom saw it coming.

John's baptism offered a sin scrub, a clean conscience, a fresh start on the week. Jesus' baptism, the one into his death and his resurrection, would bring a whole new life in God, an eternal one.

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<sup>1</sup> Wright, N. T.. Mark for Everyone (The New Testament for Everyone) (pp. 5-6). Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Kindle Edition.

If all of that is just behind the veil for us, why get baptized at all? Why go through a hoop if God's love is already drenching us?

I would say that we might consider the deep and effective ritual of baptism to be a chance for us to offer a very profound and considered yes to God's love offer. And it's not a simple yes, but one that renounces evil and clings to love, and accepts the gift of community, and commits to living the life of God in table fellowship and in collective worship and mutual care.

We Episcopalians like to say that we pray what we believe, rather than storing our faith in a lot of doctrine and dogma that you have to look up. So I invite you to let the baptism that we are about to experience after I'm done preaching speak to you today of what we believe about the life of God.

Listen to all its words as we hold space for Hayes's baptism today.

If someone brought you to the baptismal waters when you were too young to get there yourself, consider these words are a return, and you are now at the wheel.

And if you are not baptized, or haven't been Confirmed or formally received in the Episcopal Church, turn the words of the covenant over on your tongue as you say them today. Ask yourself if you want them for yourself in the context of this faith community. Imagine all the pieces of your life of faith and love catching up to one another in them.

The bishop will be back here at St Peter's on Pentecost of all days to Baptize and Confirm and receive new members who are joining from other Christian faith traditions. All of those rituals are variations of the same set of promises. Let today's baptism be a gentle invitation to your own discernment wherever you are in the life of Christ.

For wherever you are on this journey of faith, just behind the curtain the divine one is saying to you -- "you are my beloved Child. With you I am so pleased."

And to that I can only say. Amen.