

Baptized in Water

A Sermon from Mount Auburn Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Susan Quinn Bryan, Pastor

January 13, 2008 – Baptism of the Beloved

Scripture Readings: Isaiah 42:1-9; Psalm 29;
Acts 10:34-43; Matthew 3:13-17

There are those who would ask, “If Jesus was sinless, why would he be baptized?”

They ask because they don’t understand what is meant by sin. They think sin has to do with actions or inactions, with mistakes, and with morality, with the keeping of laws and commandments.

I guess if you believe that Jesus was without those kinds of shortcomings, those kinds of errors in judgment, those kinds of failures, and that baptism is to somehow cleanse us from those, then Jesus’ baptism makes no sense at all.

But then, I am not sure how one would reconcile the idea that Jesus was fully human, as well. One of us. How could he be human if he didn’t make mistakes or lose his temper (we even have scripture to tell us he **did** lose his temper, and he did have his struggles, and he violated the rules.) If he didn’t lose his temper or make mistakes, I am very sure his life can have little or no relationship to our own. If we believe Jesus was without sin in the small ‘s’ sense of the word, then we risk losing Jesus altogether – he becomes meaningless.

So I don’t buy it.

I do believe Jesus was human. Fully human as well as fully divine.

I believe he was one of us. I believe he was fully and totally himself, just as we are called to be fully and totally ourselves. (And, hold on to your hat, I believe we share in that divinity, as well.)

What the early church meant when they said Jesus was without sin was that Jesus was not separate from God. That Jesus was fully and always in relationship with God. That Jesus never saw himself as separate from God.

So, did he make mistakes, say the wrong things sometime, have doubts, questions, struggles? Were there parts of his life that may have looked like a train wreck? We know so little about his life before his baptism. Did he ache when he saw the brokenness, struggle, poverty and pain around him in the world? Did he feel powerless when he saw his people going down paths that were going to lead to their near destruction?

I believe he did. I believe that he didn’t have all the answers, that he was a man of deep prayer, but a man who was still searching for what God would have him do. I think his longing was to be ‘in sync’ with God’s will.

I think he was drawn to the teachings of John the Baptizer, his cousin, a wild street preacher who screamed harsh messages of fire and brimstone, because he knew at some level that the Jewish people needed to return to their roots, needed to return to being

Baptized in Water

God's people again. John saw the danger in continuing on the path the Jewish people were traveling.

I think Jesus was looking for answers to the problems of his day.

And I think he was looking for hope.

I think he was like we are: confused by the pain we see. Unable to make sense of the pain in the world.

And, like him, we draw close to God and one another for answers, or if not answers, at least some comfort. If we can't understand, then perhaps we can find some hope, some solace, some way to know that we aren't alone in all this. Some hope, perhaps, that things could be better. That our lives, our world can be better.

I think that's why he went to John and let John baptize him in the muddy waters of the Jordan river.

There's a reason why we celebrate Jesus' baptism during the season of Epiphany.

Epiphany means a sudden revelation or insight.

The entire season of Epiphany is marked by scriptures telling stories of the revelation of who Jesus was and what he was about to others.

From the wise men who traveled by the light of the star, to the sons of Zebedee who recognized his power to heal, and Peter and James who saw Jesus transfigured on a mountaintop with Moses and Elijah, we have one epiphany after another. All these stories – metaphors – are about the power of Jesus being revealed to others. The truth of Jesus being revealed to others; the light others saw in him.

Today's text is just a little different, however.

Because today's text is about a revelation, an epiphany that Jesus himself had.

At least that's the way it is told in our text from Matthew.

And I think that comes close to what may actually have happened.

I think that something happened when Jesus was baptized by John in the waters of the Jordan, something that changed the course of his life, changed how he felt about himself and God, and his people, and life.

Something so profound, so deep, so real, so true that he it became the driving force of his life, something to which he would hold even if it led to his death. And, I think he believed it was the truth about everything and everyone.

I think we all know that the bible stories we have are made up of various levels of stories. Some of it is historical –some of what happened, things Jesus actually said and did. And then there are stories about what the early followers said about Jesus, and then there are stories about what the church believed all that meant, and said about itself.

That is the way things happen, even now, as we relate stories to one another. We rarely report things just as they happened. We put our spin on them, we remember things that happened before the events that in retrospect may have been a foreshadowing. We connect the dots. We can't help ourselves.

I think we all know that the birth narratives of Jesus are primarily myth. Now, don't get bent out of shape when I say that. Myth does not mean we don't believe in those stories.

Baptized in Water

There is truth in those stories, which is why we tell and retell them. A myth, you see, may not actually have happened, but is true nonetheless.

There are some elements of myth in this story of Jesus' baptism, as well as some historical facts.

Our Jewish brothers and sisters take liberties with the texts, and I want to borrow a page from them and share with you the gospel according to Susan . . . my midrash on this text:

I want to introduce you to the main character, a fellow named Jesus. Nothing especially remarkable about him, except that he was a devout Jew, and took his faith seriously.

He was the son of a carpenter, and the carpenter's young wife. There were some questions about his actual parentage, rumors about his conception. There are scholars who think his mother was raped by a Roman soldier. Even today there are misconceptions about his conception. Even a lot of Christians don't understand that the idea of virgin birth was to say he was born of woman, as we are born of woman. It was to distinguish him from Roman gods and goddesses who sprang into the world from other gods and goddesses. Not human. Not like us.

This was a human being, born of woman. Flesh and blood as we are flesh and blood. But one who God sent as a prophet. As a guide.

Matter. From the divine. Not separate. But one. Connected. To us, to the world and to God.

However he was conceived, Joseph married Mary and cared for Jesus, even fleeing with them to Egypt to avoid the slaughter of the innocents. Joseph seemed to be a compassionate man. The whole family was observant in terms of their faith. But one can imagine it would not have been easy for Jesus in an honor/shame society to have doubts about his parentage a part of the village gossip. To be one of the few children who was spared when so many were killed. Survival guilt may have been a part of his psychological make up. Not to mention the bitterness of mothers who may have resented his survival when their own children had been put to death.

The family lived in an occupied territory, in a time of political, economic, social and religious unrest and confusion. A violent time, filled with uprisings and vengeful peace keeping.

People were looking for new answers to old questions because the old answers no longer seemed to work. People turned this way and that looking for guidance. They didn't know whom to trust, whom to believe. In times of such unrest the problem is not that the people will fail to believe, the problem is that they will believe anything and everything. There were preachers on every corner, each with different answers.

The whole world seemed to be spinning out of control.

It was a time not unlike our own, I think.

Jesus didn't have any answers; but he did have questions.

He was searching.

I think he felt the way we often feel about our own circumstances: overwhelmed and powerless. He saw things he knew weren't right: the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer and the religious institutions focused on rules and nit picking and making

Baptized in Water

more and more rules to keep things orderly instead of dealing with the real issues.

I think Jesus was no different than you and me. I think he may have made tons of mistakes and wrong turns and his life was not as he had hoped and dreamed it would be. I think he didn't have all the answers, or, at that moment any answers. I think he was looking, as we are all looking.

And I think he looked where we look . . . at least where we look on Sundays: I think he turned to God.

That's what the church meant when they called him without sin. They didn't mean that he hadn't made mistakes. They didn't mean that his life wasn't the same kind of train wreck our own lives can be. They didn't mean that he hadn't suffered the slings and arrows that life throws at us.

They meant that he held on – however tenuously – to his relationship with God. He was a man of prayer. He never stopped believing that there was a power greater than he was who could restore his life to sanity.

That's all they meant when they said he was sinless. That he had never lost touch with God.

So, filled with questions, living in a turmoil, he came to the Jordan, because, I think, he resonated with the things that John the Baptist was saying. He knew that his people weren't living their faith. He knew they had rejected the biblical economics on which that faith was based. He knew that they were hurting themselves and one another.

He knew there had to be some change, and he was willing to make changes in his own life.

So he waded into the muddy water of the Jordan river with his cousin, John the Baptizer, who was stirring up the crowd. And John pushed his head under the water and that was when Jesus' epiphany happened.

That was when he got it.

I think these words in Matthew may be very close to Jesus' own words as he later told other what had happened.

As he came up out of the water he heard God speak to him: "You are my Child, my Beloved, in you I delight."

What he heard, what changed him, was his connection with God, God's love for him.

What he came to realize in that moment was that he was one with God and with all the world.

And that all was well.

Even if it didn't look that way.

The heavens opened – the clouds rolled away – Jesus had a new consciousness. The Spirit of God descended upon him like a dove . . . peace overcame him. In the midst of social, political, religious and economic turmoil, peace settled on him. "This is my Child, the Beloved, with whom I am will pleased." In whom I take delight, some translations have it.

Baptized in Water

He was claimed by God, loved by God, one with God, and because God is in control, all was well. He was meant to be a blessing in the world, because God blesses the world. He saw love, God's love, and knew it to be real, and more powerful than anything else.

Knew in that moment that love was all that was real.

You are my child, my Beloved.

Just as the Jewish people had been claimed by God from the beginning, and were, from the beginning, meant to be a light to the nations, a blessing to all humanity, Jesus was to remind them, to be that blessing once again. And to widen the circle.

He remembered the cornerstone of his own faith: his connection to God that could not be severed. Light. All was light.

He remembered who he was and whose he was.

He was God's chosen, God's beloved, in whom God delighted.

The mess he saw was not the end. The mess his people had made of their nation did not have to end there. There was a better way. And God was with him, with them. That was what mattered. That was all that mattered.

You are my beloved, in whom I delight.

I have returned to you from standing with my daughter, Becca and her husband, Craig, next to a hospital bed in which my six year old grandson lay near to death after being hit by an SUV— a monitor in his brain, and tubes and machines attached to keep him alive. I stood next to him, unable to touch him for fear that he would become agitated and his little brain swell dangerously. But I held my hand above his sweet blond head and whispered the words of his baptism to him. I wanted to remind him, and myself, that he is God's own, and that what is real and true about him is that he belongs to God, he is one with God and with all others. And I knew that nothing, not even death could separate him from the love of God.

And I felt you in that hospital room with me, I felt the connection and the light, and I know this to be true. We are God's own, and God delights in us, even when life looks like a train wreck. God is in charge and all is well.

In Savannah, Georgia, another mother and father stood near the bed of their beloved son, struck down by cancer, as Faye and Frank said good bye to Kirk, who left this world too soon at forty.

And I know Faye and Frank remembered Kirk's baptism, and I know they know Kirk belongs to God, and I know they felt the connection between those of you gathered in prayer here loving them, loving Kirk and they felt the warmth and light of your love. And I know they, too, know that nothing, not even death can separate Kirk from the love of God.

In the midst of the darkness there is the epiphany: God's love is all there really is.

It only takes a crack for that light to shine in, it only takes a little to remember that God is in charge and even in what may seem like darkness – it is light and only light that is real.

“These are my children, the Beloved, with whom God is well pleased.”

Hold on to the light. Hold on to that knowledge. Hold on to the consciousness for the world needs it. Holding to the light, to the love, to our connection with God and one

Baptized in Water

another changes the world. It is the only thing that really changes it.

That was the message of Jesus. That was what he lived and taught. What really matters is who we are and whose we are. To love and be the beloved.

We are meant to be blessing, to remind others that they, too, are of the light, of the love, God's own, in whom God delights.

And today, we remember that call and say once again our yes to God's yes:
our yes to standing in the light, and the love of the God who delights in us.

Thanks be to God.

The Rev. Susan Quinn Bryan
Pastor, Mount Auburn Presbyterian Church
January 13, 2008

Mount Auburn Presbyterian Church
103 William Howard Taft Road
Cincinnati, OH 45219
(513) 281-5945
<http://www.mtauburnpresby.org>