

**This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it. AMEN.**

Some thoughts about baptism and Jesus, then baptism and us, and then about the waters of baptism.

Why did Jesus get baptized and why did he not see to the baptism of his disciples? If from the time Jesus raced away from his parents “to be about his Fathers business” he knew that his mission was a directly from the Holy One, and John was baptizing people with a baptism of repentance, why did he line up for his own baptism? What did he think he needed, wanted, or expected? None of the gospel writers makes any relevant comment, so there is no authorized answer. Since John says repeatedly that he is not the One, but One comes after him who will baptize with the Holy Spirit, why does he baptize Jesus and why does Jesus accept his baptism for repentance?

John and others had been doing Jewish proselyte baptism for repentance, and I would imagine, for teaching, welcoming, and grafting people into Judaism. Whether Romans or nomads, shepherds or travelers, many people were not Jews in that region. John the Baptist traveled around talking of the Holy One and urging repentance to know and love God better. Jesus had nothing to repent of, but he’d heard the buzz about John and his baptizing. Surely many people then really thought that John was Messiah, and that he had finally come. John knew better, and it was necessary that Jesus come to him, both to let John see the Messiah, to be relieved that he really wasn’t Messiah, and to let him rejoice at a reality he had experienced since before he was born, leaping in his womb.

I envision a scene like this. There was a long line of people coming to John, telling him their stories, seeking to repent and to draw closer to the Living God. Then Jesus showed up. John knew him and so knew his own ministry was coming to an end. He didn't tell his cousin to get out of line, that it was not an appropriate place for him to be, or a real need for Jesus, but he trusted Jesus. Is it not possible that Jesus was trying to get through the crowd to tell John that he'd come at last, was beginning, and was ready? Maybe the easiest way through the crowd was to get in line and take his turn, rather than elbowing through. Perhaps the line was long, slow, hot, and people were talking. They told Jesus about themselves, their sadnesses at their misdeeds, and ways the thought of their missing the mark in their lives kept them from appreciating or trusting God's love or fixing what they didn't like in themselves. They could repent, but not necessarily be forgiven or celebrate God's acceptance and pleasure in their work and lives. Jesus heard stories and understood why people wanted to repent, but that that wasn't enough. Jesus learned and understood, and sensed what his work needed to proclaim: an acceptance of people's repentance once and for all, so that people could feel, trust, know that as individuals they were loved and welcomed into God's being forever. It must have helped him understand his role and mission in a way neither studying in the Temple nor being in his family or family village could ever have taught him. The reality of his jostling with people helped fill in his people-education, and he changed as he did again later when the woman challenged him with "even the dogs deserve scraps," when he did as she asked. He learned what people need.

This is, of course, speculation, but it makes sense of what we do know. Also both the gospel writers and/or Jesus and John knew there had to be a pretty public end to John's ministry, and a clear public acknowledgement by John and Jesus that they each knew that Jesus was Messiah, and that John wasn't. Jesus understood that he needed to show up for John's baptism, and stayed to learn and be transformed by the experience. The learning he underwent rewarded him with an encounter with God, and he and John recognized the presence of God in a new way, in the coming of the Holy Spirit. John named that new presence and the reality of baptism changed forever.

Baptism for us, promises us the infusion, the incorporation of God's welcoming Holy Spirit. We are promised at our baptism that we will join Jesus who has taken on all sins for all time and destroyed their power. We still live a cycle of sin, repent, accept or reject forgiveness, and wonder whether it's enough and are told over and over, that we are accepted and acceptable to God just the way we are. The Spirit conveys the message to us and in us. We receive the baptism that Jesus received — not John's. We are sent the Holy Spirit to infuse our lives and reinforce God's word that God loves us, each and all.

Why then didn't Jesus want that baptism for his disciples? That's less clear to me. Perhaps their presence with him working out his mission, and their mission to repeat and spread what they were hearing from him, was enough. Perhaps he didn't want to seem to be competing with or repeating John's baptism. Perhaps he wanted there to be an interval until there could be a new and effective baptism

upheld by his life's promise, and guaranteed by the Spirit. It remains a question.

For us, though, baptism has become the primary way to encounter the vitality of the Spirit and to know it as part of our lives forever. We are in a long line, a heritage, of Christians who've been baptized into the reality of the name, the presence and life of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We don't know whether it is an unbroken line of baptisms from Jesus to us, or whether it skipped the disciples and then they longed to reconnect into that reality and remembered the Spirit's presence in Jesus and called on it to enliven them as well. There needed to be a way to bring new people, Jew or non-Jew, into their experience and understanding of the new order Jesus was promising, of love and salvation, and eternal life. While bread and wine maintained them in that experience, and still maintains us, there needed to be a beginning, appropriate and available to people of all ages. Circumcision for Jews, for practical reasons, makes it hard for adults to become Jews, and that's still true, Baptism can occur in the lives of babies and adults, teens and anyone who hears the voice of Jesus and yearns for a closer life with him.

Why baptism rather than some other ritual? I read two commentaries. One asserted in the strongest way that since God created life out of the waters of chaos, and that water always represented chaos and death, that baptism provides a transformation for people out of chaos and death into light, salvation, and God's realm. The second commentary asserted in the same sort of "this is the absolute right explanation" language that water always represented nurturing, mothering, amniotic fluid, and birth, and so

everyone has to return not to a primal scream but to a representational birth to be born again out of darkness into light, out of sin into righteousness, out of death into life. The first has some historical accuracy of the metaphors that ancient writers used, while the second has a kind of eternal verity to it. It seems remarkably unlikely that baptism was picked based on these two conflicting founding understandings. Instead the simple rite of washing to be clean for something new, and offering washing to demonstrate hospitality, seem more basic reasons for choosing the action of washing as a joining rite. People have theologized and psychologized ever since to show reasons for the force and effectiveness of the symbol. The words of the baptismal action understand those deep meanings. We are born out of death into life—that's the chaos meaning, and we are "cleansed from sin" and "born again." The more Jungian or possibly feminist vision of baptism as arising out of the womb into life is there but in language traditionally offered by the formal and male writers who've worked to say what's going on as we baptize people. I think the welcoming of the newly baptized into the household of God reflects that the person has been born into the community of the faithful, newly born into it. The brief narrative in the baptism service of favorite stories where water has been important asserts that water has been important throughout people's experience, and in a variety of ways with differing meanings, experiences, and understandings. However we understand those experiences: through, in, and by water, water is always a gift, (sometimes less so in the form of snow) but always welcome. The point is not to try to prove the most

important reason or symbol that explains the importance of water, which root story trumps the others, but to feel the power of the symbol to wash and welcome people into the new life of the risen Christ through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. Water is cool and fresh and clean, life-giving, welcome and elemental, and it draws us not only into a history of narratives, meanings and symbols, but also directly into new life in Christ. Water and fire, asperging and incensing, birth and death, purity and complexity, and a host of other dualisms to represent death of the old and life of the new, and life of the new through the death into the newer and eternal, illustrate the mystery that both baptism and a life in Christ are. Water is the simple symbol. We remind ourselves of our baptism with water at the entrance of churches and in asperging. Then the way we live allows water's power of transformation to lead the Spirit to make us our best selves, to function as God's hands and feet in the world, seeking and serving Christ in all people. This first Sunday of Epiphany shows water transformed into the light of lights, a clear and new manifestation of God's presence in the world. John the Baptist saw that happen and understood who Jesus was; he was and is God made manifest. We hear this account and recognize the new reality that entered the world then and enters repeatedly now and always. We rejoice at this great mystery and gift, and know it as Good News.

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