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Jan

## Power of Presence

Glory Revealed

**BAPTISM OF THE LORD, YEAR A**

After the pomp and circumstance of Christmas, Baptism of Our Lord Sunday can sometimes get overlooked.

### REFERENCES

Isaiah 42:1-9

Psalm 29

Acts 10:34-43

Matthew 3:13-17

### COLORS

White

Have you ever known a polar bear? I don't mean the real bear. I mean those nutcases who decide that the best way to celebrate the new year is by finding a semi-ice-covered body of water and jumping in. There must be some sort of sanity gene missing from these folks. I have even read of mishaps taking place during this annual polar bear swim: heart attacks, frostbite, chilblains - whatever those are. Yet, they keep doing it. Not only that, but they seem evangelistic about it. They talk about what a wonderful experience it is; they bubble over with enthusiasm; they invite folks to join them in their madness: "Come on in, the water's fine!"

I'm always suspicious when someone tells me that. Even in the heat of summer, when a friend is swimming in a pool or lake and tells me not to worry, the water's fine. I don't trust them. I don't like the chill of plunging into icy water. Oh, it can be refreshing when you are sweating like crazy, and the air temperature hits three digits. But most of the time, I'm reluctant. I don't like to shiver. I don't like to lose the feeling in my toes.

At the same time, I don't like being left out. When it looks like folks are having fun, and I'm standing on the shore watching, my desire to join the party overrides my fear of freezing, and I'll jump in too. Or wade in. Slowly. But I'll get there eventually.

John stood in the waters of the Jordan River and shouted out, "Come on in, the water's fine." Some joined him, and others stood on the shore. He had a word or two for those on the shore, but that is a different passage. Today, we look at one who took him up on the invitation and joined him in the waters.

There are a whole lot of issues that grow out of this little gospel moment, and I can't pretend to deal with them all here. We know how seriously the church takes these things by the level of debate surrounding baptism issues. First, there is infant versus believer's baptism; then there is the methodological question, followed by the liturgical issues (such as, "Do you invoke the whole Trinity or simply baptize in the name of Jesus?"). All these matters have been hotly debated for centuries and are no closer to resolution than they were at the beginning.

Don't look for me to resolve them either! I am a United Methodist and hold to the validity of infant baptism, but accept those who choose believer's baptism as well. I am a United Methodist and recognize that our tradition is overwhelmingly weighted toward sprinkling, but I have taken baptismal candidates to pools and rivers and fonts from neighboring congregations for immersion baptism. I use the liturgy our church provides that emphasizes the Trinity (in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit), but acknowledge that our understanding of the sacrament as a whole comes from Jesus directly.

I can find meaning in all of it. I can find justification for baptizing in a variety of ways, in a variety of settings, with a variety of words. But there is one dimension that has to be present, in my way of thinking.

When Jesus climbed down the bank into the river, John was shocked. How he knew who Jesus was, we aren't told. Maybe something from their shared family history gave John the clue about who was standing in front of him. Maybe a whisper from the Spirit in John's ear as Jesus approached made him think that something was wrong in the way this scene was playing out. Maybe there is just something about the face of Jesus that caused fishermen to leave their nets, broken people to reach out in hope, powerful people to tremble in their boots, and this wild man from the desert to want to fall to his knees and be blessed instead of attempting to confer a blessing. We don't know what happened to cause John to say what he said (or caused Matthew to record what he said). But

something did. There was some sense of what was right and what was wrong, and John's sense of what was right was that Jesus should be the one blessing and baptizing.

Yet, Jesus says, "let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness" (verse 3:15) "Let it be so now"? What does that mean? Let's go through the motions? Let's pretend for now? What is this righteousness Jesus is trying to fulfill?

The truth is, we don't really know what this means. We have some guesses, and some are more certain than others. But we don't really know. What makes sense to me is that Jesus is saying, "I want to join the party. I want to be seen joining the party. I want my ministry, my life, my witness to be about becoming a part of the body, about joining up with the kingdom of God. I want to be present with those who are longing for relationship and meaning."

John's hesitation has to do with, some say, his understanding of baptism being one of repentance and forgiveness of sins. Jesus had no need to have sins forgiven. So, why would he consent to this baptism? Maybe Jesus' view of what was happening was larger. Maybe John, and most of us, think of repentance as turning away. When we repent, we turn away from our sins and our life of sin. We are sorry for what had gone on before; we are sorry for what we had done before; and we are pledging to not engage in those behaviors again. That is how we understand repentance.

But what if Jesus understood repentance to be turning toward? What if the gesture that Jesus was making was one of inclusion, acceptance, or entrance? This was a beginning moment for the ministry that Jesus would perform. This was a sign that something new was about to be launched, and this new thing was nothing less than the kingdom of God, nothing less than a new way of living in community.

Righteousness refers to being faithful to relationships. You cannot be righteous by yourself. You are righteous with God and righteous with one another. Righteousness implies a relationship. The necessary requirement for baptism in The United Methodist Church is the community. Baptism is a corporate act; it is almost always done as a part of worship. When, in extreme cases, it is not a part of a regular worship service, then the community must be represented. Baptism is an entrance into the fellowship of believers; it is joining with the body. Once you have been baptized, you are never alone. There is always a family around you. You have joined something larger than yourself, which is sometimes startling, but always worthwhile.

Isaiah speaks of this community as well. It sounds like this text (Isaiah 42:1-9) is about a person. This is the first of four passages called the Servant Song of the book of Isaiah. There is

considerable debate about who the servant is referred to in the first verse of chapter forty-two. On the one hand, it seems to be the ideal follower of God. Maybe there isn't a particular reference at all; it is just anyone who seeks to follow; this is the kind of life he/she will lead; this is the kind of person she/he will be. It is an example passage.

Some argue that this was a passage read after the coronation of a new king. It was a reminder to the king and to the nation that leaders serve not for their benefit, not from their power, but as servants of the Lord who called and equipped them to serve. It was a celebration of a new administration launched in hope. Sound familiar? If only all our leaders saw themselves first as servants, what a difference that might make in governing.

Others who read a little further in these verses determine that the servant is the whole people of God. When Isaiah speaks of calling, of being the light on the hill, we know he is referring to the whole nation of Israel that was called to that task. It has echoes in Jesus' words when he tells us that we are salt and light, the church is the light on the hill, inviting all the world to come and know what we know, to know who we know. So, the servant is the community of faith.

Then, of course, we Christians can't help but read these words and imagine Christ. Jesus was the servant of the Lord who showed us what a life of service was like. Jesus was one who lifted up the fallen, who received the Spirit of the Lord to bring forth justice. This is a prophetic passage, spoken and written hundreds of years before the one to whom it refers came to be.

Finally, it is hard to read these words and not hear the call upon our own lives. Each of us (as well as all of us, mentioned a couple of paragraphs ago) is called to serve the lord, to work for justice. For Each of us, this is a call passage, an invitation to a way of living.

So, you might be asking, "Which is it? Which one is the right answer?" Well, all of them. That is the glory of the Bible. It functions on many levels at the same time. I believe that, historically, it referred to the king who ascended to the throne of Israel and to the nation that ruler led.

Sometimes people listened and sometimes they didn't. I think it also carried the seeds of prophecy, paving the way for the coming of the Christ. Did Isaiah know he was talking about Jesus of Nazareth? Probably not, but God knew. Just as God knows that we have the opportunity to live as servants to God and to the people. This is indeed a calling, an invitation to live in certain ways, to work for certain ends.

And what might those ends be? Did you notice that the word "justice" appears three times in the first four verses? That seems pretty important, especially when we read that we or he or someone

“will not faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth.” We can’t rest; the task isn’t finished; Christ’s work isn’t done until justice is established on earth.

What defines justice? Well, that is more than I can resolve in the small space left here. But a glimpse is given in the passage. To establish justice is to open the eyes of the blind - whether those blinded by material things or limited education or poverty or prejudice or... It is the work of the servants of the lord to help folks see what they overlook. To establish justice is to release those who are imprisoned in dungeons or darkness, whether those dungeons are human-made barriers to freedom and wholeness, sustenance, or beauty, or practices that enslave minds or resources and keep people trapped in a cycle of poverty or on the brink of illness or disease from the lack of sanitary systems we take for granted; or the lack of resources or knowledge that will enable children of God to know how valuable they are to their creator and this world. That is the work of establishing justice on earth - to be in the business of systemic change, lasting change that makes life better for all. These are the new things that are about to spring forth, the new things that we are to tell about. This is the community that we build when we enter into the fellowship of the baptized. It is an invitation to be present with one another.

Come on in, the water’s fine.

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