

Baptism of our Lord
Isaiah 43.1-7/Acts 8.14-17/Luke 3.15-22
St. Paul's Church, Halifax
14 January 2006

“THE BAPTISM OF THE LORD AND THE WATER OF LIFE”

~Paul H. Friesen~

‘Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’

And at the end of this story, as you know, Jesus heads out into the desert to confront evil in the shape of the devil, the tempter. It was not a coincidence that Jesus was told that he was God’s beloved child on the eve of his great battle with the world, the flesh, and the devil. And it is not an accident that we believe that baptism is a sign of God’s love for us rather than a reward for behaving ourselves. And it is very, very helpful for us to think about our baptism this way on the eve of the great battles of our life, or in their midst, or when we doubt the love of God for us in those small, corrosive moments.

Today, as we celebrate the Baptism of our Lord, we don’t so much step back and admire it all as we enter into the day and rejoice. We were baptized because Jesus was! We were baptized because we too are the children of God, beloved by God. We cannot atone for the sins of the world, or ourselves, as Jesus, the ‘lamb of God’ did. We cannot gain victory over death and the grave as Jesus did. But as we read last autumn in the book of *Hebrews*, in the strength of Jesus Christ we can follow Jesus Christ into every desert. ‘It was fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings...Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters.’¹

Perhaps we all agree on all of this. But why is water so important? Why was Jesus baptized, and why must we be baptized to enter into the full life of the body of Christ?

Was Christian baptism not just some bizarre first century initiation rite among many secret societies in ancient Rome? This has, of course, been suggested. No, baptism wasn’t a form of hazing such as one hears about from time to time in orientation week at university. It is a gift given; but how do we receive it and enjoy it? This brings us back to water.

¹ *Hebrews 2.10-11*

When I was discussing baptism with our St. Paul's confirmation class about a year ago, I asked its members why they thought water was so important to the baptismal rite. They quickly jumped on the fact that water is 'primal', that water is a fundamental element of life and therefore a potent symbol of God's gift of life to us. That is a brilliant conclusion.

In the Pulitzer Prize novel called *Gilead*, published three years ago, Marilynne Robinson speaks through an old preacher who has had a son at seventy or so, and in the late 1950s is now leaving him his recollections as he is certain that his own life is coming to a close. The Rev'd John Ames is very much a scholar, but he delights in the simple things of life around him as he recalls his life, and the life of his father and grandfather, preachers like him. And so, of course, he leaves thoughts about baptism for his young son, six years of age:

*You and Tobias (he says) are hopping around in the sprinkler. The sprinkler is a magnificent invention because it exposes raindrops to sunshine. That does occur in nature, but it is rare. When I was in seminary I used to go sometimes to watch the Baptists down at the river. It was something to see the preacher lifting one who was being baptized up out of the water and the water pouring off the garments and the hair. It did look like a birth or a resurrection. For us (he continues) the water just heightens the touch of the pastor's hand on the sweet bones of the head, sort of like making an electrical connection. I've always loved to baptize people (he concludes), though I have sometimes wished there was more shimmer and splash in the way we go about it. Well, you two are dancing around in your iridescent little downpour, whooping and stomping as sane people ought to do when they encounter a thing so miraculous as water.*²

Water is indeed miraculous. It is the stuff out of which God creates the world, over which God's spirit sweeps on the eve of the first day of creation: 'The voice of the Lord is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the Lord, over might waters'—so it is recalled in the ancient psalm we have just heard.³

And in the poetry of the first chapter of the Hebrew Scriptures—our Scriptures too—water is formed into that which blesses life. On the second day, and the third day, and the fifth day God divides the waters from the air and the waters from the land and fills the water full of life: 'So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm...And God saw that it was good. God blessed them, saying, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas".'⁴

Water is a creature of God. It responds to God's word: God is its master. That doesn't mean that we can simply say that whatever water does or seems to do

² Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004), p.63.

³ *Psalm* 29.3

⁴ *Genesis* 1.21-22. All biblical quotations are from the *New Revised Standard Version* unless noted otherwise.

necessarily represents God's will. We live in a fallen world that feels the complicated consequences of our good and bad choices. And we live in a fallen world in which some, but not others, are swept away by tsunamis and floods. But in the end we believe that God is creator and master of water as well as master of everything else. In the end water is for our good.

If God saw the waters of the earth in the midst of his creative acts and he confessed it to be 'good' and 'very good', how much so the waters of baptism which are set apart as a sign of God's loving redemption of us through Jesus Christ? Martin Luther, the first great reforming theologian of the great Reformation put it this way in the catechism he wrote about baptism for the spiritual formation of those in the church: 'Note the distinction, then: Baptism(al water) is a very different thing from all other water, not by virtue of the natural substance but because here something nobler is added. God himself stakes his honour, his power, and his might on it. Therefore it is not simply a natural water, but a divine, heavenly, holy and blessed water.'⁵

In the dry land in which Judaism was born, and Christianity from Judaism, water was a sign of blessing, water had the power to preserve one from death by dehydration, and the power to cleanse.

In the Jewish spiritual renewal movements of Jesus' day, baptism was practiced, among them by John the Baptist. And Jesus did say: 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.'⁶ Exactly how this was meant to take place, we don't know, only that it most obviously was by means of this great gift, water.

Baptism wasn't originally a private thing, though it was meant to be personal. And often the personal meaning followed the corporate act. We read in the New Testament that whole households were baptized: the household of Stephanus, and Lydia, and Crispus and the unnamed Warden of the city jail in Phillipi—that is, adults, children, infants, servants.⁷ Twenty centuries ago society didn't live by the faulty belief that it was possible to live or be raised as a self-contained individual, or to live in a 'neutral' household with no particular belief. Of course, some believers weren't heads of households—we are left with few details, only that baptism was a gift for all who would be Christians.

In a little guidebook called the *Didache* ('The Teaching'), written about the same time as the Apostles' letters and Gospels, a little before 100 a.d., baptismal instructions are given to the faithful: 'Now concerning baptism, baptize as follows: after you have reviewed all these things, baptize "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" in running water. But if you have no running water, then baptize in some other water; and if you are not able to

⁵ *The Large Catechism of Martin Luther*, trans. Robert H. Fisher (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959), p.82.

⁶ *Matthew* 28.19

⁷ *I Corinthians* 1.16; *Acts* 16.15; 16.34; 18.8.

baptize in cold water, then do so in warm. But if you have neither, then pour water on the head three times “in the name of the Father and Son and Holy Spirit”.⁸ A little over one hundred years beyond the death of the last Apostle, another remaining Christian manual put it this way: ‘First baptize the little ones; if they can speak for themselves, they shall do so; if not, their parents or other relatives shall speak for them.’⁹

And so till today, though practice varies, it is water that is a constant, and that it means we have the promise not only of God’s creation with us, but the mark of our redemption—not earned, but given in love to us.

If we doubt it all—God, the church, Christ, life itself—we should at least think about water given, and water received. This is our connection to God almighty which is as real as water on our forehead or in our mouth. This is why it matters that we use water: because it is an outward and visible and touchable sign of an inner grace or gift of God’s love.

And this is why we turn to real bread and real wine, as they too are real, created things that are signs of enormous spiritual realities—Christ’s death and resurrection and ascension.

Perhaps, like the Rev’d John Ames we should think about the Baptism of our Lord when we see the water fly in the summer heat, or in the grey mist that finally feeds the birth of spring. But we should always give thanks that God’s love is real. And in the strength of that love, as real as water, rejoice that we can enter whatever desert awaits us with whatever temptations will confront us. And in the strength of that love it is ours to repent of what destroys our lives and others, and to form and discipline our lives to bring the water of life to our families and our parish and our neighbourhood—our kitchen, our office, our classroom, our workroom.

Amen.

⁸ In *The Apostolic Fathers*, trans. J.B. Lightfoot and J.R. Harmer; ed. and rev. Michael W. Holmes (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1990), p.153.

⁹ *The Apostolic Constitution of Hippolytus*, trans. B.S. Easton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1934), p.45. This is best dated to the early 200s.