

Baptism of our Lord  
Genesis 1.1-10/Acts 19.1-7/Mark 4.1-11  
St. Paul's Church, Halifax  
11 January 2009

~Paul H. Friesen~

Over the past three Sundays (just as the church did in the early centuries) we have centered our worship on the incarnation of God in the person of Jesus Christ, who became one of us, and lived among us.

In these 'white' seasons (as we call them) we celebrate the whole life of Christ. We do it in an attempt to understand not only God, but ourselves, because we share with Christ both his earthly life and heavenly image.

Beginning late on Christmas Eve, we have passed through the Nativity (or birth) of Christ, the Naming (or circumcision) of Christ, and the Epiphany (or revelation) of the Christ child to the world through the eyes of the eastern magi.

And today we go with Christ, the young adult, down to the Jordan River, where he is baptized, in order to understand our own baptism. And to begin this little journey we need to think about the Scriptures just read to us.

The passages read weren't caught up in the modern politics of water scarcity and water ownership.

These debates certainly should benefit from the Christian confession, and the deep human conviction, that water is a divine gift for the whole world, not just Kings, and Presidents, and C.E.O.s and consumers.

Today's Scriptures reveal the deeper meaning attached to water by our spiritual ancestors, nicely summed up in one of our own Anglican baptismal prayers.

It goes this way:

*We thank you, Almighty God, for the gift of water.  
Over water the Holy Spirit moved in the beginning of creation.  
Through water you led the children of Israel out of their bondage in Egypt into the land of promise.  
In water your Son Jesus received the baptism of John and was anointed by the Holy Spirit as the Messiah, the Christ, to lead us, through his death and resurrection, from the bondage of sin into everlasting life.  
We thank you, Father, for the waters of baptism.<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> *Book of Alternative Services* (Toronto: Anglican Book Centre: 1985), p.157-158.

This echoes the opening, poetic verses of *Genesis* in which God's spirit (or wind or breath) sweeps over the face of the watery chaos and divides it, thus forming the atmosphere above and the lands and the seas that sustain life.<sup>2</sup> And it echoes God's delivery of Israel in the book of *Exodus* from a miserable slavery to a hostile master-race.

Water is a gift and a creature of God. It responds to God's word, and not only at creation.

I spoke with a sailor in our parish, this week, about the complexities of navigation when out of sight of land for days and weeks. And a landlubber like me has to confess a little terror at the picture of creation in *Genesis*, before God speaks over the waters to separate them from land and sky.

It is true that we now live in a fallen world in which some, but not others, are swept away by tsunamis and floods, and that others are left dry and gasping. But in the end we confess that God is the creator of water as well as everything else, and that God still speaks to his creation, no matter how wayward creation has become.

The Hebrew poet of this morning's psalm has reminded a thousand generations: 'The voice of the Lord is over the waters...the voice of the Lord is full of majesty.'

This takes us to the doorstep of baptism.

What does it mean that Jesus was baptized with water?

There is tremendous hope for us in the story of the baptism of Jesus. In the early third century Bishop Hippolytus said: 'It happened not only that that the Lord was being baptized—he was also making a new creation. The Lord was bringing the alienated under the sceptre of adoption...

When the Holy Spirit descended in the form of a dove, and the Father's voice spread everywhere, it was fitting that "the gates of heaven should be lifted up".<sup>3</sup>

Baptism, like water is a gift. It is not the reward for a pious Christian life, or held back until we have a certain form of 'conversion'. Baptism is a sure and certain sign of our new creation by God. It is a source of strength for our spiritual journey through our earthly life, with all its fears and complications.

This is why it is called a 'sacrament', an earthly act blessing us with a spiritual reality. It is what St. Paul is referring to when we speaks so often in the

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<sup>2</sup> It seems as if the ancient Hebrews, in looking at their world like the other cultures of their day, believed that water was essential to life and was around, below and above the space carved out by God at creation for his creatures. The language used in the story of Noah (see *Genesis* 7.11, 8.1-3) suggests they understood the 'great flood' in this way too—the watery chaos was collapsing in; creation was reversed.

<sup>3</sup> In *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Mark*, ed. Thomas Oden and Christopher Hall (Downers Grove: IVP, 1998), p.11-12.

Scriptures about us being ‘in Christ’. ‘We must learn’, said Martin Luther the great reformer, ‘what benefits, gifts, and effects baptism brings.’<sup>4</sup>

Baptism is a gift from God. As it was put by George Sumner, the principal of Wycliffe College right here a few years ago, nothing makes the grace of God clearer than the baptism of an infant—who has earned nothing.

When the church was formed in the days after the Ascension of Christ, it was given a simple mission, in the last three verses of Matthew’s Gospel in which Christ says: ‘Make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.’<sup>5</sup>

And the church did this. It baptized whole households, as the Scriptures make clear in the book of Acts and in the Epistles. Lydia, the merchant and her household and the jailer of Phillipi and his household were baptized in just one chapter of the book of *Acts*.<sup>6</sup> And where there were adults who were not heads of households, but desired baptism they were baptized without their families.

Baptism was a gift given freely on confession of faith in the early church. It was given so freely that in the pages of Scripture some turned away in the years or months or days after. Because Baptism is a divine gift that can be rejected, or set aside or forgotten in our lives. But that can never change what Baptism is—a pure and simple gift.

If we were baptized as adults, or as children, what should we think about when we think about baptism; what shall we tell our children about their baptism; how shall we speak of baptism to children or adults not baptized?

What did God say over Jesus in the Jordan River: ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’ Jesus, the Son of God from before the world existed, was not baptized for the remission of sin. This of course is not the gift he required, as we require it.

But behind the gift of forgiveness stands the bigger divine word; ‘You are beloved; I am pleased because you are my child’. And this word is spoken over the waters at every baptism.

To be beloved of God does not mean we are freed from the life that everyone shares, with its trials and deep sorrows. As we shall be reminded, again, in Lent: immediately upon baptism, Jesus was thrust out into the same wilderness we all walk through, and was tempted in ways in which we are all tempted. But Jesus was always beloved of God, and so are we.

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<sup>4</sup> *The Large Catechism of Martin Luther*, trans. Robert H. Fischer (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), p.83; or in any edition Part IV.23.

<sup>5</sup> *Matthew* 28:18-20; all biblical quotations in this homily are from the *New Revised Standard Version*.

<sup>6</sup> *Acts* 16. 14-15; 33-34.

Baptism is not only the most certain sign of God's grace, it is the source of all spiritual gifts: whether we are priests or laity, rich or poor, thinkers or doers, at St. Paul's Anglican or First Baptist. Because we all share one baptism.

In our daily parish Bible-reading schedule for this past week, St. Paul spoke to the anxious congregation of Thessalonica with dark, poetic words about the end of this world as we know it and the birth of the new—but in between he repeatedly gives *thanks* for these parishioners.

And the source of the Apostle's gratitude become clear in this week's daily parish lectionary readings from *Galatians*, in which the Apostle says: 'As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourself with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.'<sup>7</sup>

Baptism is a gift from God, over which we heard the words spoken to Jesus Christ; we too are beloved of God, and God is pleased that we are God's children.

Baptism, the first sacrament, is the only gift that fits us to gather around the table of the Lord which is the second sacrament. Baptism is the only gift we can bear as we come forward to receive this second gift. We can't earn the bread and wine of communion, which is the life of Christ, any more than we earn baptism.

We don't bar those too young from the table, or those not mentally fit, or those who can't focus, or are too sinful or those we don't like—any more than we bar children from our family meals, or the early church barred members of its households from their Christian meal, the Lord's Supper.

We only need two empty hands, hands with which to receive.

We can reject our Baptism, or underestimate it, but Jesus Christ did not. He passed through his wilderness on the strength of those words—'you are my beloved'—and so can we.

We should all really approach the Lord's Table the way any child should approach the dinner table, knowing that whatever she has done that day, she is not denied food or fellowship with her family, because she is a 'beloved child'.

And we should all really leave the table as children do—knowing in spite of it all their parents' and their family's love and forgiveness and good will is assured, and they can live differently because of it.

How many chances should I give someone, Peter asked Jesus piously: seven?

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<sup>7</sup> *Galatians* 3.27-28.

No, said, Jesus—rolling his eyes I think—not seven times but at least seventy-seven. And then Jesus told a parable about forgiving others as often as God forgives us.<sup>8</sup>

Our baptism is the sacrament that can never be taken away, because the love of God for us is as real as the water that was poured on us or as real as the water in which we were immersed. The same voice that spoke over Jesus, speaks over us. It is this voice that invites us to the table.

And at every Eucharist, we have a seventh or a seventy-seventh opportunity to walk away from the table forgiven, and prepared to use all the gifts God has given us—time and abilities and desires and money and home and attention.

And so our departure from every liturgy becomes an opportunity to strengthen old spiritual habits and take up new spiritual disciplines in which to carry these gifts. Because the gifts of God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) are treasures—to be always loved by all of us and always given away to others, but never thrown away carelessly by ourselves.

We give thanks today for the baptism of Jesus Christ, and for our baptism into Jesus Christ.

Amen.

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<sup>8</sup> *Matthew* 18.21-22. Or in some other old manuscripts Jesus says ‘seventy times seven’.