

11 January 2009

As I said last week, we are in the season of Epiphany, of God being made manifest to the world, and one of the stories associated with that season is the baptism of Christ. Now, that story has always perplexed me, even when I was a kid. (And yes, I really did ponder these things when I was a kid!) John the Baptist is going on about “repent of your sins and be baptized!” but Jesus is supposed to be without sin, so why did he need to be baptized? I didn’t get it. I still don’t fully get it. But let’s ponder this story from the perspective of what it tells us about God.

Stepping back for a moment, let’s recap what baptism is. Baptism is a sacrament, and as you may know, Catholics have seven sacraments. But Martin Luther pruned the list back to include only the ones that Jesus himself endorsed, which brings the list down to two: baptism and communion. The thing is: you take communion over and over again, whereas you’re only baptized once. As a result, we have a lot more experience with communion and it has more of a chance to work its way into our subconscious, into the very make-up of our being. But baptism is far rarer. Even churches that practice communion once a month do it far more often than they do baptisms. So we don’t feel it as deeply, we don’t think about it as much, we don’t have the depth and range of experience as we do with communion.

The short-hand view of baptism that most people probably just assume is that baptism has to do with cleansing us of our sins. We get that from John, of course, but also from modern-day Baptists and others who emphasize repentance as the meaning of baptism. But baptism actually has a whole multitude of meanings and layers, and even for Baptists, it can’t just mean cleansing of sin. Because the truth is: even after we’re baptized, we all still sin. This has been a dilemma for the church from the very beginning, but we all do it. Baptism simply does not make us sinless.

Anyway, we come out of a tradition that baptizes infants. The practice has been around since the second century or so, and no one is going to believe that baptized infants never sin. So there must be other meanings for baptism. And indeed, if we look carefully in the Bible, we find that there is a whole host of meaning.

Jesus himself, for example, spoke of his death as a baptism when he told the disciples, “Are you prepared to receive the baptism I will be baptized with?” St. Paul picks up this idea and runs with it, talking about how in baptism we die and rise again with Christ. In baptism we take on Christ’s death and his life. We are born as new people with a new identity. This is why we do baptize infants, because in addition to their physical birth, they are also spiritually born into a community of faith.

Baptism has even more meanings associated with it. For example, pretty much any story about water in the whole Bible can be connected to baptism: the waters of creation, the waters of the flood, the parting of the Red Sea, the crossing of the Jordan, etc., etc. But let’s pause here, and keeping in mind what we’ve talked about so far: baptism as sharing in the death and new life of Christ, baptism as rebirth into a new identity and community, let’s return then to Jesus’ own baptism and again ask ourselves, what do we learn about God in this act? How is God revealed in Christ’s baptism?

I think I made a mistake when I thought that baptism only meant to Jesus what it meant to John. What Jesus does time and time again is take existing traditions and give them a fuller, deeper meaning. Not to cancel out the old understanding, but to flesh it out, as when he says, “I have come not to abolish the law but to fulfill it.” By being baptized, Jesus takes an existing ritual – a ritual that existed within Judaism even before John – and adds to its meaning. So if we later came to understand baptism as us being reborn into Christ, maybe in Christ’s baptism he was reborn into us. Maybe in his baptism, the Sinless One took on the chains of our own bondage to sin. Maybe in his baptism, the Immortal One took on our mortality. Maybe in his baptism, the Resurrected One took on our deaths. This seems very likely, as Jesus spoke of his own death as a baptism.

There’s another little detail in the baptism story. Mark says that when Jesus is baptized, the heavens are torn open and a dove descends saying, “This is my Beloved Son with whom I am well pleased.” That phrase, “torn open or torn apart,” in Greek is *schizo*, from which we get the word schism or schizophrenia. It’s a word that connotes violence. It’s echoed in many a psalm or plea from Old Testament prophets, “Oh, that you would tear open the heavens and come down!” Come down to clean up this mess, come down to smite the wrongdoers, come down with a mighty show of power and force your will on us mortals.

But in Mark’s gospel when the heavens are torn open, there’s no violence or smiting or force. Instead there is a dove, the symbol of peace. There is a message of love and blessing, “This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased.” And there is this example of Jesus, God made flesh, who is revealed not in a mighty show of power, but in the humble form of one who takes on all the frailty and suffering of our own puny, mortal existence. A God who identifies with us at our weakest. A God who doesn’t flex his muscles and throw his weight around, but who, in the words of Paul, empties himself and takes on the form of a servant, humbling himself even to death on a cross. This is a gentle God, a loving God, a God who is not afraid to die.

So if this is what we learn about God in Jesus’ baptism, it then starts having some meaning for our own baptisms as well. It’s less about making us sinless than it is about making us free from sin, that is, liberating us from the chains of sin that binds us. We are liberated because we are forgiven. We know this story, right? And we are born again, born into a new identity as disciples of Christ, born into a new community that has been called into existence by Christ. Jesus talks often about how what binds us to one another is not our blood ties, but our willingness to follow in God’s way. That’s what binds us together as church. Baptism, then, is not so much about saving my individual soul from hell. Rather, it’s about being reborn into a community in which all of us matter, a community created and forgiven and renewed by God. It’s not so much saving us from something as it is saving us for something.

And the hallmark of this community is that we are freed from the bondage of sin, and bound anew to God’s way of love and forgiveness. The hallmark of this community is that the least among us is the greatest, humility, service, and self-giving. The hallmark of this community is that we love one another, and we constantly reach out to draw more people into this community of love.