

Church of the Good Shepherd and St. John the Evangelist

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“More Than Fire Insurance”

Back in the third and fourth centuries, it had become common for many people who wanted to join the Christian church, and who in fact considered themselves Christians, to delay their baptism until they were on the verge of death. That may sound strange to us, but there is a kind of logic to it if you accept the assumptions that they were making. If baptism is a one-time opportunity to have all your sins forgiven, and if it can't be repeated, then it makes sense to wait to be baptized until you're past the point of sinning, just before you die.

Saint Athanasius, the great fourth-century bishop of Alexandria, is supposed to have told a story about that practice. He told it with a smile, probably not meaning it as accurate history. Athanasius said that a predecessor of his had told him about a dream in which God spoke to him about the popularity of deathbed baptism. In the dream, the bishop was asked why he kept sending God all those neatly wrapped packages that had nothing inside!

Here's a more up-to-date baptism story, one that many clergy can tell with minor variations. A phone call comes to the church from a woman who isn't a member but who is very worried about a religious issue. "I just had a baby," she says, "and my sister told me that if my baby died without being baptized he would go to hell. Is that true?"

Today in the church's calendar is that Sunday of the Baptism of our Lord, and we're invited by that theme to focus on baptism. But how do we do that? Unfortunately, the Christian community is divided about the meaning and the practice of baptism, and has been for a long time. Some Christians - like the sister of the woman in that story - seem to think of baptism as a kind of spiritual fire insurance. If you don't have it you're out of luck, but once you're baptized you're safe. It's almost like magic. For others, baptism is just a right of passage, a naming ceremony which doesn't have any deep meaning. It doesn't really do anything. Still others think that a person has to be old enough to understand and to make a profession of faith before he or she is baptized. In addition to those differences, we have disagreements about how baptism should be done - pouring, sprinkling, immersion, or what? So for the church as a whole, there's some embarrassment about baptism. We agree that it's to be done, but not on what it is or what it accomplishes.

The Christian community for which Matthew wrote his gospel also seems to have been embarrassed about baptism, but in their case it was the baptism of Jesus that was a problem. Why should Jesus have been baptized? What John was administering was "a baptism of repentance," and did the sinless Son of God need anything like that? He didn't

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have any sins to repent of! And if he was spiritually clean, why would he have needed any spiritual cleansing?

For the writer of the earlier gospel of Mark there apparently was no difficulty here: Jesus just comes to the Jordan and is baptized by John. But by the time Matthew was writing, when there had been a little more time for reflection on who Jesus was, this apparently had become a problem for some people. So Matthew inserts a little dialogue in the story. John says, "I shouldn't be baptizing you. It ought to be the other way around". And Jesus replies, "It's all right for now. We need to "fulfill all righteousness." Now that's kind of vague, but it suggest that there's a good reason for what Jesus is doing.

If we realize that Matthew presents Jesus' baptism as a model for Christians, we can begin to get a better understanding of what our own baptism is about. At the very end of this gospel, Jesus tells his followers to "go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." That's the way righteousness is fulfilled in the world. That's how the Christian community is to be built up, and it begins with Jesus.

So let's take a closer look at the story of Jesus' baptism and at its place in the gospel. As Jesus comes up from the water, the Holy Spirit descends on him and there's a heavenly voice saying, "This is my Son, the Beloved." Those words echo the coronation formula of the kings of Judah that we find in the second Psalm, where God says to the new king, "You are my son; today I have begotten you." If we continue reading Matthew, we next have the story of the temptations of Christ, followed by the beginning of his ministry. So God declares Jesus his Son; that sonship is immediately tested (with Satan saying "If you are the Son of God, then.."); and the work of the Messiah starts with this proclamation of the kingdom of God.

In other words, Jesus' baptism is the beginning of a process, the start of a whole like in the service to God and God's world. It's his calling to be the "Servant of the Lord," about whom the prophet Isaiah wrote. Baptism is not something that's done once for all and can then be forgotten about. Baptism is a beginning - for Jesus and for each of us. It is the start of our ministry, the ministry of all the baptized.

So, baptism is a beginning that God brings about. It's God's act, not ours. The reason that baptism is more than an everyday bath or shower is that God's word, God's command and promise, stand behind it. It doesn't depend on our knowledge or the maturity of our faith, but on God's action. Baptism is the beginning of a life - a Christian life in which we're to grow, to increase in the faith by which we ever and again grasp the gift God has given us.

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In his letter to the Romans, Paul says that baptism means God joining us to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We are to die to sin and rise to new life, not just on the single day we were baptized, but every day thereafter. That's the pattern of the Christian life – to die to everything that separates us from God, and rise to life in communion with God. Which is to say that Christian life is the way of Christ, patterned on his death and resurrection.

“Will my baby go to hell if he dies without being baptized?” It's not a trivial question. But you should go on to ask, “What will baptism mean for my child if he lives?” (And after all, that's what is most likely to happen.) What does your baptism mean for your life? It's supposed to mean living a life that is more and more conformed to the pattern of Christ, a pattern of faith, love and hope. Salvation is God's free gift. It doesn't require your good works. But God save us for good works. And when we die, we don't want God to find us to be like those packages St. Athanasius spoke of – neatly wrapped, with our baptismal certificates and church going credentials in order, but empty.

Holy Baptism, like Holy Communion, is very rich in meaning. We can't give any adequate definition of it in a few words, but one important thing we can say about baptism is that is the beginning of life as a disciple of Jesus Christ. Think of your baptism as a service of commissioning to follow and serve him. That means a commitment to continue as a member of the Christian community, to hear God's word regularly, and share in the Lord's Supper. It is a call to struggle against evil and repent when we fail. Being baptized invites us to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ in word and deed, as we are given the opportunity to do so in the situations in which we live.

Those are not easy or minor commitments. They aren't supposed to be. Being Christian is a life and death commitment, not a hobby that we can take care of in our spare time. But it is a life empowered by the same Spirit who descended on Jesus at his baptism, the Spirit of adoption who makes us daughters and sons of God.

Amen.

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