

Baptism Series #1: Baptism is saying “yes” to God’s call

Sunday, Jan. 7, 2018

First Sunday After the Epiphany: The Baptism of Our Lord

The Episcopal Church of St. John the Baptist, Aptos, CA

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The season after the Epiphany begins with the story of Jesus’s baptism, and for the next five weeks between now and the start of Lent on Ash Wednesday, the theological theme running through our liturgical life is a focus on God making himself known. We remember how God made himself known in the person of Jesus Christ and how we are called to make him known to others.

It’s an appropriate time in the liturgical year to take a moment to reflect on our baptism and our baptismal vows. Through our baptism, we are joined to Christ, and in our baptismal vows, we commit to make him known in our world. For the next five Sundays, we’ll look closely at each question in our Baptismal Covenant and consider what it means for us at this moment. This week, as we remember Jesus’s baptism, we’ll spend a little time thinking about baptism itself - what it is, what it means, and what its purpose is in our lives.

Today, many Christians tend to think that baptism is primarily about washing away sin, that we are baptized in order to be forgiven of our sins and freed from sin. That understanding is a product of the emphasis the church placed on original sin beginning in the 5th century. The doctrine of original sin stated that all human beings are inheritors of the original sin of Adam and Eve, and we are therefore *born* in a state of sinfulness, even before we

have a chance to actually *do* anything that might be categorized as sinful. That belief combined with the high infant mortality rate at that time meant that baptizing babies was seen as a matter of life and death. If a child were to die without having been baptized, they believed that child would be condemned to hell based on the state of original sin in which they were born. But in the first few centuries after Jesus's life, death, and resurrection, baptism wasn't primarily about saving babies from hell. It was about a conversion of life, a commitment, a choice to follow God's will.

When John the Baptist began baptizing people in the River Jordan, he called them to come and be baptized "for the forgiveness of sins," so certainly forgiveness of sin is an important part of baptism. But neither John the Baptist nor the disciples of Jesus who later baptized people in Jesus's name understood sin as a "thing," a physical stain that could literally be washed off like a coating of dirt. Sin was a state of being, a way of life. It was about your actions, and forgiveness required repentance and amendment of life.

John scoffs at some who come to him seeking baptism as a kind of quick fix, like a "get out of jail free" card. He tells them that it is not enough to go through the motions of a ritual; to truly connect with God, to participate in the life he is offering them, they must "bear fruits worthy of repentance." Their lives must bear witness to their faith in their actions. Besides, if baptism was ONLY about washing away original sin, why did Jesus, whom the church teaches was "without sin," come to be baptized?

When Jesus was baptized, he oriented the human part of himself completely toward God. He affirmed all the things that had been said about him since his birth. His human nature said “yes” to God’s call on his life and brought itself completely in alignment with his divine nature. The baptism Jesus underwent wasn’t a kind of Clorox for the soul, a heavenly stain-remover. It was an expression of commitment, of pledging his life to God, of accepting God’s will for his life.

And ideally, we do this when we are baptized as well. When our Book of Common Prayer was revised in 1979, the theologians who worked on that project intentionally moved us away from the theology of baptism as washing away original sin and back to the much earlier theology of baptism as a sacrament of commitment, a sacrament of conversion. This is why the liturgy itself, the order of the service, sets out adult baptism as the “liturgical norm” for the rite – adult candidates are presented for baptism first, and the entire service is framed as one of commitment, one in which those being baptized take vows to act in a certain way, to *live out* the faith into which they are baptized in deed as well as in word.

Infant baptism is still the “statistical norm” in the Episcopal Church – meaning that there are more people baptized as infants than as adults in the Episcopal Church – but we do not *require* that infants be baptized. Because the theology of our prayer book emphasizes that baptism is a sacrament of conversion, of commitment, of a public declaration of faith, if we do baptize babies or younger

children, we require and take very seriously the vows on the part of the parents and godparents: those people must be wholly committed to the faith themselves and raise the child to know Jesus, so that one day that child might come to affirm the faith that was chosen for them as an infant.

When we are baptized, we say “yes” to God’s call on our lives. We pledge to follow Jesus, to live the way he taught us to live. At Jesus’s baptism, he heard the words, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with him I am well pleased.” At our baptism, we hear the words, “You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ’s own forever.”

We don’t hear the words “This is my Son or Daughter, the Beloved,” because we are not THE Son in the way Jesus was the Son, but at baptism we become *part of* the Son.

I take issue with our prayers that talk about baptism as the means through which we become “children of God,” because I see all people, regardless of whether they are baptized or not, or even whether they are Christians or not, as “children of God.” When someone is baptized, they don’t *become* a “child of God,” they were that already! When someone is baptized, they become a **Christian**, an identity much more specific than “child of God.” They become part of Christ, joined to his very life, death, and Resurrection.

When Jesus used the term “baptism” in his own teaching, he didn’t refer to when he was washed in the river Jordan, but to his impending death. “Can you be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?” he asks James and John when they are arguing over who will get to sit at his right and at his left when he comes into his glory. Jesus understands his baptism to be a baptism of suffering, which is perhaps why John the Baptist says that the one who will come after him will baptize “with fire.”

At our baptism, we are joined with Christ’s resurrected life, but we are also joined with the suffering he underwent at the Crucifixion. The commitment we make is one that may very well bring suffering into our lives as well, for if we live in the way Jesus lived, we will likely meet the same kind of resistance he did from the forces of this world that, as our Baptismal liturgy puts it, “rebel against God” and “destroy the creatures of God” (BCP 302).

But while we face uncertainty and danger in this life, through our baptism we are given a bond with God in Christ that is indissoluble (BCP 298). We are “sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism, and marked as Christ’s own forever.” Those are powerful words! “You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ’s own forever.” The Apostle Paul wrote that “nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus,” and nothing reminds us of that truth like our baptism.

Baptism is about commitment, but it's also about being given an identity. We choose to follow Christ, and we are marked as "Christ's own forever." We become part of that wonderful "paschal mystery;" we are joined to the mystical reality of the living, risen Christ that takes us over, indwelling us, inhabiting our very souls so that we begin to transform more and more into the likeness of him who made us.

We belong to Christ. That is the truth of who we are. And our lifelong task is to claim that identity, to keep reaffirming that identity, to say "yes" to God's call on our lives by striving to live into the vows we made in our Baptismal Covenant.

Today, in place of the Nicene Creed, we will reaffirm our Baptismal Covenant, in the words of the Apostle's Creed and the five vows that we took at our baptism.

If you haven't been baptized, you are still welcome to join us in reciting these words if they reflect your true belief and commitment, and we can talk later about baptism if you are interested in making that commitment. If you have been baptized but you don't remember making these vows and would like to make them again in an intentional, public way, there are several opportunities throughout the year when you can make a reaffirmation of faith.

Now, if you would turn to page ____ of your bulletin for the Renewal of the Baptismal Covenant, and please stand as you are able.