

1 Epiphany The Baptism of our Lord

Mark 1:9-11

January 8, 2012

Baptism is like... Pickling? An "Occupy" movement? A jump start on New Creation?

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Today we celebrate the Baptism of our Lord. And we will baptize Alicia Evonna, whose currently resting, I see, with her bottle! We all will witness and give our support to this newly baptized of Christ's community. And we will renew our baptismal vows.

Now John baptized Jesus. And that was in the River Jordan. (I want you to know that contrary to all airline regulations I brought back from the Holy Land some water from the River Jordan, and there are a few drops of it mingled in the Baptismal font. And that is a beautiful connection for us here!)

My question for today is, "Why was Jesus baptized at all?" People who were coming to John were being baptized confessing their sins. The idea was that their sins would be washed away. But Jesus was free from all sin, so what was the reason for his being baptized.

Let's start by looking at the context of Mark's Gospel. Luke Timothy Johnson tells us Mark's gospel is the story of how God came into the world, a world that is already hostage to enemy "forces." The Baptism is the first story in Mark's Gospel. It's four verses into the Gospel. And the Gospel starts out, "This is the Good News of Jesus Christ." This is the good news of "Jesus," translated from the Hebrew "Joshua," which means "God saves."

So translated into our terms, Mark's Gospel starts with, "Here is how God came into the world to save us." Good News, from battlefield earth, battlefield creation. God is here to save us. The first story in Mark is not about Jesus' birth. There's nothing about the angels, there's nothing about Mary and her cousin Elizabeth or about being pregnant. Nothing about angels. It's all about the baptism. So how is the baptism associated with saving us, with saving the world?

Now, I'll do one of my favorite things, which is, to talk about some of the words that we find in the Gospel. Those of you who like words can tune in; those of you who don't like words can tune out, unless you're going to be taking the SATs -this might be on it! That Greek word that we've come to translate "baptism" is "baptizmo." And what it means, for the doctors in the parish, and this is from Nicodemus, a Greek physician 200 years before Christ's birth, it means to soak something in a solution to change the original object. So in the context of pickling a vegetable this word "baptizmo" is used. It means to soak it in vinegar so that it is changed and it becomes something different.

In our context, God has sent Jesus to be baptized: There is a change going on, a change in Jesus. Because now he's named: Jesus. He's claimed. "This is my Beloved Son," God says. And He is commissioned to do something. "This is my Beloved Son in whom I am well-

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pleased.” And in the very next sentence after our reading today Jesus is sent out into the wilderness to be tempted. So immediately He goes out and He starts his ministry. Jesus was sent to the world to reclaim the world: to reclaim this hostile world for God.

In some ways Jesus’ coming into the world, and His being baptized, is like an “occupy” movement. Jesus comes into the world and bodily is here to point to the Truth. The occupy people come into hostile territory, physically, with their presence, to let us know the truth about economic systems: the truth about what is happening to people in this country and around the world, to show us that our system is broken. Jesus comes to be one of us. He is fully human, even as He is fully Divine. The occupy people stand with those who are oppressed and affected by this economic system. They stand in solidarity.

The other thing about the “occupy movement” is that they challenge each one of us to get busy, to figure out what we can do about this economic system. We may feel that we are the 99-percent. We may be one or two paychecks away from a major change in lifestyle. Recently I heard a report on NPR (National Public Radio) that said that a twenty percent reduction in pay, combined with a calamity, or a health issue, can catapult a family from “making it” into “not making it.” So we are, most of us, in that 99%. This is our context in the United States. But if, like me, you travel to Malawi, in Southern Africa, if you have gone to the Holy Land and seen the Palestinians, if you’ve gone anywhere in the world outside of the few top countries, economically, that is, you will see that we are the 1%. That doesn’t mean that you or I literally are “rich,” but it does mean that our lifestyle and our country use up most of the world’s resources. Now the Occupy people don’t have a Response. They don’t have a Solution.

When Jesus comes into the world to “occupy” it, it is more than an “occupation.” It is an act of Love, and an act of New Creation. What God wants, through Jesus, is to reconcile all Creation to God. God want us all Creation to be changed, every bit of Creation: not “us” and “them,” but “we,” all Creation, together, to be changed, to enjoy New Life in Him and become a New Creation. This is why God came, Jesus suffered on the Cross and died for our sins.

Baptism, and the baptism of Jesus, is the jump-start on this miraculous process. In Baptism, God invites each one of us to share with Him in loving and creating this New Life. And God allows us, each one, to decide how much of a part we want to play, how much we will act in this new Creation. God doesn’t specify what we need to do. We’re not automatons. And especially in the Episcopal Church we have a lot of leeway to decide what is right for us in community, in prayer, and in the context of our religion.

Jesus is the example. And we are to follow Him. For some of us it will be about challenging ourselves to seek and serve Christ in all persons. For some if us, sharing in this new Creation will be about renouncing evil: personal evil in our lives or evil as we see it within our culture, in our society. For some it will be about seeking justice.

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And for some it will be meeting that challenge to grow our faith. Some of us have faith that was very strong when we were ten or twelve, but we really haven't taken time as adults to look again at what we believe. We don't take necessarily the chance to question and to try to fit our own experience with what we learned before. And we'll find that God can withstand all of our scrutiny. And we'll come to a larger understanding.

For some of us, sharing in this New Life and in Creation will be about continuing the best we can, putting one foot in front of the other foot as we face crises or setbacks that threaten to destroy us.

God Himself names and claims each one of us in Baptism.

Do we accept the challenges of our Baptism?

Do we accept the invitation of our Baptism?

AMEN