

The Waters of Baptism

Isaiah 43:1-2; Luke 3:21-22

Sunday, January 12, 2024 at The First Congregational Church of Marshalltown, Iowa

- Introduction

Today is the Sunday that we remember the baptism of Jesus, that He insisted in being baptized along with many others as part of the Ministry of John the Baptist. John had tried to talk Him out of it, saying that He should be the one baptizing John, not the other way around. John had a point, but Jesus said that "it was to fulfill all righteousness." So Jesus was baptized by John with all the rest. This ancient rite, one of the Sacraments of the Church, is laden with meaning and importance. In fact, you cannot join the church unless you are baptized so it makes sense to review what it means and why we do it.

- Set the stage

To set the stage, so to speak, John the Baptist has been preaching out in the desert, calling for people to repent of their sins for the Kingdom of God is coming. Somehow, word got out about his ministry and people from all around the region, including Jerusalem, came out to see him. Christian history has several similar examples of people moving to the wilderness to get closer to God who then find that people are drawn to them because of their great wisdom. John, however, was unique. He claimed to be the forerunner of the Messiah and Scripture and Jesus bear witness to this. Jesus wins the argument and John agrees to baptize Him. After the baptism the Holy Spirit appears in the form of a dove and alights upon Him and God the Father speaks "You are My beloved Son. In You I am well pleased."

- Main Point

I think that main point of the Sacrament of Baptism is that it represents the end of an old life and the beginning of a new one. There is a story from an old edition of the Chicago Tribune that speaks to this new life. "It is the story of a Chinese immigrant who thought Americans celebrated Christmas as part of their patriotic duty. Relatives gave gifts. Neighbors prepared feasts. Storefronts in Chinatown advertised sales. But during her eight years in the United States, no one told her the biblical story behind Christmas — until this year. On Sunday, Yuan celebrated the birth of Jesus for the first time by immersing herself in the baptismal waters at Chinese Christian Union Church. "I have peace in my heart and joy," the 41-year-old seamstress said through a translator. "I'm giving the heavy burdens to Jesus..*" Several points in Scripture describe baptism as a symbol of a new life, not just changed priorities, but an actual new life. The person being baptized does so in light of the recognition that the Christ follower has actually died in the real sense of the word and has started a new and different life as a new and different person. The changes that are part of this new life may only come over time, but with the true follower they will come and nothing is ever quite the same.

- Application

The application is a matter of realization, that baptism is the symbol of a new life, and it is radical. One of my favorite verses in the Bible is 2 Corinthians 5:17, which states: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new." The new life of a Christ follower is the harbinger of an entirely new creation yet to come, a destiny

one would hardly ever dare to even imagine if it were not found in Scripture. Romans 6:4 says something similar: "Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life." One of the felt differences baptism symbolizes is that the Holy Spirit is always with us and that we never walk alone. The "waters" in the Old Testament passage in Isaiah represent not just death, as it does in the Sacrament of Baptism, but also the troubles of life and times of upheaval and great challenge. The promise of God to the people of Israel remains in the Sacrament of Baptism today. The Christ follower is never alone. The Spirit remains with us always.

- Conclusion

The Sacrament of Baptism was so important that Jesus Himself insisted that He participate in it. Since then, countless numbers of His followers have continued in that tradition, engaging in the Sacrament as a symbol of not just a changed, life but a new one. It will continue as long as there are followers of Christ on earth.

* <https://www.chicagotribune.com/2007/12/25/at-christmas-a-rebirth/>