

Jesus' Baptism & Our Immersion

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From the pulpit of
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Psalm 29

¹Ascribe to the LORD, O heavenly beings, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength. ²Ascribe to the LORD the glory of his name; worship the LORD in holy splendor. ³The voice of the LORD is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the LORD, over mighty waters. ⁴The voice of the LORD is powerful; the voice of the LORD is full of majesty. ⁵The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars; the LORD breaks the cedars of Lebanon. ⁶He makes Lebanon skip like a calf, and Sirion like a young wild ox. ⁷The voice of the LORD flashes forth flames of fire. ⁸The voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness; the LORD shakes the wilderness of Kadesh. ⁹The voice of the LORD causes the oaks to whirl, and strips the forest bare; and in his temple all say, "Glory!" ¹⁰The LORD sits enthroned over the flood; the LORD sits enthroned as king forever. ¹¹May the LORD give strength to his people! May the LORD bless his people with peace!

Mark 1:4-11

⁴John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. ⁸I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." ⁹In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. ¹¹And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

No angels. No shepherds. No Star. No Magi. No stable. Not a word about Mary and Joseph or a baby. The beginning of Mark's gospel reads like the Christmas tree, ornaments removed and dragged out the door. Bare, dry and clean. Nonetheless, for the first four hundred years of church history, Epiphany held far greater significance than Christmas. The two great feast days of the early church were Easter and Epiphany – celebrated long before Christmas was even established as a special holy day.

Epiphany marks the moments when the light shone bright to reveal who Jesus is. One moment commemorates the arrival of the Magi bearing gifts for the Christ Child, out of which grew our tradition of exchanging gifts. The other, a stronger and longer tradition establishes January 6th as the celebration of Jesus' baptism. Because, in the words of Fourth Century Archbishop John Chrysostom, "It was not when he was born that he became manifest to all ... but when he was baptized."¹

None of the gospels agrees with another on the details of Jesus birth; but all of them agree on this – at about the age of 30, Jesus went down to the Jordan River to be baptized by John. So today we observe Jesus' baptism and consider how his baptism plunges us into the depths of transformative ministry for the sake of the world. Overshadowed in our time and culture by Christmas, it's worth beginning a New Year thinking about how Jesus' own baptism immerses us in God's ministry on earth.

Now, the baptism of Jesus is also one of those curious Biblical events that scholars have debated and argued over for centuries. The questions abound: why did Jesus, who was without sin, submit himself to this act of cleansing for the forgiveness of sin? Should those who are baptized in his name be sprinkled with water to symbolize repentance and fresh beginning? Or should the church dunk the whole body under water as

¹ Chrysostom quote from P.C. Enniss "The Baptism of Jesus," preached at Central Presbyterian, Atlanta, 1/7/79.

evidence of our dying and rising with Christ? Should infants be baptized to enact a prevenient grace that precedes human decision; Or should one have to grow up to recognize the need for God's mercy before being baptized? Denominations divided over these questions; people were killed over these questions; wars were fought, in part, over these questions. Yet, for all the differences within Christianity, over the reason for Jesus' baptism, the theology of our baptism, and the method - immersion, pouring or sprinkling, the church has generally agreed that Jesus intentionally decided to be baptized as an example to those who would be his disciples.

Jesus showed up with the others who went out to the River to hear John's prophetic preaching; Jesus got in line with them; no one knew anything about him yet. But when the Galilean came up out of the water, Mark says, "He saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending ...". The heavens were torn apart, they were ripped open. The words are dramatic and powerful, echoing the imagery of Psalm 29: *The voice of the Lord is over the waters; the God of glory thunders...The voice of the Lord is powerful; the voice of the Lord is full of majesty.* When Jesus took his turn that day, the veil between Creator and Creation, was torn apart; by a God determined to have no division between God and us. Because Jesus was standing in water up to his waist, in person, nothing was standing between us and God.

Don Juel was a beloved New Testament scholar at Princeton Seminary. He was passionate about how serious Bible study can inform and shape the church, evidenced by the fact that he not only taught seminary students, but also a class for the middle school youth at his church. One Sunday, Don was teaching this text from Mark's gospel, and there was one kid in the class who obviously did not want to be there. His mother had forced him to come, and he resented it. You could tell by his body language. He turned his chair away from the group and faced the window. The kid's attitude troubled Juel, but he said to himself, "I've just got to forget him and focus on the ones who are paying attention."

So the Professor said, to those who were listening, “Mark says that when Jesus was baptized, the heavens were ripped apart. Do you know that when Mark says *ripped apart* he uses a variation of the Greek word, *schizo* like our word *schizophrenic*? What Mark is saying is that there is this curtain hanging between heaven and earth, and that when Jesus was baptized, *schizo*, it was ripped open so you could see into heaven. Do you know what that means?” he asked before giving his scholarly answer. “That means we can see God because of the baptism of Jesus, we can actually get to God.”

Then the young man who did not want to be there, squirmed in his seat, and turned from the window and said, “That isn’t what it means.” Don Juel, a little irritated looked at him and said, “Oh, yeah, what does it mean?” “It doesn’t mean that we can get to God,” the kid said, “It means that God can get to us. And the world isn’t safe anymore.” Don Juel knew immediately that this youth was right. “It is not that we can get to God but that God can get to us... What it means to be human is to be called beyond our own little dreams and goals,” Juel said, “and to be fashioned into bearers of the mystery of God who stands at the center of human life.”²

You know, at this point in Mark, we aren’t told what all this means. We read on to discover the implication of this inaugural moment as it unfolds in the gospel. But we do have a glimpse of what is coming when the heavens get ripped open, and God tells us who Jesus is.

When you rip something, or tear something, it never gets put back together exactly; it never closes as neatly as before. There is always an uneven seam, a gap or a hole. At the Jordan River that day, God proclaimed, “You are my Son, the Beloved. With you I am well pleased. In you my Spirit will be present on the earth in a new way.” The heavens were torn apart; they would never close tightly again. And from that day

² Michael Turner, “Get Ready for God,” Pulpit Resource, vol. 36, no. 4, 2008, and excerpted from Tom Long in *Awakened Calling: Reflections on the Vocation of Ministry*, Abingdon Press.

forward, Jesus began tearing apart the expectations people had about God and how human community presumed to organize itself. With his baptism, Jesus began tearing apart: the social fabric separating rich from poor; tearing open hardness of heart to bring forth compassion; loosening the chains of power that left some people bound while others ran free; ripping open the notions of what it means to be God's beloved children.³ By his baptism, we – who would follow him - become immersed in God's way in the world.

In a recent journal article Walter Brueggemann brings his Old Testament Scholarship to bear upon the current rise of authoritarian regimes and their companion forms of violence across the world. He quotes Yale History Professor Timothy Snyder and his book, *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century*. Snyder did the math on the deaths caused by political regimes in the last century. In the first half of the twentieth century, add together the deaths of soldiers fighting wars, of civilians caught up in mass deportations, concentration camps and starvation, and it totals approximately fourteen million people who died. Fourteen million deaths to the purposeful policies of mass murder implemented largely by the Nazi and Soviet regimes between 1933 and 1945. Snyder comes to a hard closing comment, saying: “The Nazi and Soviet regimes turned people into numbers, some of which we can only estimate. It is for scholars to seek these numbers and put them into perspective. It is for us as humanists to turn the numbers back into people.”

Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann brings that insight into the current century saying, we have all the numbers at hand: mass atrocities and mass deaths from hunger; excessive numbers of Black persons incarcerated; American families and children who lack food; the numbers who suffer violence; the unbearable numbers of homeless people who are daily exposed to the violence of the street and weather.

³ Barbara Lundblad, Torn Apart Forever, Jan. 12, 2003, Day1.

Then Brueggemann says this: The numerical reality leaves us with countless, nameless numbers who are, by the mercy of God, turned back into persons. The church is a prominent and important venue in the community that has the hard, good work of turning numbers into persons. The sacramental focus of this work is the rite of Baptism, the naming ceremony of the church. Baptism insists that persons have durable names and abiding identities that are not subject to statistical reduction, not even by the state.”

He goes on, “The Sacrament of Baptism is our insistence that evil will not define the world. The world belongs to, is governed and defined by the life-giving resolve of God the Creator. Brueggemann concludes: “The forces of many --ISMS stalk our landscape in menacing ways. The work of baptism is to insist that the world has a shape and a future given beyond the force of fear, hate, greed and death.”⁴

Friends, the church is a community of baptism because Jesus first stepped into the water, and under the hand of John the Baptist his humanity began to draw us toward his divine work. In Christ all of God’s children are named Beloved! Any perceived separation between heaven and earth was torn open, never to be separated again. So that we - the people of God – are drawn into the reality of that middle school kid in Don Juel’s Bible study: Jesus’ baptism “doesn’t mean that we can get to God,” he said, “It means that God can get to us. And the world isn’t safe anymore.” What is not safe anymore is the power of fear, hate, greed and death. Those old, worldly powers are overcome in the baptismal waters of Jesus Christ. And by his Baptism we are immersed in him. We are immersed in his hard, good work.

AMEN.

⁴ Walter Brueggemann, “Converting Statistics,” *Journal for Preachers*, Lent, 2024, p 8 ff.

