

“Baptism, Identity and Purpose”

A sermon based on texts for Baptism of the Lord (A)

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The first person I baptized was Adam Prouty on Easter Sunday of 1993. He was, in many ways, an average 8th grade boy. My preparation of him for baptism was enjoyable, as he was endlessly curious and enthusiastic.

The church I served at that time had a baptistry that was built for full immersion baptisms. It was big enough for the minister and the one being baptized. The day before the Easter service, I walked over to the church to fill the baptistry.

As you would expect, there were two faucets for filling the reservoir, one hot and one cold. I later learned that the one for the hot water had never been connected. And so the water that filled the baptistry was a cold 50 to 52 degrees. I tried pouring in several coffee carafes of hot water, but that only raised the temperature a couple of degrees. So I left that afternoon, hoping that the water would continue to warm overnight. It didn't warm much.

I waded into the water the next morning, and it rose up to my waste. Cold, but tolerable. But poor Adam, who was not nearly as tall as I am, waded in with the water just about up to his arm pits. As he stepped in, I heard him take in a quick gulp of air, and he said, “This is cold.” The congregation could just hear that, and of course, everyone smiled, but Adam, I don't think he warmed back up for a couple of days.

Here we are on this first Sunday after Epiphany, when liturgical churches around the world celebrate and remember The Baptism of Jesus, and we might find ourselves felling somewhat like Adam after his full immersion in cold water. The beauty and delights of Advent and Christmas are past now, and we find ourselves back in the routines of ordinary time. More than a few of you may find it kind of shocking. The blessing for us shines in these shimmering strips of blue cloth which Mindy Watts-Ellis created some years ago to celebrate the waters of life, and today to remind us of the Baptism of Jesus and our own baptisms.

As Matthew tells the story, Jesus came one day to the River Jordan, where his cousin John had been preaching and baptizing. We jump quite a number of years from last Sunday when we celebrated the visit of the Magi, when Jesus was still a child.

After their visit, Joseph took Mary and Jesus and fled to Egypt, Herod raged and slaughtered the innocents, and then after Herod died, Joseph brought Mary and Jesus back to Palestine, to Nazareth, where they returned home. At least 25 years have passed. Jesus has grown up. He has learned his father's trade, carpentry. He and Mary have buried Joseph after his death.

Some have wondered why Jesus waited so long to begin his ministry. Matthew does not tell us this, but from other sources, we know that a first century Jewish son, whose father has died, was expected to remain with his mother, caring for her, until he reached his 30th birthday. Jesus was a true son of the covenant, and he fulfilled his obligation. That fulfillment happens to coincide with the preaching of John.

The Gospels give us a sense of how the early church struggled with this scene of John baptizing Jesus in the River Jordan. It begs several questions, at least. Was Jesus a disciple of John? Given that Jesus is God's son, why would he even need to be baptized by John, baptized with a baptism of repentance? From what, exactly, would Jesus need to repent?

Matthew suggests this early struggle of meaning by telling us that John didn't want to baptize Jesus. John said, "I need to be baptized by you, cousin!" But Jesus told him to let it be for now. John consented and baptized his Lord.

Since that time, disciples and scholars and mystics have come to understand that what Jesus did that day was not so much for him, but for us. This was his declaration of solidarity with humanity. The Lord of the universe, through whom all things were created, and in whom all things hold together, was fully with us, stepping into those muddy waters just like everyone else.

This piece of beautiful art hanging from the cross and draping over the communion table is beautiful. Yet most of our lives are much more ordinary than this, much more muddy, and crowded with demands and expectations, kind of

like the Jordan River that day long ago. Jesus is right there, in the ordinary, in the muddiness, with us. In that solidarity, our ordinariness is transformed.

That's what Matthew means when he tells us that the heavens were opened and the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus. The understanding that God can have nothing to do with matter, or flesh and blood, that the Divine can have nothing to do with what is not divine, is completely contradicted by the Incarnation itself. That notion is contradicted by this scene by the river. God's Spirit breaks directly into the ordinary, and transforms it.

Three hundred years later, a deacon name Ephrem, in what is now Syria, would retell this scene in a most poetic way. Ephrem imagined that Jesus took off his robe in the river that day. When we are baptized, each of us puts his robe on. Each of us, just as the Apostle Paul imagined, puts on Jesus. Just as the prophet Elisha picked up the mantle of Elijah, just so do we put on Christ's robe of glory, which makes it possible for us to live as his disciples.

II

And so, the ministry of Jesus had begun. Matthew tells us after our passage for today what the other Gospels also tell us, that Jesus was driven, or taken, out into the wilderness, to fast for 40 days and to be tested. But his ministry began with his baptism, just as it does for all of us. Baptism is not the completion of our discipleship. It's just the beginning.

Rodger Nishioka, who taught at Columbia Seminary in Georgia, and who is now on the staff at Village Presbyterian Church in Prairie Village, Kansas, tells the story of a boy named Kyle, who he baptized and confirmed. Rodger says that after the confirmation, he missed Kyle. He missed him because it seemed he up and disappeared. Others in that confirmation class began to ask about Kyle, as did the adult friend who acted as Kyle's mentor.

Kyle and his family had begun attending that church when Kyle was in the fifth grade. Initially, the family attended infrequently, leaving Rodger surprised when Kyle and his parents responded enthusiastically when Rodger asked if Kyle wanted to be part of that confirmation class. Kyle and his parents came to the orientation and agreed to the covenant which specified that Kyle would take

part in two retreats, a mission activity, work with an adult mentor, and take part in weekly classes.

And Kyle did. He rarely missed a class or an activity. He became an important part of the group, and made genuine friendships with others in the class.

Kyle had not yet been baptized, so when the others were confirmed, he was baptized and confirmed on the same Sunday. As confirmations so often are, that Pentecost Sunday was wonderful.

But then, Kyle and his family disappeared. Rodger and others in the church began to wonder if something had happened, or if they had done something wrong.

Rodger says that when he finally called to check in with the family, Kyle's parents expressed a bit of surprise.

Kyle's mother said, "Oh, I guess I thought Kyle was all done. I mean, he was baptized and confirmed and everything. Isn't he done?"

Rodger says that was the problem. Despite our best intentions and despite all that we say and try to communicate, too many people seem to think that the baptism of an infant or the young adult or the adult is the culminating activity of faith, and then we are all 'done.'

I think Rodger is right. We clergy types joke about it. One variation tells of a church that had squirrels in the rafters. Despite their best efforts, they couldn't seem to get rid of them. When the beleaguered pastor shared her struggle with a colleague, the colleague replied, "Why don't you just baptize and confirm them?" The gallows humor suggests how widespread this is.

Baptism is not the completion of faith. Something else is. There is a prayer in one of our services that reveals when there is completion, and you won't find it during a baptism. Any guesses which service I'm talking about? A funeral.

After the homily, and after expressions of gratitude, there are the prayers of intercession and thanksgiving, one of which says, "O God, before whom generations rise and pass away, we praise you for all your servants who, having

lived this life in faith, now live eternally with you. Especially we thank you for your servant N., whose baptism is now complete in death.”

Baptism is not the completion or the end of faith. It is only the beginning.

III

Now, when we are baptized and/or confirmed, we may feel like we are ready for anything. But that feeling tends not to last that long. Much more often we struggle, with our own sense of worth, with our sense of worthiness, and sense of purpose. We feel very much like all of those sinners gathered by the River Jordan that day, sweaty, unclean, and standing in the mud.

So here’s the final word of encouragement to take from today. After the heavens split open and the Holy Spirit descended, what did the voice say to Jesus? “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

Those same words are for us as disciples baptized in the name of Jesus. People of God, our value, our worth, is given to us by God. It is entirely unearned, and it is permanent.

“We are beloved. We are delightful. We belong. We are forgiven. We are free. We are known. We are an enfleshed vision of none other than the divine.” That’s the good news for you this day.

Remember your baptisms, and be thankful. Amen.