

Date: January 13, 2008

SUNDAY: Baptism of Christ

SERMON: Creation, Community, Calling

Text(s): Isaiah 42:1-9; Matthew 3:13-17

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When Carol and I attended the International Pastor's and Spouse's Conference in Geneva about 12 years ago, one of the highlights was a tour of the archaeological excavations underneath St. Peter's cathedral where John Calvin held forth during the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century. There were ruins of several much earlier churches underneath, going back to a third-century church, which was itself built upon the ruins of a pagan temple.

One of the treasures unearthed there was a 3rd century baptismal font. When we think of baptismal fonts, most of us probably think of one similar to the font we have here— a stone or marble basin on a pedestal. Or if we come from a Baptist background we may think of a water tank sunk into the floor of the chancel in which one is fully immersed.

But the baptismal font under Calvin's cathedral in Geneva was a shallow eight-sided pool about six feet in diameter, recessed into the floor, with two shallow steps down to the place where the candidate and the priest would stand. The eight sides and steps were a dark green marble. Apparently, the candidate for baptism would stand in the center, in water about knee deep, and the baptismal water would be scooped up with a vessel of some kind, either a scallop shell or a pitcher, and poured over the candidate, who if other early Christian records are correct, was probably naked.

But however the rite itself was performed, it was the same rite in essence by which people are still incorporated into the community of Christ. This ritual washing, which the church took over and modified from Judaism, has been the doorway into the church for nearly two thousand years, which explains why in many

older churches, the baptismal font is still located at the back of the sanctuary, near the door.

Since today is the Feast of the Baptism of Christ, perhaps it's a good occasion to think briefly about what this ritual signifies and what practical meaning it has for our lives. We're all aware, I think, that Christians have emphasized different aspects of baptism at different times in history. And the evidence is clear that a variety of modes of baptism have been practiced at different times—sprinkling, pouring, washing, or full immersion. Sometimes these differences simply reflect the logistical necessities of the moment; at other times, they reflect the various theological emphases particular churches or denominations put upon baptism, or even simply differences in local custom. But rather than discuss the different understandings or different practices that Christians have had through the centuries, this morning, I want to lift up three main meanings upon which all or virtually all Christians are agreed.

First and foremost, baptism is a sign of God's New Creation, revealed and brought into being through Jesus Christ. It is not *primarily* about what the person being baptized has done, is doing, or will do— those are all important, and they are often the basis of the differences that Christians have over baptism— but they are *secondary* meanings; they are results rather than causes. Baptism is always first about God's love for, and engagement with, the creation and humanity. The stories in the Bible are the record of people's perceptions of God's engagement with the world and human history. The stories of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, Abraham and Sarah, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers, Ruth and David, the Exodus from slavery in Egypt, the Exile and return from Exile, the stories of Mary and Joseph, Jesus and his disciples, of Paul and Peter— all of them are stories of how God was perceived to be at work in human history, to restore the creation to its intended purpose. All the individual biblical stories in our Bible taken collectively form one larger story; I like to call it the Christian Super-

story. If you've read any of the post-modern philosophers like Lyotard or Derrida, you might prefer to call this Super-story a "meta-narrative," which is just a fancy bit of academic jargon that means the larger story that forms the backdrop for all the individual stories of our lives and provides them with a framework of meaning. Call it the "big picture," if you will.

All of us live out the individual story of our lives within some larger story, or even multiple Super-stories. For some people, the most important Super-story is the American story, and the primary meaning of their lives is shaped by that identity as citizens of America. That particular Super-story is the backdrop for all the political campaigns right now. All the candidates are giving us their version of the larger story that binds Americans together.

The biblical Super-story frames human life in terms of God's will and purpose for creation and human life. Jesus' insistence on being baptized by John, despite John's objections, tells us that Jesus saw himself and his own life against the backdrop of that biblical Super-story of God's mighty acts. To Jesus' followers, the shock of his arrest and crucifixion might have been seen as the evidence that the Super-story they read in their Bibles was false, except for one thing. Some of them, at least, claimed that they saw Jesus alive after his crucifixion, and these appearances of Jesus convinced them that the Super-story was, despite all appearances to the contrary, true. Now those old Bible stories came alive with new meaning. Now they understood that God's saving love, God's saving acts on behalf of his people were still on course. God had rescued his Beloved Son from the power of death, thereby breaking death's power forever. And so they understood baptism to be a sign of that triumph of God over evil and death that will ultimately result in a renewal of all creation. As Noah came through the flood, as Israel came through the sea, as Jesus came through death to new life, so we, too, now

pass through the waters as a sign that we are included in God's mighty acts of deliverance. We are now characters in that big story, the small pictures of our individual lives are part of that big picture of God's ultimate goals for the whole creation. That is what baptism means theologically. By passing through the waters of baptism, my story is joined to the story of Jesus, God's Chosen One. Jesus' future, glimpsed by faith in the resurrection, is my future as well because it is the future of the whole creation.

Baptism not only witnesses to our hope in God's New Creation; it is also a sign of our inclusion in a New Community, or if you will, a new family. It is a common image in the New Testament to speak of the risen Christ as "the new Adam"—the progenitor of a new human family, or of the church as "the household of God." St. Paul uses the obvious analogy of adoption as a way to help us understand this truth. Just as an adopted child becomes part of a new family through the love and choice of his or her adoptive parents, so we become part of the new humanity through God's gracious choice.

The heavenly voice that spoke at the baptism of Jesus, "*This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased,*" is the voice that speaks in each of us at our own baptisms, naming us as God's children and welcoming us into the family of God. St. Paul says this explicitly in his letter to the Romans: "*The Spirit of God bears witness with our spirits that we are indeed children of God, and if children, then heirs of God and fellow-heirs with Jesus Christ.*" Paul then carries the implications of this even further. He speaks of being "*baptized into Christ,*" and says to the community of Christians, "*now you are the body of Christ, and individually members of it.*" In Paul's mind, the new community into which we are adopted by God's grace is nothing less than the resurrected body of Christ—a corporate body, made up of the individual bodies of those who have been joined to Christ through baptism. We are, collectively, the new humanity,

made visible in Jesus Christ.

A friend of ours who was adopted, told us that as a young teenager she was having the conflicted feelings that many adopted children have of wanting to know where she came from and who her real parents were and why they put her up for adoption. The insight that helped resolve all those questions and fill her, not only with gratitude and love for her adoptive parents, but a great feeling of inner security was this: I was chosen. My adoptive parents chose me. They didn't have to. Out of love, they chose to make me their daughter. I'm part of this family because of that loving and gracious choice they made.

This belief that God has chosen to adopt us into the household of God is the reason why, from the earliest days, Christians have practiced the baptism of children as well as of adults. God's act of adoption comes prior to our response to it, and so our membership in the community of faith is the result of God's gracious choice, not of our own choosing. An old hymn puts it well:

*I sought the Lord, and afterward I knew,
he moved my soul to seek him, seeking me.
It was not I who found, O Savior true,
No, I was found of thee.*

When we talk about God's grace, that's what we mean— we mean that God's love for us and claim upon us and adoption of us into a new community always come before our recognition, our response, or our decisions. Or as St. John put it so simply, "*We love God because God first loved us.*"

Finally, not only does baptism witness to the New Creation, not only does it witness to our inclusion in a New Community, it also witnesses to our New Calling or Vocation. What does this mean for our lives in a practical sense? It all sounds very nice, but where does "the rubber meet the road?"

Well, to put it as simply as I can, it means that the baptized have the freedom, the privilege, and the obligation to live in a new way, in ways that are characteristic of the New Creation that we are pressing toward by faith and hope. I love the way the African-American evangelist Tom Skinner put it one time. He said, "The Church is to be the visible model on earth of what's happening in heaven." I like that. The visible model on earth of what's happening in heaven.

To accept baptism is to accept God's claim on us, to accept God's adoption of us into the new community, the new human family. But that family does not exist for any purpose other than to bear witness to God's New Creation by actually making that new creation visible in the way the members of the family live together. This is our vocation. When those outside the Church look at us, what they ought to be able to see, and are dying to see, is an alternative way for human beings to live together that enables us to have hope that there is a future where the powers of death do not have the final word. Someone has to model that. And where is the world going to see such a model of a new human community if not within the community of the New Creation— those who are collectively, the risen body of Christ? Stanley Hauerwas, a very well-known professor of theological ethics, says that the church needs to be the church in order that the world will know that it's the world. In other words, if being part of the church doesn't cause or enable us to live differently from the rest of the world, then, what's the point? We're just another social organization, or as a colleague of mine put it, "the rotary club with music."

The Church is called to be a transformed and a transforming community. It is the place where we ourselves are transformed as we allow the Super-story to become the truly formative story that gives meaning to our lives. In the community of faith, the Holy Spirit is present to form us into the image of Christ. St. Paul says, "*As many as have been baptized into Christ,*

have put on Christ.” What a wonderful image of transformation! To be clothed with Christ. Here is where we individually learn how to love others as we have been loved by God, how to accept one another as we have been accepted. We learn how to worship the true God rather than give our loyalty to the false gods of our age. We learn how to be grateful and giving rather than greedy and grasping. We learn how to forgive when we are wronged rather than get even. We learn how to repent and accept forgiveness rather than persist in our wrongdoing or arrogantly deny our faults. We learn how to serve one another in love rather than compete with one another in self-interest. We learn how to be free of the chains that bind us, chains of addiction, chains of old resentments, chains of damaged emotions, chains of prejudice and fear, and to live as free sons and daughters of God. We learn to care about the things God cares about— about justice for the poor, about stewardship of the earth and its resources, about working for peace in a world that loves war - and we join our collective efforts to allow God’s transforming power loose in the world. We don’t learn this all at once or easily. Again and again, we fall short. Again and again, we need to repent. Again and again, we need to re-commit ourselves to our calling. It takes a lifetime, but this is where we do it— in the transformed and transforming community of Christ.

Does the world need such transformation? Does it need to see evidence that such transformation is possible? The answer is obvious. Where is the world going to look, if not to the community of people who claim to have had a glimpse of God’s future in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, and who have bound their own future to his by passing through the waters of baptism?

I love the way a contemporary hymn by Don Marsh sums it up:

Do you feel the Spirit’s fire or hear the wind blow free?

Do you feel the wind and fire blowing free?

We are chosen each by name, marked by water, then by flame. We are baptized!

We have passed through the waters,

And that’s all that matters.

We have passed through the waters!

O thanks be to God!