

## We Are Not Easy on Our Knees

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Baptism of the Lord - January 10, 2010

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

*As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."*

*Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."*

I'll begin this message with a few questions:

What does God look like to you? An old man with a white beard? A woman? An all-powerful mighty warrior? A mere feeling, or something too hard to define?

Here is another one: What does faithful Christian discipleship look like to you? Trying to be a "basically good person?" Being kind to others? Attending worship? Reading the Bible? Thinking about God? I ask these questions because today, in the event of the baptism of Christ, we encounter a story that has the power to disrupt many of our cozy notions about God and Jesus, what they look like, and what they expect of us.

This is problem with the baptism of Jesus: in the baptism of the Lord, God really gets in our faces. God invades our space. We would like to think sometimes that as long as we locate ourselves among sinners, in the wilderness, or in any "unheavenly place," we can live and believe however we choose, trusting that God is distant, safely tucked away in heaven, far removed from the granular details of our lives. Yet in this morning's text, this is not what we find our Lord doing. In this morning's text, Jesus gets into our water, the water of sinners, the bath of the unrighteous, amidst the people who know they have something for which to repent, who have admitted so publically; those whom John the Baptist calls "a brood of vipers" as he warns them to "flee from the wrath to come."

Hearing John preach, it is nearly impossible to imagine what happens next. In Matthew's gospel, even John cannot believe it. You see, John has described what he thinks God looks like: "One who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." It sounds like John has a pretty clear idea of what God in Jesus Christ will be

like: mighty, even severe. Yet our God is a God of surprises, and sometimes even the cast of characters in this divine drama are unaware of what is coming next.

The late humorist Lewis Grizzard made a living writing about his childhood in the small town of Moreland, Georgia, and he tells the story of living for a time at his grandparents' house on hot, summer days when the well would run dry. On those days, water was at a premium and the family did not have the luxury of wasting it, which meant, among other things, that they had to share bath water. Grizzard recalls the dread he had as a child of being the last one to use the water. It was obviously dirty, and there were things floating in it. It is one thing to be close to your family, but this was taking things quite a bit too far.<sup>1</sup>

Which brings me back to how the baptism of the Lord is problematic for our easy, cozy notions of a distant and uninvolved deity, because here, at the very outset of his public ministry, Jesus, the one whom John proclaimed would come dividing and burning, comes so obedient, so *humble*, that he gets into our water, the water of sinners, and stands where we stand. If you want a potent illustration of what it means for us to say that Jesus is Emmanuel, which means "God with us," here it is. If you want a powerful image of what our God looks like, here it is: the Son of God, God in the flesh, standing knee-deep in the mud and muck of the Jordan River with you and me.<sup>2</sup> Jesus, the sinless Son of God receiving a rite of ritual cleansing for the forgiveness of sins, and in doing so, locating himself here, with us, in our midst.

The baptism of the Lord asks a good deal of us. Our own baptisms do as well. Baptism, especially in the time in which live, is a countercultural act. Just as when Jesus appears on the scene, he defied the religious and cultural expectations of his day, so does our decision to become a part of the community of the baptized set us apart from what comes so naturally in our modern culture.

Baptism is joining God's revolution. It is dying to our old selves so that we can live as children of God. It stands against the notion of the rugged individualist or the self-made woman or man. Baptism means that we acknowledge that our bodies are no longer our own, because we become a part of Christ's body, a body where each and every member are important.

Baptism stands against our homemade, scrapbook gods, that we can cut and paste to our liking. By being a part of the community of the baptized, is about liberation but it is also about submission to the disciplines of our faith as we seek to become and live as disciples of Christ.

I said that baptism is countercultural, and it is. We are a people who are not easy on our knees, who do not like the notion of *needing* anything outside of ourselves. The very idea that there is a power beyond ourselves that we need to make us whole is deemed a crutch or a sign of ignorance or simpleness.

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<sup>1</sup> I recall this story being in one of Grizzard's novels, although I can no longer remember which one.

<sup>2</sup> William Willimon, "Jesus: God and Humanity Meet," in *Pulpit Resource*, January 10, 2010.

Yet the community created by baptism, humble though it may be, is the means by which God is transforming the world, and it does so by providing an alternative to what the world has to offer, albeit one that does not conform to the expectations of the larger culture.

Consider the promises we make in our baptismal liturgy itself: we acknowledge the reality and universality of sin. We acknowledge our own need of grace. We confess faith in a Lord who was often unpopular in his day as in ours. We become part of something larger and older than ourselves; a body where we acknowledge that by design we need others, and they need us; where we acknowledge that our faith is not simply about our own lives and how we *feel*. Our faith is about how what we are allowing God to do in us affects others. This is why our presence is such an important part of our lives as baptized people: even if we can convince ourselves of the fallacy that states that we don't need the community, it does not change the fact that the community needs *us*.

Baptism has very little to do with feelings. In living this covenant, we promise to love, forgive, and nurture others whether we like it or not, whether we like the other or not, whether we feel the person on the receiving end of our grace deserves it or not.

Baptism means that we “so order our lives after the example of Christ” for the sake of children that none of us can claim to be childless, because we all have children we are responsible for raising. Greg Jones, the Dean of Duke Divinity School tells this true story: There was once a Catholic couple in their late fifties who understood their ministry to be foster parents for terminally ill orphaned children so that these little ones could spend the rest of their lives, regardless of how little they had left, in a loving, nurturing, and caring environment. This couple did this for many children.

One child for whom they were foster parents had been born to a woman who died of AIDS. It was naturally assumed that this child had the disease as well. However, they learned after the adoption that this child was actually perfectly healthy. This couple began to do the math and realize how old they would be when this child reached his teen years and how old they would be when it was time to pay for college. They decided that the right thing to do was to put this child up for adoption.

One night soon thereafter, at a meeting of the Altar and Rosary Society of that small Catholic congregation that Greg Jones knew, the foster mother of that child whose mother had died of AIDS, mentioned that they would be placing the child up for adoption. Upon saying this, she was met with a surprising response. She was told that she and her husband should adopt the child because this congregation of God's people had baptized that child and he was no longer simply the responsibility of this one man and this one woman. He was the responsibility of the community of faith who had promised at his baptism to be for him the household of God. This small congregation vowed to help to raise this child in very tangible ways, including helping to pay for college.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Jones, L. Gregory, *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis*, Wm. Eerdmans Press, Grand Rapids, 1995.

I served a congregation once who helped a family, native to Sudan but refugees in Egypt, move to Virginia. After they had been living here for several months, I was in a in the church library in a Finance Committee meeting, where we were preparing our report to the Administrative Board later that night, going over committee budgets and line items and accounts and bills when a member of our congregation came in and asked to speak. He said, “You know, we need to start thinking long-term for these children. We are their church now, and eventually these five children are going to need to go to college, and we need to develop a plan right now to start creating scholarships so they can.”

And he was right.

Baptism means that we are all standing in the same water. It is an indictment of our modern notion of a solely personal relationship with God, replacing the power of “me” with God’s power of “we.” And best of all, it means that we can trust the Lord of life is standing in the water with us. Thanks be to God.

Gloria In Excelsis Deo.