

The Blessings of Baptism

The Rev. Anne B. Bonnyman
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Jesus goes down into the cool waters of the Jordan River and comes back up with a prize that anyone could envy. A voice outside himself proclaims Jesus as the special one, the chosen one: "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." Jesus has won the best prize of all.

I recently learned a lot about prizes. I was traveling and found myself in a hotel room with a huge TV and lots of remote controls. There was nothing to do but channel surf and check out all my options. What I got was a curious mixture of local fare and celebrity contests. I confess that I have not paid attention to these competitions before and here I was, all by myself with a big screen full of my fellow Americans competing to be the best.

I was particularly mesmerized by the cooking competition. Talented chefs were given random ingredients which they quickly turned into lovely gourmet meals. I still marvel at the dishes with exquisite, colorful sauces. My own attempts at those look suspiciously like puddles of gravy.

The exposure and suspense that these folks endure on national television is amazing. The pressure is incredible and the critics are harsh. But at the end of the day, someone is proclaimed the best, the chosen one, the beloved chef, the beloved singer, the beloved super model. We ordinary folk watch these high achievers process across our TV screens, and then we get on with our everyday lives and average cooking.

So when we come to the baptism of Jesus and his revelatory moment with God, we can't help but ask ourselves, "Is this someone winning the crown again while we sit on the riverbank and watch?" It must be wonderful for Jesus, but what does it have to do with us?

The baptism of Jesus has everything to do with us. In fact, John points out to Jesus that he could skip baptism altogether and get on with things. Jesus declines and stands in the muddy line like everyone else. He says, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." These are the first words that come out of the mouth of Jesus in the gospel of Matthew.

The very first thing he says is, let us fulfill all righteousness. Jesus is not talking about etiquette here. Being righteous is about being in right relationships with God and one another. The baptism of Jesus begins the healing of the relationship between God and humanity. It marks a fresh start for all of us, and this really pleases God.

So Jesus goes down into the water with us in mind. And as he comes up the mind of God is revealed in history's shortest sermon about Jesus. "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Martin Luther preached about the baptism of Jesus in the year 1534. He said,

So, we learn how the Father revealed himself on this day with a fine sermon about his Son. [We learn that] what he does with us and we with him is well pleasing to God, that whoever follows the Son becomes God's beloved child... "Here you have the Son," says God, "not an angel, but the Son; and you have me as well... Hold fast to my Son. Hear and do what he tells you."

Luther goes on to explain that the blessing does not come from anything mysterious in the water. It is just plain water. He says even his dog, whose German name means Blockhead, even Blockhead understands plain water. Both the mystery and the blessing of God's outreach to us in Jesus come directly from God.

And yet, the water does mark a turning point. We know nothing about the immediate events of Jesus' life before his baptism. The last time we saw him he was a baby receiving gifts from the wise men. Here suddenly is the grown-up Jesus.

Matthew and the other gospel writers mostly choose not to give us information about the intervening years. I sure am curious about them and you probably are, too. But the essential message of the gospels is that the baptism of Jesus launches his ministry. Everything begins as he comes out of the Jordan River. He calls a group of disciples to join him and he begins his public life of teaching and preaching and healing. It all starts here with his baptism.

Today we gather as the baptized community that follows Jesus. Most of us here have been baptized and if you have not, you have come to the right place. We would love to offer you baptism and its preparation here at Trinity Church. Some of you remember your baptisms, but many of us were baptized too young to recall the day.

Baptism is a one time event that lasts for your whole life. So even though we won't be dripping wet when we leave church today, we claim this spiritual turning point in Jesus' life as our own. That is why we mark the feast of Jesus' baptism on this Sunday every year. It belongs to all of us, not just to Jesus.

This is our chance to wash off the residue of life's distractions and failures and to refresh our focus. Over the course of the year we may forget who we are and to whom we belong. Sometimes we end up worshipping idols and don't even realize it till they disappoint us. We fall into the trap of thinking that our lives are filled with random events. We forget that we are headed someplace as a child of God. Through baptism we

are launched into a life of righteousness, living in right relationship with God and our neighbors. We have a journey to make with the precious time given to us on this earth.

We begin here as we are welcomed into a community of prayer and formation and we deepen our relationship with God. We come clean with God about our failures, and accept God's promise to forgive and restore us. The journey continues as we relate to the world around us and look for signs of Christ in ordinary events and people.

It leads us to see beyond the traditional social barriers of race and nation, gender, class, ideology and wealth. We grow to see our common humanity in the eyes of those who look and speak very differently from ourselves. Because of this growing connection, we are compelled to act on behalf of others.

And finally, we are stretched to care about the world and people we will never know because we are all God's children. This is a baptismal journey from the riverbank into the full life of faith. It gives our lives meaning and direction. It is our call as individuals and as a Church.

Every journey requires a map and this one is no different.

And so now I ask you to take out the *Book of Common Prayer* in your pew. Turn to the bottom of page 304, and join me in repeating the promises that shape our baptismal life. Notice the movement, the way these sentences move from our life here to the world beyond Sunday morning. I often think of these promises as a musical crescendo:

Celebrant Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?

People I will, with God's help.

Celebrant Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?

People I will, with God's help.

Celebrant Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?

People I will, with God's help.

Celebrant Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?

People I will, with God's help.

Celebrant Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?

People I will, with God's help.

May God who has given you the will to do these things give you the grace and power to carry them out in your daily life.

Today the memory of baptism washes over us to refresh our spirits and strengthen our resolve to follow Christ in 2008. It is just plain water, even Luther's dog Blockhead knew that. But we also know that God often uses the commonplace to reach the depth of our hearts. So do not be afraid of the water, to go under the surface of your own life and find God deep within. You may come up blinking and surprised by the power of God's love. You are chosen, you are blessed. Every person here wins today. We are all beloved.

You and I and everyone else in Boston and beyond are all celebrities in the eyes of God. Amen.