

The Burning Chaff

Today we celebrate the baptism of our Lord, with old John the Baptist dunking folks into the Jordan River, drowning them away from one kind of life and lifting them up to a new.

And setting this stage are both the prophet Isaiah and the Psalmist — hinting at the miracle of the Exodus, when God indeed drowns the slave masters as he liberates a bunch of nobodies — so that they may become God's somebodies.

It is this connection between Exodus and Baptism that helps us to see exactly who we are and who we are called to become.

So what about baptism?

Is it just another kind of initiation ceremony?

Like learning the secret Mason handshake or unlocking the mysteries of the Rotary Club's decoder ring?

John says "No!"

Baptism is our "yes" to God's freedom movement, to our own, individual and collective, liberation.

Baptism is the Spirit of God on the move!

Baptism takes us from our narrow, self-serving pre-occupation with what we say is good and evil and gives us a chance to see good and evil through God's eyes.

Before baptism, good and evil means what's good or bad for me and my own.

After baptism, good and evil means what's good and bad for my sister and brother: for the neighbor, for the stranger, as we begin to see God's majesty alighting on the poor, the oppressed, and the lost.

And so Exodus comes alive again and again through the miracle of baptism.

Exodus comes alive in the civil rights movement that we celebrate this month.

Some may remember that Easter Sunday back in 1964 when 5000 people, dressed in their Sunday best, marched from the church to the jail cell holding the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

"The marchers set off in a festive mood, and almost immediately encounter police, fire trucks and firemen holding fire hoses who block their path.

Bull Connor, the notorious police chief of Birmingham, Alabama, bellows:

'Turn these people around!'

Andrew Young recalls it this way:

Wyatt Walker and I are leading the march.

I can't say we know what to do.

I know I don't want to turn the march around.....

I ask the people to get down on their knees ... and pray...

Suddenly another minister jumps up and hollers: 'The Lord is with this movement!'

Off your knees!

We're going on!

A stunned Bull Connor yells that they be stopped, but none of the police move a muscle.

Even the dogs that were growling and straining a moment ago, stand perfectly still....

I see one fireman, tears in his eyes, dropping his fire hose to his feet.

Our people move right through those red fire trucks, singing 'I Want Jesus To Walk With Me.'

The police refuse to arrest us.

The firemen refuse to hose us.

The dogs refuse to bite us.

I'll never forget the old woman shouting out as we march through the barricades:

'Great God almighty done parted the Red Sea one more time!' Andrew Young, *An Easy Burden*, 223, modified.

The transforming power of God through Exodus and baptism is again alive at Dr. King's 1963 speech at the Washington Monument, where, to Mrs King, "it seemed that the words Martin spoke came from some higher place — a gift given to the weary people before him.

Yes, heaven itself opened up that day and we were all transformed." P. Lehman, *The Transfiguration of Politics*, 182-3.

It happened in East Timor when the Indonesian government brutally suppressed the people of that tiny island in the late 1990's; when a

reporter listens in “at the broken heart of a small city, while a priest tries to persuade his threadbare listeners that suffering is rewarded, and that there is such a thing, even for them, as resurrection.

“You are like the people of Israel who suffered for peace, suffered for freedom, suffered so that they could have their own land.” S. Mydens, NYT, 10/4/99.

In baptism we are all invited to become part of the Exodus story.

But to get there, some dying needs to be done.

“During a baptism class in the deep south, a bishop reads from St Paul:

‘Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?

Our old self was crucified, we have died with Christ.’ Rom. 6

Blank stares greet the bishop.

Desperately, he asks: ‘Has anyone here died to become a Christian?

I know we didn’t pour enough water on you to kill you when you were baptized, but did any of you have to die?’

A white man says:

‘When the schools in Jackson were integrated, I thought I would die.

I knew that on the day black children went to school with our children, the world I knew was dead.

But now, my black neighbor is my best friend.’

An old world dies, but a new world is born." Willimon, Peculiar Speech, 14.

And then there is the woman who was terrified of sleeping alone in her home.

But then her daughter died of leukemia, and she never again was afraid to be home alone.

When someone asked her why, she replied:

"Well, when you've died, what else is there to fear?

When you've had to let go of your most precious possession, what else could happen that would be worse?" Id. at 15.

Which reminds me of the student who asks the rabbi why the Bible says "to place these holy words **on** our hearts."

"Why", he asks, "doesn't it say to place these holy words '**in** our hearts'?"

The rabbi answers, "It is because, as we are, our hearts are closed, and we cannot place the holy words **in** our hearts.

So we place them **on top of** our hearts.

And there they stay until, one day, your heart breaks — and the words fall in." Kurtz, Experiencing Spirituality, 146.

Perhaps that is the heart of baptism.

While we often speak of our faith as a slow growing process; it is just as often some kind of loss or injury or death that really gets the whole journey on its way.

In ways I will never understand, it seems we need this kind of crisis, that without the crisis, we don't develop the eyes to see the new world that God invites us into.

Without a broken heart, we tend to see only the routines of life.

It is death, that comes in so many different ways, that helps us enter a world where kindness reigns, where forgiveness is the path to peace, where violence is rejected, where friendship is the norm.

Perhaps it takes the death of the world we know to find ourselves in God's new world.

Baptism is the gateway into this new world, a world that God creates, the world intended for each of us since the beginning of time: it is our Exodus from the old life to the new.

In baptism, we are each of us called by name and made a child of God.

But baptism also makes us a people of God, and it is in that journey, that transformation, from **a child** of God to **the people** of God, that the fire of Jesus saves us.

You heard it from John this morning:

"The one who comes after me will baptize not with water, but with fire, and the Holy Spirit.

We often forget this part of baptism's power: the power of fire.

The fire that Jesus brings is the fire that burns the chaff in our lives.

The "me first" chaff.

The "us against them" chaff.

The chaff that causes us to be angry or afraid.

And as that chaff burns, what remains is a sense of joy; a kind of intuition that no matter the problems or foibles of life, everything's going to be alright.

Even when things don't feel alright.

This is our Exodus.

This is our baptism.

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