

## Baptism and Death

Our St Elizabeth's baptism class is entitled, "Holy Baptism, or, Are You Ready To Die?"

Which always leads the participants to look at me with the hairy eyeball....!

But in truth, Holy Baptism is all about dying.

It's there in the Book of Common Prayer which we will pray real soon as two of our own prepare to die into baptism.

"Grant O Lord, that all who are baptized into the death of Jesus Christ....."BCP 306

"In [the waters of baptism] we are buried with Christ in his death....."id.

St Paul chimes in too when he says "We were ... buried with him through baptism into death...." -Romans 6:4

And then there's the church fathers, like Cyril of Jerusalem, who reminds us that "Bearing your sins, you go down into the water; ...you go down dead in your sins...."

So why must we die in baptism????????????

Because our natural desire is to be number one, it's to love power and prestige and fame and money and security ... and don't forget our love affair with controlling other people, places and things.

Jesus offers us a different way.

In Jesus, we are invited to become who we were always meant to be....people who love one another, serve one another, who look out for each other's needs.

Not to earn God's love or bargain for forgiveness, but, realizing God's overwhelming love for us, it's only natural to swim in that love....

As one mother whispered to her beloved child, "daughter of God, know that you were formed by God's hands, dreamed up in his heart, and placed in this world for a purpose."

You see, God makes all things for good...

Which is why in the Garden of Eden God walks about with the first human beings and tells them it's all theirs, only one thing is forbidden: the knowledge of good and evil.....which is strange advice considering that every self-respecting human should know the difference between good and evil!

RIGHT?!

But think a little bit more....

In every human conflict, husband and wife, brother and sister, ISIS and the West, each side is certain they are right and good and the other is wrong and evil.....forgetting the wisdom that when you point your finger at someone, you've got three pointing back at yourself!

Into this mess steps Jesus, who's not about judging or condemning but who is all about helping us to tune into the Mystery whom we call God....

And we tune into that mystery by taking a series of steps.

First by recognizing that life using only our own power and control becomes a real mess very quickly....

Second, by acknowledging that we need help to become who we are meant to be....by remembering that asking for help doesn't mean that you're weak or incompetent; it usually indicates an advanced level of honesty and intelligence." Anne Schaefer.

And third, by knowing these 2 things about God:

1. There is one....

2. It's not you!

Fourth, spend some time reflecting on what life is like when I'm running the ship.....then looking at myself in a very deep and searching way, not making excuses, but facing things I'm ashamed of, embarrassed by, would rather not remember....

Because.... you can learn great things from your mistakes when you aren't busy denying them!

It means taking a moral inventory, a fearless and searching self-appraisal that hones in on things like dishonesty, selfishness, conceit, intolerance, arrogance, remorse, self-pity, bigotry, revenge, resentments, egotism, fear, jealousy and laziness....

Because, you can't change what you refuse to confront....

And then, with a priest or counselor or mentor, sharing those things in detail....letting it all hang out... for in this emptying, we create space for God's spirit to enter our lives, to teach us a new way to live.....

A way that is not frightened or defensive, but which slowly comes to experience the deep compassion and love God has for you...

This can feel a lot like dying, because it is a lot of dying, dying to our need to control, dying to our worship of money, dying to our old ways of thinking about right and wrong....and replacing all of that with faith in Jesus.....which begs the question.....who is Jesus????

In the early days of the church, that was THE question: Who is Jesus?

So in 325, Christian leaders from around the world came to Nicea to grapple with this question, a question that really asks "What is the nature of God?"

After much discussion and prayer, the church elders agreed on the Nicene Creed, which captures our essential beliefs...

"We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is seen and unseen...."

Yes, one God, made up of three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit....what we call the Trinity....

"We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, one in Being with the Father. Through him all things were made."

In other words, Jesus isn't a good man adopted by God, Jesus isn't a spirit who only pretends to be a man, but Jesus is fully human and fully divine.....

"For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven: by the power of the Holy Spirit he was born of the Virgin Mary, and became man."

Because God loves us, he sends Jesus to show us how to live the way we were always intended to live.

An unwed teenager becomes his mother... in a culture where such scandals require death by stoning....telling us that just because WE are scandalized by something (like transgender bathrooms?), it doesn't necessarily follow that God is scandalized!

"For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate, he suffered, died, and was buried."

Pilate was the Roman governor of Israel at the time.

Jesus was condemned as a political prisoner — a threat to the Roman empire.

The best legal minds, the best religious minds of the day.... condemned him to death....

Remember all that stuff about how bad we are in telling good and evil apart?????

"On the third day he rose again in fulfillment of the Scriptures."

In the resurrection, God says "yes" to Jesus and "no" to our love affair with power and control and death...

We believe Jesus actually died, and stayed dead for three days, and was raised to life by God into a transformed body, a body we hope to receive as well....

"...he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end."

Meaning NOT that he is far away, but because God becomes human, heaven and earth forever intersect; and sometimes we can just feel it, there, in the thin places....and remember this too: that God's judgement is expressed in mercy.

"We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son."

The Holy Spirit is the third person of the Trinity.

She is called the comforter and the advocate: "Comforter" because life is hard, with pain and disappointment and death — we need comforting.

"Advocate" because we're called to take a stand for mercy and kindness and justice...

"With the Father and the Son he is worshiped and glorified."

The Holy Spirit is one with God...

"He has spoken through the Prophets."

When the Jewish people forget that God wants mercy and kindness and humility, he sends prophets to remind them.... like Isaiah and Jeremiah and Micah and Amos and John the Baptist, who baptizes people with water, calling them back to a life of mercy and kindness and humility....

And God continues to send the Holy Spirit to speak through prophets today, prophets like Nelson Mandela and Archbishops Oscar Romero and Desmond Tutu and Dorothy Day and Dan Berrigan...

"We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church."

Yes, we Episcopalians are catholic!

Meaning, "universal", meaning our faith is set out in the Nicene Creed, meaning we believe our clergy are descended from the original apostles....

We are catholic, just not Roman Catholic...

The Church in England split with Rome in the 1500's back when popes wanted to be kings and kings wanted to be popes....

The split had everything to do with politics and little to do with religion....

We Episcopalians are part of the world-wide Anglican Communion, which began as part of the church of England and spread around the world...

We believe in 7 sacraments, but the 2 most important are baptism and the Holy Eucharist, the body and blood of our Lord...

The other sacraments are marriage, holy orders, confession, confirmation and last rites...

"We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins."

Some denominations will re-baptize you if you join their group...we believe all baptisms made in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit are valid and final...

"We look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come."

This is our great hope...that this life is not the only life, that in God there is no death, and since we are all in God, we trust that death is a passage way, not the end point....meaning, we can live fearlessly in this life, by acting with kindness and mercy and humility, even toward our enemies...

If that's the life you'd like, you're ready to be baptized...!

If you're already baptized, that's the life you're called to!

Which makes today's gospel lesson especially appropriate.

Out of Nain come the dead boy, his widowed mother who's as good as dead, because with no son or husband, no social security or food bank, she's finished...

...Yet into Nain comes the Lord of life...

And when the Lord of life bumps into death, death hits the road!

Today, God extends his hand to us and asks not so much for good behavior but for our trust; not so much for discipline, but for a simplicity of heart.

Leaving the village of Nain is a parade defeated by death.

Coming into that same village is the Lord who loves us all; for free, having paid the price for us himself.

It's through death that we come to be born into this new life.

So as we now move to the baptismal font, as the water is being poured out and blessed, lift up whatever might be dead in you: a grudge, a fear, a resentment; lift it all up, and pray the Lord to come into **our** gates, to touch **our** dead, to change it all into trust, into love, into life.

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