

## Baptism

Today is all about baptism, the baptism of our three little ones this morning, and the baptism of our Lord by St. John.

And the questions before us may be: "What is baptism, why do we do it, what does it mean?"

Some see baptism, it seems, as the end of their journey in faith.

It's like the old story about the squirrels, how they had overrun three churches in town.

After much prayer, the elders of the first church, the First Presbyterian Church to be exact, figured that the animals were predestined to be there.

"Who are we to interfere with God's will," they asked?

So the squirrels multiplied.

The minister of the second church, obviously the United Church of Christ, decided he couldn't harm any of God's creatures, so he humanely trapped the squirrels and set them free outside of town.

Three days later, the squirrels were back.

It was only the third church that succeeded in keeping the pests away.

You see, the priest at Grace Episcopal Church baptized the squirrels and registered them all as members in good standing in the church.

Now they only show up on Christmas and Easter.

And so it is that some folks see baptism as signing up as a Christian, and once signed up, the story is finished.

But in fact, baptism is only the beginning of our life in faith; it is not the last step, but only the very first.

That's why, in Matthew's gospel, the very first words that Jesus speaks are here, today, to John, as Jesus submits to the baptism of John.

While these are the first words spoken by Jesus in Matthew's gospel, they will most definitely not be his last.

So what is baptism?

Before answering that question, perhaps we can take a look at what baptism is not.

It is not a golden ticket into heaven as so many seem to believe - a sort of magic key into Willie Wonka's chocolate factory, a sort of insurance policy, especially for our children, so that if, heaven forbid, they should die in infancy, they'll be able to enter into heaven.

It seems God loves all of us, and especially his most innocent children, so perhaps we needn't worry about the fate of unbaptized children, but rather trust their fate to the unconditional love that is God.

Nor is baptism simply a ceremony that marks one's membership into the club of Christianity; like any other club's initiation ritual.

It is that, but it is not only that, nor is it primarily that.

Instead, what John calls to us on the river bank, what the entire ministry of Jesus invites us into, is a baptism of transformation; changing from a life and a mindset determined to make our own way through life into a life that relies wholly and absolutely on the God who comes to us as an infant, who saves us by dying for us, and who shows herself to us in humble service, paying special heed to the very least among us.

When you hear the word "repent" - instead of thinking about feeling sorry for the many sins in your life and mine, the many failures, instead of thinking guilt, think "transformation" - think "changing directions" - think "turning around."

You're probably familiar with fellows like Joel Osteen and John Hagee and even the New Hope folks here in town, evangelical ministers who preach a form of Christianity that is based on self-improvement, and overcoming personal anxiety and getting help through the rough spots that life throws at all of us.

It's sort of Christianity as a self-help book.

There's nothing wrong with any of these things, and indeed, those who are willing to be transformed through the call of God in Jesus may very well, as a side benefit,

like frosting on a cake or the wrapping paper on a gift, find themselves improved, less anxious, and more easily accepting of the roughness of life.

But, the frosting is not the cake, the gift wrap is not the gift, and self-help Christianity "is not the gospel." Yoder, 1971, 32.

The meat, as in m-e-a-t, of repentance, as John and Jesus call us to, is not about an improved humanity bringing about the kingdom of God; it is about recognizing the FACT that God's kingdom is invading our lives, now, today, this moment.

It is about coming to grips with our need to prepare ourselves for this new reality.

This is why John refuses to baptize the Pharisees and Sadducees, calling them out for their presumption that race or status or class or religious affiliation somehow matters in the eyes of God: since God can turn even stones into this or that race or status or class or religious affiliation.

No, the key is to change how we think, to change how we perceive the world, to change how we enter into the mystery of a God who comes to us as an infant, who saves us by dying for us, and who shows himself to us in humble service, paying special heed to the very least among us.

It is a complete reversal for a world that knows itself through power and wealth and fame.

This is the reversal that baptism invites us into, and it is not for the faint of heart.

In the marriage ceremony, the priest admonishes the couple preparing to wed that "marriage is not to be entered into unadvisedly or lightly, but reverently and deliberately."

We might be well served to have that same admonition read before each baptism.

Baptism is a serious undertaking, because it is a promise to follow, to stake our lives on, the mystery of a God who comes to us as an infant, who saves us by dying for us, and who shows herself to us in humble service, paying special heed to the very least among us.

That's why the squirrels get it wrong when they understand baptism as the ticket punched once and for all; why it misses the mark to see baptism as the Willy Wonka golden key, to be presented at the end of one's life at the Pearly Gates.

The gift God gives to us in baptism is not a possession, it is a task. S. Hauerwas, Matthew, 46.

Allow me to say that again: the gift that God gives to us in baptism is not a possession, it is a task.

And what might that task be?

It is to witness, sometimes with words, more often in actions, to the unexpected and upside down power of God in the world.

Unexpected because the power of God resides not in military might or money: but the power of God resides in forgiveness and welcoming arms and suffering for the sake of one another.

Who ever imagined that the truth of our situation is this:

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to them.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to them." Mt 5:1-10

This is the life into which we all of us are called to live.

This is the life into which these three precious children are entering, with the promises of parents and godparents to bring them along on this strange yet marvelous journey.

We can't do it alone.

It's why we gather each and every week, because the counter message out there is loud, insistent and brash.

The counter message says to us every day:

Blessed are those rich in money and things, for they are in control.

Blessed are the youthful, for they will be envied.

Blessed are the strong, for they shall impose their will on others.

Blessed are the sharp dealers, for they will corner the market.

We gather here each and every week to remember that we have cast our lot with a different message, and with a different messenger, one who helps us say yes to the God who comes to us as an infant, who saves us by dying for us, and who shows himself to us in humble service, paying special heed to the very least among us.

Why do we baptize?

Perhaps so that we can come to live in the reality that God is not an in-law coming to see if the wedding present china got chipped, but that God is a crazy uncle, with wild hair and a twinkle in his eye, maybe a salami under one arm and a bottle of wine under the other; and we tag along not out of fear or obligation, but simply because we don't want to miss out on all the fun!

So join me now as we welcome these three little ones on our collective journey, as we trudge together upon this road of happy destiny!

+amen