

### Why Baptize?

Isaiah 61: 1-4, 8-11; Psalm 126; John 1: 6-8, 19-28

In 1986 the Challenger space shuttle exploded, the Chernobyl Nuclear plant melted down, the Iran-Contra scandal became known, and we bombed Libya. The next year our Navy accidentally shot down an Iranian civilian jetliner and Pan Am flight 103 was destroyed by a bomb. The following year the Exxon Valdez had its catastrophic oil spill and students were killed in China's Tiananmen Square. 1990 was fairly quiet, but 1991 brought the first war with Iraq, 1992 the race riots following the Rodney King verdict, and 1993 saw the fatal battle between the Branch Davidians and the federal government in Waco, Texas, and the first World Trade Center bombing.

I think a sense of the world's being out of control, and beyond the powers of governments to master, contributed, in 1990, to the creation of the Promise Keepers movement, an evangelical men's movement devoted to personal responsibility and mending race relations. I think the same spirit led to the Million Man March in 1995, with a similar agenda of individuals rejecting negative forces on the personal level and working toward better relationships across social divides.

I believe that both the Tea Party movement and the Occupy Wall Street movement, though very different in their politics, are a reaction to the financial downturns and geopolitical tensions of recent years. People notice governments failing to manage big problems and realize that someone has to do something, and so they band together and exhort one another to make a difference. Desperate times seem not only to increase anxiety and suspicion, but a profound desire for hope and agreement.

Although politicians will court such movements, and movements hope to influence politicians, there is no clear leader evident. What is obvious is that the difficulties of the moment have created a great longing to belong to hopeful community.

That's as close as I can get to understanding the Palestine of Jesus' day. There, too, a series of national humiliations and political reversals and accommodations began to weigh on the minds of everyone. The Pharisees arose to encourage the development of an authentic Judaism apart from what they regarded as a corrupted Temple and government, and we know from the Dead Sea Scrolls that various other groups discontented with the direction of the world formed themselves to await and work for a better day.

There were various local leaders of such movements but everyone, in a sense, longed for a great leader to take up their cause and achieve the restoration of national and religious dignity they sought. Their own faith tradition contained the promise of such a leader for just such a time. Part of the heritage of the Davidic dynasty was the hope, in scripture, that when there was a great need, God would raise up a son of David to restore and rule over Israel again. The name given to such a deliverer was Messiah.

In the century that began with Jesus' birth the end of any pretense of self-government, with the decline of the Herods and direct rule by Rome, accelerated the anxiety and hope of the Holy Land. Many began consciously to look for the arrival of the Messiah, and several champions of reform offered themselves for the role. There was a Theudas and an Eleazar before and contemporary with Jesus, and a Menahem a bit after. Early in the next century Rabbi Akibah hailed as Messiah Simon Bar Kochba, and he led the last Jewish revolt against Rome.

This worrisome time and the desperate hope for heavenly help it created are behind the events recorded in the gospels. John the Baptist must be understood in this context. When authorities come from Jerusalem to question John about his identity and his authority, they aren't just jealous of someone who seems to have the favor of the common people. They are people who have a stake both in the collaborationist government and, in the best possible circumstances, the restoration of a free Israel. Walking a fence between cooperation with Rome and any change which God might initiate makes them at least a little of two minds, and we see that's true both in the way John is regarded by the established leaders and by the way Jesus is. They are collaborators because they see themselves as practical and realistic, but they share a religious heritage and a first-century capacity for belief in heavenly intervention with their fellow Jews, and they can't ignore that possibility.

John sees their motives as self-interested and tends to be tough on them. They, however, must do their best to figure out if he's the person sent by God or not, because if he is their self-interest is to change course. That's why there's this dialogue. They ask him if he is the Messiah, if he is Elijah, if he is the Prophet. Those are three categories of expectation that have to do with who God might send to rescue the Chosen People from being under the thumb of unfaithful men. Those are the credentials which might legitimize his baptizing people for the forgiveness of sins.

John says he's not any of those people that fit their expectations. He doesn't have to buy their criteria, and he doesn't. John believes God has something for him to do, and he's doing it. He doesn't need to be one of the pre-Messianic messengers or the Messiah to do what he does. He knows God is sending a Savior, and he wants people to be prepared to stand in the presence of holiness. That's why he baptizes.

John says something a little like what Jesus later tells people when Jesus tells them "the kingdom of heaven is within you." John tells his questioners that someone, someone they don't know, is the one whose baptism is far more powerful than his own. What God is doing is among them-- already present, and they don't know him, and they can't recognize him. At this point John doesn't know him, but he believes in him, and for now that's enough. The moment of recognition comes differently in the different gospels, and some record a subsequent time of second-guessing, but the point is that John knows God is in the world to make a change already in the person of someone God has sent, and that people who think the way the authorities do won't be able to see who he is.

John himself looks like a prophet. Whether he consciously dresses like a holy man of an earlier period or whether his clothing and dining habits are the result of living like a hermit on the boundaries of settled life, they set him apart. But the one God is sending into the world to make things right won't be known by what he wears, or what he eats. He won't be known by where or how or with whom he's studied, he won't be known by who he associates with. Where he's from won't tell you anything, whether he sounds sophisticated when he speaks or naive, polished or simple.

The saving power of God can be present in the world in anyone. God's transforming work in the world can be done by anyone. None of the ways the empowered and the entitled and the privileged decide what matters and what doesn't matter. The world doesn't have to wait for a person of God who impresses everyone, who passes every test, who telegraphs holiness to the most obtuse of witnesses. The one who offers forgiveness, who offers healing, who challenges presumption and reassures shame, is someone in the midst of the crowd, someone who might be anyone.

We live in troubled times, times of discontent and anxiety, and discord. Most of the directions those things sent people in first-century Palestine were the wrong directions-- people decided God believed in solving problems by violence, people hailed Messiahs who hated people. Did God make it too hard for them? Was it unfair to send a Messiah who was too much a fellow human being, whose origins were too modest or provincial or obscure, whose learning was uncredentialed and whose associates were uncouth? Was it too hard for people to accept a Savior who refused to do harm, who thought the work of God was to lift people up instead of striking enemies down?

We are like John the Baptist. We're nobody special. We're no Messiah, no Elijah, no prophet. This little margin of society which is First Baptist Church calls for people to change direction and do good, offer forgiveness, live in peace, pray, accept and rely upon the love of God. Does that make sense in the world in which we live? Does that seem hopeful when the claims of God we proclaim don't seem to persuade or impress many?

Christmas is the earthiest of holidays. God comes into the world through the travail and messiness of birth, to dislocated parents, to meager hospitality, revealed obscurely and selectively to representatives of the most common of persons and representatives of exalted position and insight and the wider world. Nobody else, that night, knows the story.

We are nobody special, but we know the story, and it is our privilege, by God's help, to share it in what we say and do, how we regard others and resolve difficulties, what we find important and what we recognize as dispensable. The commonplace and unrecognizable Savior still is in the world unknown, and we can only point to acts of compassion, decency, justice, forgiveness and truth-telling to offer the world hints about where its salvation lies. Christmas is coming, and with it a reminder that in the worst of times the world is still being sought by the God who has made it. That's why we baptize.

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