

Baptized in the Spirit  
Genesis 1: 1-5; Ps. 29, Acts 19: 1-7; Mark 1: 4-11

Near the conclusion of John's gospel the resurrected Jesus returns to encounter Peter, the disciple whose three betrayals of him before the cock crows is one of the poignant elements of the Passion narrative. Jesus asks Peter three times if Peter loves him, and Peter, pained by the three questionings, assures Jesus that he does. Then Jesus offers Peter an insight about the nature of life and the nature of discipleship. Jesus says to Peter, in verse 18 of chapter 21 of John's gospel, "Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go."

A friend of mine who is not a church attender surprised me once by quoting this scripture to me as part of his ruminating about his advancing years. Since then I have thought of it as powerfully suggestive about life in general. The evangelist tells us that Jesus says this to Peter to predict Peter's crucifixion, but it serves disciples more generally to remind us that finally all human experience is one of helplessness at one's end. While many of us will be so sustained by strong constitutions and modern medicine and our faith that we may welcome that end, an instinctive resistance to dying is part our nature, and that's part of what Jesus recognizes in his words to Peter.

This morning I want particularly to notice the phrase, "where you do not wish to go." Peter will be martyred, and he'll be martyred because he is so persuaded of the resurrection and the claim that makes upon humankind that he will not stop preaching it even when threatened with death. But he doesn't want to lose his life. This suggests that something is true of the early Christian martyrs that we sometimes perhaps misrepresent to ourselves. They were not all defiant of death and serenely confident, as Stephen is portrayed in his stoning in Acts of the Apostles. Some of them had to accept an end which they hated, out of faithfulness.

That, in turn, seems closer to the spirit of Christ, whose agony in the Garden of Gethsemane and whose saying upon the cross, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" reveal someone who wanted to live, but whose sense of God's purpose for him forced him to accept his execution.

I am talking about the difficulty of accepting death in order to begin to address this morning's scriptures about the baptism of Jesus. I first want to remember with you that the New Testament, in Romans six and Colossians two, considers baptism itself as a variety of death. Then I want to contrast the baptisms of John and of Jesus, which is a matter of such moment in our reading from the book of Acts.

Reading the very first verses of the Bible reminds us that all creation begins with

God's spirit moving over the face of the waters. The Hebrew imagination had a vivid apprehension of the creative possibilities of the fluid state. Greeks tended to regard fluidity in terms of flux, as an irresistible agent of change. To them the liquid state had to do with dissolving. For the Hebrew, there was that element, but there also was the element of bringing forth something new. Greek gods and goddesses, for all their immortality and power to influence events, tended to be hostage to the powers of nature. The God of the Bible turns natural qualities, like the fluid, like the unformed, to God's own purposes. Out of water comes a world. Out of the fluid comes everything--burning stars and solid earth and the grass which renews itself and the life of all creatures excepting our kind. God gives us something more by breathing into us God's own breath, but basically everything else in creation is achieved by Divine purpose arranging and aligning, making sense out of the matter at hand. I read the Bible as asserting that, although there's a large school in Christian history which reads it as saying everything is made of nothing, but that's a distraction in this context.

What I want to see in the Bible's account of our being made by God is that our nature is very much the nature of the cosmos-- it's all common stuff, formed by God into distinct, interdependent creatures. Our nature also has something of God. In the first chapter of Genesis that distinction is described by saying that we are made in God's image. In the second chapter that distinction is suggested by God's breathing God's breath into the clay-formed Adam.

What has this to do with John the Baptist and with Jesus? What the book of Genesis tells us is that the possession of a conscience is a universally human quality. There may be a person here or there without a conscience, the same way that persons sometimes are born with missing organs or digits or something, but that doesn't change what our nature is. We are born, as creatures of God, with instincts about right and wrong and a sense of shame and the ability to feel grief not only at losses like the deaths of loved ones, but grief at our own moral and ethical failures.

We do not have to be religious for that to be true. Religion has a responsibility to help us to discern when our shame makes sense and when it may not, just as it helps inform our idea of what is admirable. Having a bad conscience, however, and feeling the need to be unburdened of guilt, belong to us from the beginning, before any covenants are made or prophets sent, long before the coming of Christ.

The genius of John the Baptist is the recognition that a bad conscience, though we might like to think of it as an opportunity for God, really is an obstacle to spiritual health until it is resolved. Persons who feel bad about themselves project their discontent on the world around them, and the pain of a sense of sin may be resented in ways which are peevish as easily as it may be regretted. John's baptism was part of a call to repentance. Repentance means turning back to God, and whether that turning back is conceived as being prompted by a bad conscience or being prompted by experiencing forgiveness,

repentance is not regret, or remorse. Repentance is going in the right direction again. Regret and remorse are the things John cures by his baptism, and by his encouragement to go ahead and be persons of God.

John the Baptist figures in the baptism of Jesus and in thinking about baptism. The baptism John performs for Jesus is not the one he routinely provides. The gospels make that clear in various ways, from what John says when Jesus comes to the water to what happens at the baptism. Jesus' baptism is the occasion for God's spirit in some evident way to descend upon Jesus, and that's the spirit which drives Jesus into the desert to be tempered by the experience of temptation and the experience of renouncing temptation. All that has to do with Jesus' accepting death as part of his own discipleship, seeing past the mere turning which repentance would have implied to the need to reckon with death in order to live for God.

How is it, however, that Jesus does reckon with death in order to free himself to live for God? The resurrection follows Jesus' death. There are points in the gospel when he announces his expectation of it. There are points, as we've discussed already, that the prospect of his resurrection doesn't seem especially helpful to him, any more than his knowledge that God would raise Lazarus from the dead kept him from weeping at Lazarus's demise. The pain of death is something which is inescapable, and so needs to be met somehow.

The somehow for Jesus is the same spirit which drives him into the desert, the same spirit which is part of his baptism. God provides him with some internal resources, some inner strength, some energy and intention with which to do God's will, which allays Jesus' instinctive reluctance to face down danger.

I've said that John the Baptist figures in Jesus' baptism and he does, but John also has his own disciples and his own disciples spread their message and John's role as a messenger of God is so significant that disciples of John are found at Ephesus, years after John's death, ignorant of the meaning of Jesus. Paul baptizes them and then they have the missing ingredient-- to their baptism of repentance is added the Christian baptism of being able to count on the Holy Spirit. The spirit is demonstrated for them by charismatic gifts, but those of us who do not display charismatic gifts must remember that Paul himself ranked their significance much lower than such abilities as getting along peacefully and constructively with other disciples, so we shouldn't get hung up on speaking in tongues and things. The Holy Spirit provides all our gifts, including the ones which seem less dramatic, like the ability to pray, or to care for someone simply for Christ's sake.

Those are the gifts on which we must rely when our natural instinct to want to be free of guilt is not the only task before us. When we have gotten past concern for ourselves, and live to please God, there will be many things we do not wish to do but which we will do, for God's sake, by the power of God's spirit. That will include many small sacrifices while we live, and finally it will include our ability to die well as disciples of our Lord.

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