

Wade in the Water
Zechariah 12:9-11; Mark 1:1-11
March 7, 2010
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I. Introduction

Many of us tonight will be watching the Oscar's (although since having children, the number of nominated movies that Jeannine and I have seen is pretty limited!). Some of those movies will go down as classics, others will hardly be remembered. One that has become a classic was the "Best Picture" winner from the year I was born. *West Side Story* was a wonderful musical in which the feuding families of Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet are updated to feuding gangs in New York, singing music by Leonard Bernstein.

In his book on Baptism, Remember Who You Are, Bishop Will Willimon reminded me of a delightful song from that musical called "Officer Krupke," in which one of the rival gangs – the Jets – make fun of the ways in which our society rationalizes and finds excuses for their poor behavior. They tell Officer Krupke that they've been poorly parented; the Judge tells Officer Krupke that they need psychiatric help; the psychiatrist tells him that they need economic opportunity. They sing, "We ain't no delinquents, we're misunderstood; deep down inside us there is good."

The irony of the song, of course, is that the boys singing it know that they are ultimately responsible for their behavior, and that their benefactors are not doing the boys or themselves any favors by trying to rationalize their misconduct, their sin. We don't like talking about "sin" in our society. But sin is part of who we are, part of the water in which we swim; and until we recognize it, we can't heal it.

Baptism is at the heart of the healing of our sinfulness. It is through Baptism that we are washed of our proclivity to sin and empowered to accept God's gracious offer of relationship. We are spending the weeks of Lent looking at the sacraments in our church. Those two sacraments are Baptism and the Lord's Supper, and they were very much at the heart of John Wesley's Methodist revival. Wesley called the sacraments a "means of grace," by which he meant that they are gifts from God through which God works to transform our lives. We're closing out two weeks looking at Baptism today; and next week, we'll start exploring the Lord's Supper.

II. Cleansing Water

The late American psychiatrist Karl Menninger, wrote a book called What Ever Became of Sin?, in which he criticized his colleagues who did therapy and social science for trying to rationalize individual misbehavior by blaming it all on social systems. He scoffed at social scientists – and the religious community – for saying that "sin" was too judgmental a word. People sin, and we need to be able to acknowledge it, if we're going to address it in healthy ways.

John the Baptist, in our Scripture lesson this morning, had no trouble calling sin, sin. John is an interesting character on many levels. If you wanted to start up a new and powerful movement, for example, I'm not sure that the desert is the place you want to go. And from what we know about his preaching, it was pretty direct and confrontational. "You brood of vipers! Who warned you of the wrath to come?" This is not an approach that we would today call "seeker friendly."

And yet, the Gospels tell us that people come from all over to hear John's preaching. Clearly, the words that he was speaking, the approach he was taking, resonated with folks. He was telling something that they knew they needed to hear. Mark tells us that John was preparing the way for Jesus' coming by proclaiming a "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." Repentance is the starting place for our meeting Jesus, because it's the process of cleaning out all of the psychic junk that builds up in us and creating the space for the divine encounter.

All of our great saints knew this. St. Paul, St. Augustine, Martin Luther, John Wesley – all of these guys had a profound sense of grief over the places that they fell short of God's call on their lives. But, as we have discussed before, this wasn't simply about their individual infractions of God's law. Sin is about our general state of brokenness; it's about the *systems* of injustice and oppression that we are all guilty of benefitting from, even when we're not individually actively participating.

Sin (with a capital S) is not simply some bad acts that I can engage in or avoid. Sin is the water in which we swim; and acknowledging Sin is not just about my sins, but about my part in systemic violence and injustice that plague our world. The great saints in our church understood that war and genocide and racism and poverty are my problems, and they're not just the result of somebody's poor parenting!

III. The Journey of Sanctification

a. Acknowledging Sin

Now last week, I talked about the fact that as a church we have moved away from the medieval idea that Baptism magically wipes away the Original Sin from infants so that they can avoid Limbo. But Baptism is still – in part – about sin. Baptism is about acknowledging our sinfulness – our brokenness – and resolving to live in a different way going forward. It is about our repentance. It's about addressing both our individual sins, and also our corporate Sin. It's about stopping our behaviors that are destructive of ourselves and those around us; *and* it's about recommitting to the fight against injustice and exploitation.

Every time we perform a Baptism, the parents acknowledge their sinfulness, repent, and affirm their belief in the power of God to help them live in different ways. But friends, it's not just for the parents: as the parents say their vows, we have an opportunity – silently – to reaffirm our own Baptismal vows. Baptisms are not a spectator sport! They are fully participatory. We are all supposed to be saying those vows along with the parents and re-committing ourselves to

turn away from those sins in our lives that cause brokenness, and to claim the power that God offers us to lead a new life.

Lent is, of course, the time in the Christian year when we focus on repentance, on getting ourselves right with God, so this is a great time to really engage the opportunity given to us when we baptize someone. Every time we do this, we have the chance to re-claim the desire to set aside our sinfulness and live a new life in Christ. In this sense, Repentance is the place where the Baptism that we practice and John the Baptist's baptism overlap. The language of Baptism is filled with imagery of death. Dying to our former selves and rising to new life in the Spirit.

b. The Power of the Spirit

But lest this seem too dismal, this new life in the Spirit is really what Baptism is about. That's why our Baptism is more than John's. Scripture is very clear that in Baptism, God gifts us with a new kind of power through the Holy Spirit. Our baptismal service talks about "accepting the freedom and power that God" gives us to reject sin. This is interesting language, because in the common perception, being Christian is about *restricting* our options; it's about choosing *not* to do certain things.

But the Biblical understanding is exactly the opposite. From a Scriptural perspective, before we are baptized, we are *trapped* in sin; we have no option but to act out of greed and self-interest. There's a certain inevitability to our sinning, which we have all experienced. But in Baptism, we are freed up to accept God's offer of relationship and given the power to live in new ways.

This is what being "born again" really means. We have let the religious right claim that term, but being born again is the other side of the death of repentance. This is why when Jesus is speaking to Nicodemus in John 3, he says,

"Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born again."⁴ Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?"⁵ Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit."

Baptism is about water and the Spirit being poured out on us. In Acts, on the day of Pentecost, Peter says to his listeners: "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven [*that sounds like John the Baptist*]; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit," he concludes.

We see this idea clearly in the book of Acts when Paul first travels to Ephesus. In Acts 19, we read:

"Paul ... came to Ephesus, where he found some disciples.² He said to them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?" They replied, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit."³ Then he said, "Into what then were you baptized?" They answered, "Into John's baptism."⁴ Paul said, "John baptized with the

baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus.”⁵ On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.⁶ When Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied.”

Baptism is about power. It is about God giving us the transforming gift of the Holy Spirit, so that we are no longer trapped in Sin, but can with freedom engage the new life God offers. So if you ever happen to be asked if you’ve been born again, please answer, “Yes, when I was baptized.”

c. Revisiting the Jordan

But that’s obviously not the end of the story. The gift of the Holy Spirit is one that we need to reclaim day after day. Our conversion is never accomplished and over. John Wesley’s Aldersgate experience did not mean that he stopped struggling. St. Paul’s Damascus Road conversion did not mean that God took away the “thorn in his flesh” that he talks about. Baptism is ultimately the paradigm for engaging God daily. It is the process of repenting, acknowledging our places of brokenness, and again inviting the power of God’s Holy Spirit to transform us.

This is why for each of us, Baptism can’t be something that happened to us long ago in the past. It is the gift that keeps on giving. It is about my daily transformation as God seeks to have me become who I am to be. Every day, Martin Luther would get up and say to himself, “I am baptized,” which is to say, the Holy Spirit is working within me *right now*. My call is to recognize that and begin working with it.

IV. Conclusion

Friends, for me – and I suspect for many of us – there seems to be a certain inevitability to sin, both our individual sins, and Sin (big S) itself. I am tempted periodically to give up on my own attempts to stop being destructive of myself and others; and I regularly despair of our ability to change our social structures.

Baptism is God’s word of hope in that despair. It is God’s ongoing promise that we are not trapped in our destructiveness – individual and corporate – and that Sin does not have the last word. Baptism is the sign that the power of the Holy Spirit is always working within us to change and transform and lead us to perfection in love.

Amen.