

Baptism Power

What do you know about your baptism, if you have been baptized? If you were baptized as an infant, have you seen pictures or heard the stories? Is there a baptismal gown that has been passed down through your family? Or were you old enough to remember your own baptism – at the font, in the river, on the beach or in someone’s backyard.

If you close your eyes, can you recall, or maybe imagine, the water dripping down your face, the wet smudge of a cross on your forehead or river water churning around your knees? Was the water warm or shockingly cold? If you have witnessed the baptism of a son or a daughter, niece or nephew, God-son or God-daughter, did she or he laugh, or cry or sleep? Do you remember seeing the water trickle down that child’s brow or recall kissing the wet patch of hair after the pastor handed the baby back to you?

What emotions do you associate with baptism: tenderness, reverence, awkwardness, wonder or just plain sogginess? Did it seem like a lot of fuss, a bit embarrassing, or did it have all the marks of a powerful God moment?

If you haven’t been baptized yourself, what images of baptism do you have? Do you picture a well-dressed family, gathered around a bowl of water, in a sanctuary, or people robed in white and wading into a river to be dunked all the way under?

Water is a powerful, primal symbol. At the very beginning, says our creation story, when the world was wild and waste, darkness over the face of the ocean, rushing Spirit of God hovered over the face of the water. Before anything else, there was water. Scientifically speaking, all of our planet’s life emerged from water, what Soviet biologist Alexander Oparin referred to as the primordial soup. Even now, we are nurtured in the water of our mother’s womb. Our bodies are made up of anywhere from 50-75% water. If we lose jus 2-3% of that water, we will feel thirsty. But it takes only 1% dehydration to start to impair our mental performance and physical coordination. And although we can live without food for weeks. we will die within days without water to drink.

We are utterly dependent on water for our survival – it is our source and our sustenance. So maybe it’s not surprising that it plays such a central role in our scriptures for this morning.

Let’s look first at our scripture from Isaiah. It isn’t specifically talking about baptism but as Christians as soon as anyone mentions going through water, we think that way. But the Jewish culture would have heard something completely different. They were a captured people and the prophet, who is the keeper of the people’s history is trying to combat those narratives that are coming from a violent throne’s agenda.

“When you pass through the waters....and through the rivers....when you walk through the fire...”

When we read that, we might think its just a poetic way to talk about tough times, those words are recalling the most significant moments of liberation in Hebrew history. With full context added it might read:

When you pass through the waters, like you did through the red sea out of Egypt and through the dry bed of the River Jordan into the promised land. When you walk through the fire like Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego.

Isaiah is showing the people that even though they are oppressed, look back at our history, and realize there is an upcoming salvation and freedom from their captors. If this author in the Isaiah tradition had been a Black descendant of the enslaved, the amplified translation might have read: "When you pass through the waters of the Atlantic middle passage...and through the Ohio, Potomac and Combahee rivers towards freedom....and when you walk through the fire of your flourishing communities and churches set ablaze by white reactionaries.

Verse 2 of Isaiah isn't written about baptism...but it isn't irrelevant to baptism either. John the Baptist wasn't the first to acknowledge the sanctity of water. In fact it isn't the only religious culture that reveres water. Shamira Ibrahim says that in many Black spiritual practices that predate colonial interactions, there has long been a reverence for water and cleansing. These rituals and concepts have been preserved and transported to the Americas and beyond as a byproduct of the Trans-Atlantic Slave trade. They can be found in everything from African Traditional Religions and their descendants, such as Ifa and Black American Hoodoo, to the cultural syncretism embedded in Black expressions of Abrahamic religions."

It also extends to classical African American spirituals that are frequently infused with significant references to water and its power. The familiar lyrics to "Wade in the Water" for example, are enmeshed with multiple subtle references to water as a cleansing and liberating space, not just biblically, but as a cue to slaves to communicate with each other as they sought an escape to freedom.

In Howard Thurman's book *Deep River and the Negro Spiritual* speaks of Life and death, he says that "For the slaves, the 'troubled waters meant the ups and downs, the transformations of life. Within the context of troubled waters of life, there are healing waters, because God is in the midst of the turmoil.

As we move to our gospel lesson this morning, all four of the gospels tell of Jesus' baptism differently but they all agree that as an adult, Jesus went down to the River Jordan, to meet a wild eyed prophet named John, who had been calling the people to repent and prepare for the coming of the Messiah. Jesus waded into the cold, muddy waters, of the Jordan up to his waist and asked John to baptize him.

It's a scene that defies our urge to make baptism too sentimental. There is nothing sentimental about standing mid-stream in a cold, muddy river, I've seen the Jordan and it is not pretty, Jesus is standing in that cold muddy river with a man dressed in camel hair and smelling of locust breath.

It's not sentimental to be gripped by calloused hands and submerged – momentarily unable to breathe – beneath the surface of the water. Of re-emerging, dripping wet, and watching, moments later, as the sky tears apart and something comes careening out of the heavens, right toward you.

Thank God for what happened next. Because out of that rip in the sky came the voice of God, saying “I love you. You are my child; I love you and I’m proud of you.” This is music to a child’s ears. How many times do you suppose Jesus recalled that moment and those words – in the weeks that followed, as he journeyed the difficult road that began in the Jordan River?

It turns out that beginnings – whether modest or spectacular – soon give way to the actual living of life – life that is inevitably messier than we first imagine, life that is fraught with challenge, disappointment and pain. So we need all the love and guidance we can get.

Which brings me back to that question: What is really going on there, in those breathless moments beneath the water, or in that more symbolic moment, as the water is dabbed on a person’s forehead?

Although there are a lot of ways to answer this question – enough for a whole sermon series! – one thing is clear – in baptism, God marks us as God’s own. And another: baptism marks us as part of the Christian community – followers of the one who first waded into the Jordan.

In the 4th century, baptismal rites were a dramatic and extended affair that included being marked with salt – rubbed down with oil, and immersed in water. Each of these steps had symbolic meaning. Together, they transitioned the candidate from an old life to the new. Former ways were renounced, new wisdom conferred, evil banished and the body anointed as though for burial. The candidate went down in the water and rose from the font as if born brand new, ready to follow the way of Christ and be welcomed into the Christian community.

One of the more colorful moments, in this rite, candidates blew toward the west, to chase away the demons; some texts even suggest that they spit at the devil which obviously was during pre-COVID times.

In the 15th century, Martin Luther included these words in the baptismal liturgy addressed to the devil: “So hearken now, thou miserable devil, adjured by the name of the eternal God and of our Savior, Jesus Christ, and depart trembling and groaning, conquered together with thy hatred, so that thou shalt have nothing to do with the servant of God who now seeks that which is heavenly and renounces thee and thy world.”

The journey that begins in the river, leads to the cross and indeed beyond it – a detail that reminds us that baptism is no tame act. Whatever else is happening in that water, this seems clear: that we are allying ourselves with the one who allies himself with the suffering of the world. In the waters of baptism, we promise to follow, as best as we can, the one who wades into every troubled water.

Writer Steve Thorngate suggests that baptism is not so much about making us ritually clean, as it is about turning us toward the world’s uncleanness. In other words, baptism inducts us into a

community that doesn't run from pain and turmoil, but rather faces into it, just as Jesus did, for the sake of healing, loving, redeeming God's whole world.

Christian baptism was not originally an occasion to bless a baby with sweet words and high hopes for their future. Jesus accepted a baptism that set him against the powers that be and aligned himself with the poor. Jesus followed in the steps of John the Baptizer, whose arrest and subsequent death foreshadowed what Jesus would endure. Baptism was and is not a mark of conformity; it's a means of disruption and resistance!

If you have never been baptized and would like to at least consider baptism, I would love to have a conversation with you. Baptism doesn't mean you've figured out everything about the Christian faith or that you agree with every doctrine.

Baptism for you might be a way for you to share a new level of commitment to follow Jesus, which means becoming a disrupter of systems as well as a lover of the least and to do so among this supportive community of faith. Because baptism is both personal and communal.

This week, I invite you to look around for signs of your baptism. Find your baptismal candle if you have one and light it. Flip through the pictures. Or just tell the story. If you have children in your home whose baptism you witnessed, tell them what you remember about that day. If you haven't been baptized, maybe find someone who has, and ask them about it.

Consider the details. Ask yourself what it means to you now, how your life is different because of that water.

Will we allow those waters to change the way we look at the world? Might it give us the courage to step out, even as Jesus stepped out, in faith that God goes with us.

Are we prepared to wade into the muddy waters, wherever it leads, to perform acts of love and mercy, justice and healing?

Remember this: There is mystery in the waters, power beyond reason, something life-giving that we cannot fully explain, or need to explain. Trusting those words of assurance, and the one who leads us into the waters in the first place. As to what happens, next, that is in God's hands. Amen.