

“Through the Waters”: Water Baptism Sunday
9-23-18
Text: Romans 6:3-11



Reflection Questions for Personal Use or in a Group Context... (please consider the teaching notes prior to consideration of the reflection questions)

Today, we interrupt our series, “This Is Life: 1 John”, to consider the practice and meaning of water baptism. In this week’s worship gathering, we will actually celebrate with folks their decision to follow Jesus into life and make such a public declaration through the sacrament of baptism.

Teaching Notes...

Wherever we look in history, we find religion to be a universal human trait. “Religion”, from the Latin root, *to connect*. All religions seemed to share some common characteristics:

- ▶ **The belief that what they were experiencing around them was not “self-explanatory”. The natural (perceivable) developed a sense of the supernatural (not readily available to the senses).**
- ▶ **Religion formed and informed their ‘paradigm’. It helped them answer the deeper, meaningful life-questions.**
- ▶ **There was, out of necessity, some form of response both ethically (ways that we were with each other) and supernaturally (worship, commitment and prayer).**

The Jewish narrative distinguished itself in (3) particular ways:

- By identifying their God as the One, True Creator-God who was thoughtful and intentional in all of his movements. He was peerless. In a class by himself.
- By presenting their God as one who was personal and self-revealing. He would make himself known through a people who would learn to be present with him and for him in order to bring his desires to bear on the world.
- Finally, by offering a story that was not cyclical, but linear, in that it was moving toward a purposed-end: “shalom”--- peace; wholeness; everything functioning properly.

Traditionally, there have been (2) sacraments (“sacred” activities) in which the church has continued to participate: the Eucharist and water baptism.

The word ‘**sacrament**’ is a Latin word used to translate the Greek word ‘**mystery**’. Meaning, **it’s something bigger than the act itself; there’s something more profound at work.**

The themes that permeate the biblical narrative are: “captivity and freedom”; “leaving and coming home again”.

The central narrative of the Jewish people has always been the “**Exodus**”. The word is derived from (2) Greek words meaning “*out*” (ex) and “*way*” (odos). A “way out”. Jesus took his cue from this OT back-story. It was this narrative that provided the backstory for all of Jesus’ teachings and actions.

Genesis gets us off to a “good start”. It centered us in the creative, generative love of God. It established “blessing” as the framework for all of life. It created context for understanding our world, ourselves, our God. It rooted us.

Suspicion called it all into question. Our questioning diminished our ability to trust. The absence of trust resulted in alienation: disconnected from life, from truth, from wisdom. We chose to be self-determined. To write our own story.

The OT offers page after page of “*humanity behaving badly*”, mostly committed to their own self-indulgent ways, with the occasional expressions of repentance that they simply couldn’t seem to sustain.

Against the dark backdrop of human brokenness, the faithfulness of God became even more glaring. He would find a way to make good on his promises, even if we could not. It became apparent that God would not be content with such relational fracture. He would pursue us. He would set in motion a plan for restoring us. The Jews called this “**redemption**”.

“**Redemption**”, in its broadest sense, is a word we use to describe a moment when something ugly and tragic and devastating gets turned into something beautiful and meaningful.

By the time we reach the end of the OT, we find God’s people mired in the consequences of their own infidelity, but being met with a message of “*tenderness*” (Isaiah 40---) and “*expectation*”. We discover that God’s dealings with his people were not meant to simply be “punitive”, but “corrective”.

We come to the end of Daniel and he is wondering if there is any reason to be hopeful. What he is given is the hope of resurrection. It is the conviction that chaos, and disorder, and death are not the final statement.

“For I am about to do something new. See, I have already begun! Do you not see it? I will make a pathway through the wilderness.” Isaiah 43:19

The prophet Isaiah speaks about a **“highway”** being prepared, by God, in order to access us---- where we are--- and lead us out of the desert and into God’s new world.

Fast-forward to the opening scenes of the NT: John is said to be *“in the desert”* preparing for the arrival of God who would come and finally lead his people into the true exodus.

“The prophet Isaiah was speaking about John when he said, ‘He is a voice shouting in the wilderness, Prepare the way for the LORD’s coming! Clear the road for him!’” Matthew 3:3

The context of John’s activity is the **Jordan River**. The Jordan, you might recall, is what the Israelites crossed after their *extended vacation in the desert*. They crossed over into the land of promise, not due to their own “swift-water skills”, but by miraculous intervention--- God acting within history to do for them what they could not do for themselves except trust and respond.

Jesus, stepping into the waters, endorses John’s movements and demonstrates the lengths to which he is willing to be identified with us; somehow being baptized “with”, “for”, and “because of” us.

Now, imagine if you are a Jew whose entire life has been informed and formed by this narrative. Mark, by bringing together the images and themes of desert (wilderness), repentance, and turning back to God, and the Jordan River, intends for people to make some connections with the story that has been going on for a long time: ***“This is what we’ve been waiting for!”***

By entering the water with the people, Jesus is portraying himself to be the one who was coming to lead the people into a “new exodus”: through the waters of death and out the other side into life--- a promised and promising life. It would be a life accompanied and empowered by the Presence.

Paul says, in 1 Corinthians 10:2, that just as people were *“baptized into Moses”* by crossing the Red Sea, now people were being *“baptized into Jesus”* (Romans 6:3-11).

According to the biblical narrative, if God is going to deliver his creation from the chaos and evil that we have unleashed upon it, he will have to defeat death. If he is going to eventually and decisively eliminate evil in order that life may rule (eternal life), he is going to have to address the issue of death and all its seeming ‘finality’.

The central Christian conviction and hope is that what the Creator-God did for Jesus at the resurrection, he intends to do for the whole world.

“... in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead. He is the first of a great harvest of all who have died.” 1 Corinthians 15:20

At Passover, the first of the grain crop was offered to God. Presenting the initial crop represented your trust in a much larger harvest which was yet to come.

It says that Jesus is the “first-fruits of the dead”: he is the beginning--- the guarantee that love is stronger than evil, that life is stronger than death, that nothing can stand in the way of God’s dream of “shalom”.

Baptism defines us.

Stepping into the water of baptism locates us in a “**this**” story. I am unique, but I am particular. It says that I am no longer limited by or bound to my old way of life, but can, through this mysterious connection to Jesus, begin to live into something new.

Baptism identifies us.

Paul said that just as people were “*baptized into Moses*” by crossing the Red Sea, now people were being “*baptized into the name of Jesus*” (the person being baptized is “bound to” the name: clear emphasis on identification/relationship with Jesus). Jesus joins us in the waters of baptism and says, “**You belong to me! You’re mine!**”

In baptism, we get named in the same breath as “God”.

We find ourselves in the company of God. “*Father, Son, Holy Spirit, McKenna, Bob, Cale, David.*”

Today, you may not see the dove or hear the voice, but I trust that you recognize the delight of the community and hear our confirmation of your new identity- with God, with us.