

BAPTISM
Mark 1:4-11
Preached by Dr. Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
Sunday, January 11, 2015

After years of riotous living a man finally came to his senses, repented his sins and accepted Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior. He was taken down to the river to be baptized.

After he was dunked the pastor said to him, "Son, by the grace of God your sins are forgiven."

The man gazed into the river and replied, "God help the fish."

Every second Sunday of the new year the gospel lesson tells the story of Jesus' baptism. Maybe the best way to begin the sermon would be to answer the question "What isn't baptism?"

Baptism isn't just a family event and naming ceremony. Neither is baptism a free get-out-of-hell pass. Oddly enough, it wasn't unusual in the past for some to put off their baptism until they were on their death beds, thinking a little sprinkling of water on their heads would automatically make them right with God. Not so.

Then, "What is baptism?" First, baptism is a sacrament. A sacrament is best described as an outward visible sign of God's inward, invisible grace. That is, when you see the ritual being performed what you don't see is the mysterious activity of God at work welcoming the one being baptized into the passion of the Christ. In other words the sin of the one being baptized, in some wonderful, unexplainable way, is washed away through Christ's crucifixion. Our sin dies with Christ so we can then be raised up with Christ. When the man in the story was being baptized in the river, being dunked under the water, it was symbolic of him going down into the tomb with Jesus and then being brought out of the water is also symbolic being raised up with Jesus on Easter morning.

So, in ways beyond our comprehension, through baptism, God's love and grace strips you of your false nature who you've become outside of God's authority, so your new self, your real self the person you were created to be, has a chance to emerge. And I say "has a chance to emerge" because it's up to you to accept your baptism and get on with that lifelong journey of following Christ.

In the third installment of C.S. Lewis' Chronicles of Narnia The Voyage of the Dawn Treader there's a delightful passage that gives us a glimpse into what happens to the believer in baptism.

Eustace is not a nice boy. He's self-centered, self-important, a snob and a whiner. By chance (or is it?) he is brought into Narnia when his cousins Edmond and Lucy are unexpectedly called back to the magical kingdom.

One morning Eustace woke up to discover he was no longer a normal boy. He became on the outside what he was on the inside, an ugly dragon. Eustace was miserable. There was nothing he could do to change himself back. Then sometime later he looked up and saw Aslan the Lion slowly coming towards him. Aslan, the Christ figure in the story, told Eustace to follow him to a bubbling pool. Once there the Lion told Eustace to undress and get in.

So Eustace started undressing by scratching himself with his dragon claws until his outer skin started peeling off like a banana. He felt wonderful and waded into the pool only to realize his skin was as scaly as ever. So he scratched and tore at it again until his outer skin peeled off as before.

But his skin was still rough and scaly. He repeated this a third time with the same result, he was still an ugly old dragon.

Then Aslan said, "You must let me undress you. So Eustace laid prostrate on the ground. He later told his cousins,

"The very first tear was so deep it went right to my heart...it hurt worse than anything I ever felt before. The only thing that allowed me to bear it was just the pleasure feeling it peel off...he (Aslan) peeled the beastly stuff right off...and there it was on the grass, only more thicker, darker and knobby than the others had been. Then he caught me--and I didn't like that very much for I was very tender underneath now—and threw me into the water. It smarted like anything, but only for a moment. After that it became perfectly delicious and as soon as I started swimming and splashing around I found all the pain gone...I turned into a boy again."

What's Lewis telling us about baptism?

First, you don't have the power to improve, let alone save yourself. No matter how hard you scratch, you remain the same. That's why we need Jesus. We can only scratch the surface, but Jesus digs down deep, right into your heart. And when you let this happen, when you invite Christ into your life and save you, sooner or later it hurts, because the consequences of your sin hurts whenever you submit to Christ and let him rip it out of you. And when he washes your wounds, it still hurts, until you heal and finally become the real you.

You may be wondering if baptism hurts, why don't children and adults being baptized scream with pain? Remember what I said earlier? Baptism is "an outward, visible sign of God's inward, invisible grace." You see, God's grace doesn't work on our time, but in God's time. That means our growth into our truest humanity only comes when we're finally ready to stop thinking our old behaviors and attitudes are acceptable and then be ready to have them ripped out of you.

Another question frequently asked about baptism is, “Why did Jesus, who was sinless, submit to John’s baptism?” That’s what John the Baptist wanted to know.

In his Gospel Matthew fills in the blanks that Mark left out. John the Baptist initially questioned Jesus’ request for baptism. “I need to be baptized by you, yet you came to me?” he asked.

Jesus’ baptism was his ordination rite to become the Crucified Christ and his baptism was finally consummated when he offered himself up on the cross. Therefore when we are baptized into Christ and in baptism we receive the invitation to enter into his passion, his suffering and death on the cross, and ultimately his resurrection. We go down with him into the tomb and we are raised up with him to new life. Then the process of being transformed into his likeness, becoming Christ-like begins.

Back in the 1950’s the American psychologist Abraham Maslow coined the phrase, the self actualized life, meaning you are an emotionally healthy human being. If I remember my college Psych 101 course correctly Maslow included Jesus of Nazareth as one of the few self-actualized people who ever lived.

Wayne Dyer, another psychologist seen often on Public Television, once talked about an exam that had only one question.

“A self-actualized person arrives at a black tie diner party. He alone is wearing blue jeans and a tee shirt. What does he do?”

The answer: “Nothing because the true self-actualized person never notices outside appearances because he or she is focused on more important things.”

I think if any of us ever showed up at an event improperly dressed all of us would feel embarrassed and out of place. I know I would. But that’s why I need Jesus, because I’m nowhere near being self-actualized. I need his help. Without him I’m lost.

Most of us can’t remember our baptisms because we were infants at the time, but that’s OK because God remembers, and God knows all about you. The Good News is, God loves you anyway. There’s grace in being remembered.

They say whenever Martin Luther, the Great Reformer, became overwhelmed with his sinfulness he repeated over and over, “Remember your baptism, Remember your baptism.”

A good mantra to remember, because your baptism is a precious gift and if you claim it, trust your life to the One who gave it to you, through it all and in the end through Christ you will be truly blessed and what’s more, through Christ you will be a blessing to others.