

“Whose Baptism is it Anyway?”

The baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan by John the Baptizer is a famous scene from the synoptic Gospels—Mark, Matthew, and Luke. What may not be apparent at first is the theological problem of Jesus’ baptism. As mentioned earlier in Luke’s Gospel, John “went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”¹ It is one thing to be baptizing the average person or egregious sinners for the repentance and forgiveness of their sins, but why baptize Jesus whom Mark calls the Messiah and Son of God? The baptism of Jesus is so concerning that Mark and Luke do not even try to explain it. They just state that it happens. In Matthew’s Gospel John initially refuses to baptize Jesus until Jesus asserts that, “it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.”² The Gospel of John does not refer to the baptism of Jesus although it uses some of the same language. For example, in the first chapter of John’s Gospel the baptizer says, “I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him.”³ He is alluding to something that the other Gospels say happened at the baptism of Jesus. John just skips mentioning the problematic baptism.

If we wonder why it was mentioned at all, the consensus is that it must have been such a well-known part of the Jesus narrative that it could not be left out. The gospel writes report it but get it over and done with so they can move on to “the rest of the story” as Paul Harvey used to say.⁴ Given the discomfort with the baptism narrative it is interesting that it comes up as a reading twice in quick succession, first on the second Sunday of Advent and then a month later on the first Sunday after the Epiphany.

While theologians have a problem with Jesus’ baptism, the early church made baptism an essential part of the initiation for proselytes. That practice continues to this day. But since the advent of infant baptism, many people have been uncomfortable with the idea that a child needs to have his or her sins cleansed. Many if not most people question what sin a little child could have committed. However, if we are initiating the child into ministry at Jesus’ baptism that is another thing altogether.

I want to examine a part of the baptismal liturgy to see what it is saying this rite means for Augustus and Colt, the two young boys who are being baptized this morning and for us. After we say the Apostles’ Creed there are five questions we are to answer. The first question the priest asks of everyone is “Will you continue in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of the bread, and in the prayers?” This question assumes that we all have been participating in these practices of worship already. What we agree to, in a nutshell, is that we will go to church where we will hear the readings, receive communion, and pray with and for each other. When we agree to this statement, we are assuring God and each other that we will continue.

The second question asks, “Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?” This question also presumes an ongoing commitment to resisting the evil in the world from infecting our lives. When

¹ Luke 3:3 NRSVUE

² Matthew 3:15b NRSVUE

³ John 1:32 NRSVUE

⁴ Paul Harvey was a radio journalist and commentator from 1938-2008. More at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_Harvey Accessed January 11, 2025

we give in to evil, not if but when for we know we will succumb at times, we agree to turn around and get back on the straight and narrow path that is the way of the Lord.

Next comes a question, which makes mainline Christians squirm. “Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?” The first thing that comes to mind for many people is those who evangelize door-to-door or on street-corners. This is not what this question refers to. It is more about how we live our lives than pamphleteering. This question asks us to affirm that we are going to live lives worthy of Christ and worthy of the great cloud of witnesses who have preceded us in the faith. It also means we will not be afraid to talk about our faith and be able to articulate why God is important in our lives. It means having a faith that is like that of my Grandma Chinn or Jimmy Carter. People who wore their faith on their sleeve without the need to shove it down someone else’s throat.

Which brings us to the fourth question. “Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?” Look for the Christ in everyone you meet, especially those in whom it is hard to see. In these times where we are divided by race, ethnicity, education, beliefs, income, and many other aspects of life, it is sometimes hard to look someone in the eye for fear of what lingers behind their gaze. That is why it is imperative that we look for the Christ in them. That is what we are called to seek and serve in even the most difficult people. We are to do that because Christ does.

Finally, we are asked “Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?” The two most important words in this question are all and every; as in “all people” and “every human being.” Like Christ we are to seek justice for everyone not just who we love, who vote like we do, who live where we do, who belong to our clubs, or anything else. Christ loves all people and wants the best for them, and so must we if we are to claim that we are one of his flock.

You may have thought that the rite of baptism was all about the ones being baptized. It is also about us who are affirming our baptism. For little ones baptism may seem simple, but for the rest of us baptism is multilayered. First, we must get our own spiritual house in order. We must remind ourselves of our baptismal promises and start doing a better job of living them. We must set an example for children and for each other. Second, we need to realize that perfection is not what is required, rather it is the striving to live into the covenant that is important. It is hard, but anything that is worth doing is hard.

Today’s baptisms, for all their beauty, joy, hope and love, are also a call to action for those observing this sacrament for Colt and Augustus. It is a call for us to get our lives in order. And a call to support these two boys as they seek to live lives of faith. It is not just a big thing. It is everything.