

Down to the Waters

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“Remember you are baptized.” The reformer Martin Luther once said that perhaps when the Christian rolls out of bed each day, he or she ought to begin with these words, reminding ourselves to whom we belong and for what we are made. Luther even enacted it as he began each day by patting himself on the head and saying to himself, “Remember you are baptized.” To remember and reaffirm our baptism and all that it entails can be an awkward and unwelcome business. It is to remind us that we belong to something and someone bigger than ourselves. It is to remind us that we belong to someone who believes we have been made for a purpose and through whom these baptismal waters help direct us for a life of purpose.

Growing up in a minister’s household was not always fun or fair, and often those moments came when we asked to do something our peers had somehow gotten permission to do (or maybe they just simply did it without permission). I remember one of those instances distinctly...in which I was not allowed to do something that I did not find all that troublesome on my own moral compass, but the reply I received was, “Remember you are baptized; sorry, you are not going to do that.” Remember you are baptized. Remember you are baptized? I thought baptism was supposed to be self-freeing not self-limiting; why was it keeping me from my heart’s desire? Now one of the favorite things we do in the life of the Christian community is to reaffirm our baptismal vows, but when it was done as a reminder of who I was in the context of my high school extracurricular activities, I wanted to have no part of it. I did not want to remember who I was in baptism, I did not want to become the person I was baptized to be, and I wanted to do what my friends were doing and wished I hadn’t asked for permission in the first place. I wished I had forgotten my baptism all together.

When we stand at this baptismal font and baptize an uncomprehending baby, we are reminded in the baptismal liturgy that we cannot be unbaptized no matter how hard we may try. And there are times, at least in my own life, when it would be a lot easier to be a free agent and to try to unbaptize myself. Baptism sticks me with people I did not get to choose, with a family of faith that I did not get to self-select, and places demands on me I would often prefer not to face or try to live up to. Baptism unites me to a Savior, a God whose love will not let me go and whose life obligates me and binds me to people and a way of life that requires more of me than lip service, more of me than the lowest common denominator, more of me than I sometimes prefer to give.

Will Willimon has described the problematic nature of American Christianity in this way: our attitude is often “okay, what is the least amount I can believe or the least amount I have to do to still be considered a Christian?” And our consumer culture plays right into that, offering us whatever version of worship or religious commitment will be the most appealing to us and the least invasive or demanding on us. Come worship here, and you can be anonymous; come worship here, and we won’t ask you to do anything. But we know that is not true, because we know the promises

of baptism. “Remember you are baptized” is always and everywhere in danger of being replaced by the advertising slogan made popular by Marks & Spencer, where “the customer is always and completely right.” Why not design faith on our terms and design it as we prefer rather than surrendering our prerogative to something and someone outside of ourselves?

And then there is Jesus. Today in our scripture lesson, John the Baptist appears for what will probably be the last time until next Advent (so savor this moment). John is out in the wilderness calling all people to repentance and baptizing them for the forgiveness of sins. And many of them are rightly wondering, “This guy sure acts like a prophet and sure doesn’t have problems telling people what to do, and he baptizes with authority; perhaps he is the Messiah, the One who is to come.” And John reminds the crowds that he is not the Messiah but that the Messiah is more powerful than John will ever be and that the Messiah will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire.

John is weird and hair-raising and unnerving enough, so I cannot imagine what the Messiah is going to be...and expect and demand, with water and the fire and the Holy Spirit, not to mention the winnowing fork. And then in our passage, we don’t have to wonder for long about how wild and hair-raising and unnerving the Messiah is going to be because he actually shows up. What does he do? Does he scare everyone straight? Does he make fire flow from his finger tips and put together a pyrotechnic display that would rival the best of our theme parks? Does he burn all the chaff and seek to rid the world of all the rabble and less than desirables?

Not according to Luke. According to Luke, the Messiah hears John’s preaching alongside everyone else. In response to John, Luke tells us that all the crowds of people coming to John are baptized, every one of them. Jesus, one of the crowd, joins them and presents himself for this baptism of repentance. Jesus chooses to present himself for baptism of repentance and to place himself among sinners (Isaiah 53:30). And as he does, he prays and the Spirit comes and the Messiah is made visible. That’s right, this Messiah, who has more power in his pinky finger than John the Baptist will ever have, this Messiah for whom John says of himself that he is not worthy to stoop and untie the Messiah’s sandals, this Messiah who is coming to baptize with fire and the Spirit, this Messiah waits in line nonchalantly while the entire mass of humanity gets baptized, and when everyone else is finished, he takes his turn. Really, that’s how this wild and crazy and unnerving Messiah does business — waiting for everyone else and then calmly taking his turn? I don’t get it. And why does he need to be baptized in the first place? For what sins and transgressions does he need to repent?

For more than two years I worked in a prison in Scotland. To enter the prison each day, I went through a security door and had to put my possessions through a security belt like in the airport. Then there was a second door in which I punched a button and awaited a camera somewhere to unlock the door for me. Then I went through another door to retrieve my set of keys assigned to me. Then I went through a fourth door that required another camera to verify me and let me through. Then a corridor led me to a fifth door that I opened with my key, a sixth door that led down the main corridor, and then three more doors that I had to unlock and lock until I reached the chapel where there was still one final door that led to my office. Lots of locked doors with lots of cameras that required me to unlock and lock them each and every time, each and every day.

My first couple of days, I was a ball of anxiety, not worried so much about

interacting with prisoners, but worried that I was going to do something wrong or forget to lock a door and be caught in the act on video. But after awhile, my duties became second nature and my responsibilities became like any habit or routine we do each day. I remember thinking how intimidating it was that I had to cross nine or ten thresholds just to reach these people who had committed crimes destructive and dangerous enough to have that many precautions and safeguards. How clean cut and boy scoutish I was compared to some of these people, and in many ways I was.

But one holy week we gathered for special services in the chapel. Easter, Christmas, and really all holidays were a tough time for prisoners, so many came to chapel for these special services, sometimes just to get their minds off being locked away from family during the holiday seasons. That holy week service the chapel was full, and we were reading through the passion narrative in a stations-of-the-cross style service. By way of introduction, my Catholic colleague reminded those prisoners, people who seemed so distant and disturbed and destructive in contrast to me, that like them, Jesus had been a prisoner, that like them, Jesus had served time behind bars, and like them, Jesus knew what it was like to struggle in such a place. I remember almost cursing to myself under my breath, "Jesus has more in common with these folks than he does with me."

And indeed he does. He has no problem with all those doors that stand between us and him. And in a way I think he gets baptized to go through every last door that separates us from him; to experience the whole anatomy of the human soul and condition; to make his way to the very depths of our heartaches and heartbreaks and struggles. He is baptized into the whole lot of us, Luke tells us. And he waits patiently until all of us have had our turn. He gets baptized into our life so that we may get baptized into his and share all the joys and fulfillment and hope his life bears and brings.

So remember you are baptized and remember that Jesus got baptized. Remember that he was baptized into the heights, the depths, and the breadth of our lives, so that discovering him there, we may find ourselves in the heights, depths, and breadth of his.