



The Westminister Pulpit

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3900 West End Avenue Nashville, Tennessee 37205-1899

“As Urgent as a Flame”

Isaiah 42:1-9; Psalm 29; Matthew 3:13-17; Acts 10:34-43

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Baptism of the Lord

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WHERE WESTMINSTER GATHERS FOR WORSHIP

Some days you know that God must have a sense of humor. Last Wednesday was one of those days for me. I'd been invited to offer a homily at Baptist Hospital for their mid-week chapel service. I chose our morning text from Matthew. So there I was: a Presbyterian minister, preaching at Baptist Hospital with a text on baptism. It sounds like the lead-in to the joke about the two ministers who were discussing baptism. The Presbyterian minister asked the Baptist if he considered a person baptized if he was immersed in water up to his middle. "No," said the Baptist. "Do you consider him baptized if he is immersed in water up to his neck?" asked the Presbyterian. Again the Baptist's answer was "No." "Well now," said the Presbyterian, "suppose you immersed him up to his eyebrows? Would you consider him baptized then?" "No," said the Baptist. "Well then, there you have it!" said the Presbyterian. "It's only the wee bit of water on the top of the head that counts!"

Our morning text from Matthew invites us to turn from the focus on our own baptismal practice to be confronted by the surprising story of Jesus being baptized in the Jordan by John.

I. It's safe to say that John is as surprised as we are.

Let us, first of all, simply be surprised that Jesus got baptized at all. John had predicted the Christ as a baptizer (with Spirit and fire), not as a recipient of baptism.

To get a sense of the surprise, imagine we are going to the Schermerhorn Symphony Center for a sold-out performance. There's not a seat to be had; we all have our programs. As the symphony begins to warm up, there is a palpable sense of excitement in the air as we wait for the thunderous music to begin. We have a sense for what it should sound like. It will be marshal music, fit for a battle, full of sounds of victory, the clash and clatter of "thunder and lightning and explosions of wonderful noise."¹

The Maestro comes to center stage to introduce with highest praise the famous musician. He gets us to our feet, and with thunderous ovation we welcome the man who is going to fulfill our expectations. But the unprepossessing person coming onstage doesn't resemble the image in our head. Instead of the conductor's baton that we expected he'd use to rouse the orchestra to play, he's carrying a small flute. Startled into silence, we watch and hear him begin playing softly and gently a melody quite different than the one we'd thought.

As we listen, we become surprised as we begin hearing "familiar themes played in a new way."² That music gets inside of us; it "sounds an echo in our soul"³ And as it comes to its end, as if a signal has been given, the orchestra responds with a very different rendition of the music we'd been waiting for all along.

Now hear John, the Maestro, working the crowd, increasing our excitement about the soloist who is going to appear. "He's coming! He's more powerful than me! He'll bring you God's wind

¹ N.T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone*, Part One, (Louisville and London: WJK/SPCK, 2002), p. 20. I am indebted to Wright for the suggestion of this analogy.

² *Ibid.*, p. 20.

³ Hymn, "How Can I Keep from Singing?" from *With One Voice: A Lutheran Resource for Worship*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995), #781.

and God's fire, not just water! He's coming to clean things up, making sure only the good wheat is left." We're expectant, on our feet, waiting to cheer this One, who comes with power and might to transform the world in a single blow.

Instead, we get Jesus. So far in Matthew's Gospel, we've only seen Jesus as an infant with a price on his head. His coming to John, with humility and meekness, asking for baptism - this is Jesus' first adult act in the Gospel. The first surprise of Jesus' adult ministry, then, is in fact the first deed of his ministry: his seeking baptism at all. One commentator says that this act should really be considered Jesus' first miracle: the miracle of humility.⁴ The first thing Jesus does for us is go down with us. His whole life will be like this. We remember that Jesus ended his career on a cross between two thieves; it deserves to be as well known that he began his ministry in a river among penitent sinners. From his baptism to his death on the cross Jesus stays low, at our level, identifying with us at every point; becoming as completely one with us in our humanity as, in the Church's teaching, he was completely one with God in eternity.

This act of humility is like putting an exclamation point on the Incarnation. In this act we see Jesus beginning the pattern that is sung in the great Christ hymn of Philipians:

Christ Jesus,
though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death –
even death on the cross.

Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess to the glory of God:
Jesus Christ is Lord! Amen.⁵

We could just as easily sing another song: "Jesus loves me, this I know, for his baptism tells me so."⁶ This adaptation of the old Sunday School song is one meaning of Jesus' baptism.

II. Jesus' baptism is surprising, and so is ours.

There are not a lot of movies that portray baptism; but one of my favorites, *Tender Mercies*, does. The film stars Robert Duvall as Mac Sledge, formerly an icon of country and western music, now down-and-out, a penniless alcoholic. Rosa Lee (Tess Harper), the young widow who owns the Texas motel on the edge of nowhere where he has ended up, allows him to work off his room and board. As the months pass, Mac develops a bond with Rosa and her young son, experiencing the healing effects of this deeply religious woman's compassion. They become a family when she accepts Mac's offer of marriage, and he continues to rebuild his life. Mac accompanies Rosa Lee to the church where she sings in the choir. Later, Mac and the little boy, Sonny, are baptized by immersion in that church. On the ride home, Sonny reflects on the experience saying, "I don't feel any different; how about you, Mac?" With a wise smile and a chuckle, Mac says, "No, I don't feel much change either. Not yet."⁷

⁴ F. Dale Bruner, *The Christbook*, (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), p. 83.

⁵ Philippians 2:5-11 (NRSV). The form of this rendering comes as AFFIRMATION OF FAITH from the *Book of Common Worship*, (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), p. 97.

⁶ Bruner, p. 84.

⁷ Note: I'm not sure I have this dialogue exactly right; I was writing from memory.

The film is less a traditional story than a chain of epiphanies; but over the length of it, we see the change come to Mac as he gradually grows into his baptismal identity. As many times as I've seen the film, until recently I'd never noticed the name of the little road-side motel that Rosa Lee runs. Have you? Did you know it's called the Mariposa Hotel? What an odd name! Odd until you learn that "mariposa" is the Spanish word for "butterfly" – a symbol for resurrection.⁸

In the dialogue between John and Jesus that Matthew records, Jesus says the reason he needs to be baptized is "...to fulfill all righteousness."⁹ I like the way *The Study Catechism* amplifies this. The portion of the *Catechism* on the front of your bulletin reminds us that "Jesus entered fully into our fallen situation and overcame it from within..." and "he removes our disobedience and clothes us with perfect righteousness."¹⁰

Like Sonny and Mac, we tend to underestimate baptism. But Jesus' opening words in the Gospel "estimate" baptism considerably. Jesus' decision for baptism, says Martin Luther, is "as if Christ wanted to say, 'Although I am not myself a sinner, yet nevertheless I now bring with me the sin of the whole world, so that I am now only a sinner and the greatest sinner of the whole world.'"¹¹ Again, "This is 'all righteousness': to consider yourself unrighteous."¹² Jesus is baptized not because he shares our need, but in order to share our need. Righteousness in Matthew's Gospel usually means right behavior; covenant loyalty, even when the partner fails; and here especially it means willingness to be identified humbly with sinners.

I confess that it wasn't until I was out of seminary that baptism began to become meaningful to me. I remember walking up the steps of Miller Chapel at Princeton Seminary at midnight one Easter morning. Each year the seminary put on a Paschal Vigil that acted out the great drama of redemption at various sites throughout the campus. We'd begin in Miller Chapel, stripped bare after Good Friday, to read the creation narrative, and then walk throughout the campus to see various stories portrayed, and then usher in Easter with worship back in the Chapel. Just before we'd re-enter the Chapel that had been decorated for Easter, the whole company would pause at the Chapel steps, and someone from the community would be baptized. Then, as we'd ascend the stairs going into the Chapel, the Deacons would dip evergreen branches in water and spray us with water, saying, "Remember your baptism and be glad!" How could I remember, I wondered; I was all of three months old!?

But a remarkable thing happened a few years later. I was a young pastor starting the new church in Alpharetta, GA. We were worshipping in a high school cafeteria and planning to build our own building. The day before we were to kick off our very first stewardship campaign, news came of my father's sudden death. Well, you know how that is – all the arrangements, and then all that closing up a house entails. Going through his chest of drawers, I found the church bulletin from June 19, 1960, the Sunday when I was claimed as God's beloved child through the waters of baptism. As I read over that bulletin I was amazed to see that two other kids whom I knew were also baptized that day: Sherry Strubeck and David Morgan Joynt. Sherry, I learned, had stayed in town and was teaching fifth grade Sunday School at the home church; and David, my dear friend David, is now pastor of the largest Presbyterian Church in New Jersey. That I learned our friendship went all the way back to the font, that I realized our church had been so faithful in upholding its covenant promises to us, that I could gratefully remember my baptism each time I saw a child of God, baptized or marked one with the sign of the cross, has become a gift of unspeakable worth.

I've come to realize that almost every phrase in the second verse of the hymn, "We Gather Together," is also a commentary on Jesus' decision to be baptized with us:

Beside us to guide us, our God with us joining,

⁸ I'm grateful to The Reverend Dr. Roland Powell Perdue, III, for this insight. I happened to be worshipping at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, New York, NY, on October 14, 2007, when he delivered the sermon, *Salvation at the Mariposa Hotel*.

⁹ Matthew 3:15b.

¹⁰ *The Study Catechism*, Question #34.

¹¹ Martin Luther, as quoted in Bruner, p. 85.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 85.

Ordaining, maintaining His kingdom divine;
So from the beginning the fight we were winning;
Thou, Lord, wast at our side; All glory be Thine!¹³

III. Is it, then, any surprise that Jesus' baptism was so important in the early Church?

Did you catch it in Peter's sermon to Cornelius in Acts? There in that amazingly compressed witness to the Gentile Cornelius of the life, death and resurrection of our Lord, Jesus' baptism made the highlight reel. Indeed, for the early Church, Jesus' baptism was "a much more important festival than Christmas."¹⁴ As the writer Kathleen Norris tells us,

"There are important reasons why Jesus' baptism was observed as one of the three feasts of light, which include Epiphany, marking the wise men's recognition of the true nature of the Christ child, and the wedding feast at Cana at which Jesus performed his first miracle. These are feasts of light because they illuminate God's nature. They are three occasions on which God chose to reveal an aspect of God made flesh, as incarnated as Jesus Christ. And they indicate that the Incarnation is not only about Jesus, but about us; these three feasts demonstrate to Christians not only what God is like, but also who God wishes us to be."¹⁵

You see, we can hear in the voice from the heavens, "This is my...Beloved..."¹⁶ God's gracious welcome for all who "bear on their brow the seal of him who died."¹⁷ No wonder the early Church celebrated the Lord's baptism. For in his baptism we find the promise of our own. God claims us and sets us free from slavery to sin and death.

While Amy, Benjamin, Leah and I were living in Charlotte, NC, I became aware of a particularly unusual baptismal font. Between Charlotte and Gastonia lies Belmont Abbey, a small Roman Catholic college. The buildings are ornately Victorian in a high Gothic style, so the baptismal font seems to be at odds. It is made from a huge stone that has been hollowed out for a font. The amazing thing is on that very stone a century and a half ago slaves had stood to be sold to the highest bidder. On the plaque an inscription tells all who enter those cleansing waters: "On this stone [people] were sold into slavery. From this stone [people] are now baptized into freedom."¹⁸

Grateful for such freedom, let us with the "urgency of a flame" go out to love and serve the Lord.¹⁹

¹³ *The Presbyterian Hymnal*, (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), #559.

¹⁴ Kathleen Norris, *Christian Century*, "Marked for a Purpose," December 25, 2007, p. 17.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

¹⁶ Matthew 3:17.

¹⁷ *The Presbyterian Hymnal*, "Lift High the Cross," (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), #371.

¹⁸ Will Willimon in his book *Remember Who You Are: Baptism, a Model for Christian Life* made me aware of the font at Belmont Abbey.

¹⁹ This phrase ties into the sermon's title, "As Urgent as a Flame," which comes from a line in our final hymn, "Christ, When for Us You Were Baptized," #70 in *The Presbyterian Hymnal*.