

“Accompanying Spirit”
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Matthew 3:13-17 January 13, 2008
San Dimas Community Church, United Church of Christ

My understanding of baptism has changed rather drastically over the years. The church in which I was born and raised did not believe in infant baptism. They believed that baptism was only legitimate at the “age of accountability.” But the “age of accountability “ was hard to define. It was not a set age in chronological years; you had to be old enough to know what you were doing and also have a “need” which meant you must have committed a sin for which you needed God’s forgiveness. This was hard for a child to figure out, since baptism was necessary in order to get to heaven but you had to have sinned before you could be baptized. I worried a lot about this because what if I sinned and died quickly without having had a chance to get baptized. Would I go to hell?

I still remember the Saturday night in Topeka, Kansas when my father was reviewing his sermon for the next morning, and I, at the age of 10, brought him a cup of tea and announced that I thought it was time I should be baptized. My father paused to discuss this with me, and he asked me what sin I had committed for which I needed forgiveness. Well, I was a very good child, but finally I said that I had gotten angry at my older sister and anger was sin, wasn’t it?

The next morning when the invitation hymn was sung (you may know this as an altar all), I came down the aisle in my white and purple gingham dress to declare my desire to be baptized. And so I was immersed in the baptismal waters. In the next 8 or 10 years, I was baptized two more times since I really wasn’t sure I had understood what it meant to be baptized the times before, and I sure wanted to be saved.

Today we reflect on Jesus’ baptism, and we learn that his baptism and the ritual washings common to his day had little to do with all my anxieties of heaven and hell. Baptism was a ritual of publicly proclaiming one’s willingness to accept God’s call on one’s life. Somewhat like a wedding ceremony where love is present prior to the ceremony and love continues after the ceremony, the ritual proclaims and celebrates within the human community the relationship between the two people in love with one another. Jesus baptism was a witness to the community that said he was willing to accept God’s call on his life. And then his willingness was affirmed by the spirit, the dove, the words you are my beloved, in you I am well pleased.

In the UCC we baptize infants and small children not because there is something inherently evil that must be washed away so that they are ready to go to heaven at a moment’s notice. We baptize them to celebrate what is -- that God loves them from without beginning and without end -- and it is the parents and the church family who we ask to promise to raise them in the faith until they are old enough to be confirmed and to say yes to their relationships with God. Some parents in the UCC choose not to baptize their infants but to allow baptism and confirmation be a combined act of affirmation. So in spite of all the preachers who say you must be dipped or sprinkled in order to please God, water in itself is not magical; it is the relationship that water represents that gives baptism its meaning.

Rather than baptism being only an opportunity for a party, baptism is a serious public declaration of one’s future life orientation or in the case of infants the life orientation of their parents. From now on, the life of the one baptized will be aligned with God’s purposes. We know very little about Jesus’ life before his baptism, but after his baptism, his life is fully oriented towards God. And Jesus family doesn’t have a Christening party; rather Jesus is sent into the wilderness by the same Spirit who blessed him to ponder what his life will mean and to challenge if he is truly up to the task. After Jesus baptism he does not live out a peaceful

existence the rest of his days; God troubles the waters of the Jordan with an accompanying spirit that does not spare Jesus the cost as well as the joy of a life lived in faithfulness.

If I'd know what I was going to say in this sermon before printing the bulletin, I might have titled it, "Here Comes Trouble" because Jesus' life was to bring angst to the complacency of the privileged and hope to a world of broken relationships with God. I imagine the heavens cracking open and the dove descending and the voice being heard caused the spectators that day fear and trepidation. Here comes trouble! Just what kind of God is making God's presence known in creation, incarnation?

While it is true that God shows us in flesh and blood in Jesus who God is, God is surely much more than any of our human capacities can conceive. The Psalmist and poets and prophets choose the best, most applicable metaphors they know to help us understand the awesome source of all that is, and yet, our imaginations are still limited. For some people God as father gets at the love and protection and guidance and fundamental relationship of their lives. For others especially those who do not have loving fathers as a point of reference, a nurturing mother, the sophia Spirit described in the wisdom literature of the Bible helps them understand the love and beauty of God. For some people any human image is too narrow, and to them God is best talked about as the creative, responsive love of the universe that is dynamic and able to be with us in relationships that continue to reveal the holy and to delight us with joy and challenge us to do justice and tell hard truths.

But on the day of Jesus' baptism, God shown God's Spirit on the wings of a snow white dove, and the words: "You are my beloved, my chosen."

History suggests that it is very likely that the great reformer Martin Luther suffered from mental illness. No matter the depth of his devotion to God, he grieved inordinately his failings and agonized over his sins. It is said that he often repeated the mantra: "Remember your baptism." We are to remember our baptism as a moment when God declared "You are beloved to me" rather than "I'm sure glad you took care of this detail so I don't have to send you to hell."

We remember our baptism and that God has chosen, cherished, wanted us. We are longed for by God and we belong. Knowing this deep in our souls will be the accompanying Spirit for the hard times, for the troubled waters of life. May the peace of Christ come to you on the wings of a snow white dove, or the touch of another's hand, or the inspiration of God's Word, or however is best for you to remember your baptism and never forget who you are and whose you are.