

“The Waters of Baptism” 1-6-16

Isaiah 43: 1-7; Luke 3:15-17; 21-22

As I reflect back over the course of my life I am more aware than ever of multiple turning points. The decisions that we make at critical junctures form our identity and character. As a teenager the choices seemed limitless. Who or what would direct the choices I would make?

As a graduate student, life narrowed down to one direction, professional ministry. Other choices could no longer be pursued. Certain doors become closed.

Then the early thirties, life now fully engaged in the responsibility of work and family. Living outside the wishes of parents, the pressures of peers, there became the allurements of career prospects, salary, and so on.

Then the crisis of mid-life emerged. Do I still want to keep doing what I am doing for the rest of my life? I experienced some lengthy conversations with God during my late 40's and early 50's. This is also known as the season of *acedia*. Often called the 'noon day demon', it describes a state of listlessness or a state of restlessness, perhaps a kind of sloth. Aldous Huxley concludes that it is one of the conditions of modern life.

At the end of one's working life, especially amidst success, the accomplishments over the course of a life may raise questions regarding the social or moral responsibility of one's work. Was I faithful to the purpose of my life? Did I stay true to who I wanted to be? What compromises or trade-offs did I have to make? As Walter Percy writes, "You can get all A's and still flunk life" (Os Guinness, 'The Call', p.3).

C.S. Lewis observes that every time I make a choice I am turning the central part of myself, the part that chooses, into something a little different from what it was before. Looking at our lives as a whole, with all of the innumerable choices, I am slowly turning the central part of my life either into a person who is growing into the image of Christ or away from His design and intention for my life.

Consciously or unconsciously our values and beliefs shape these life decisions. What I have become aware of is the influence of my baptism and the family's faith lying behind that choice to baptize me as an infant. At the 18th year of life I made the decision to no longer attend church and pursue the Christian faith I had been raised to believe and live. However, as I announced my new stance to my mother all she said to me was, "I'm praying for you".

In that moment I became aware that I was dealing with God, not my parents. My baptism had implications for my life. I had to include that reality in the decisions I was making. Would I live into that identity and purpose or turn from it?

Go with me to the world of Isaiah. Here we are dealing with a people who have chosen to disconnect from their identity. Things have not gone well in their estrangement, however. Though the people have not lived up to their responsibilities within the covenant, God is not forgetting God's part in the relationship. Grace is moving at full speed. In spite of Israel's lack of responsiveness, God is persistent.

A man writing to a friend troubled by his own sinfulness and lack of a vital faith in God reflects on grace. He writes, "Grace is goodness that triumphs over all reasons to the contrary". As our human predicament appears utterly desperate there will we discover God graciously intervening (IB, vol.5, p.480). So God is doing for Israel.

Leo Tolstoy writes something that has born itself out in my experience to be true. "The proof of spiritual maturity is not how 'pure' you are but awareness of your impurity. That very awareness opens the door to grace" (Yancey, 'Grace Notes', p.372).

God's people are in such a position. Listen! "But now says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: 'Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine'". God is calling the people back to their true identity and purpose. God knows us and forms our identity in eternity. David writes in Psalm 139:16, "Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be". This is one of the arguments for infant baptism. God's grace is present even before we are born. To Jeremiah God says, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations" (Jeremiah 1:5).

Baptism is God's claim and call upon our lives. It is our identity in Christ, grounded in eternity. The sacrament is an outward sign of God's grace that has already been at work in us. Our identity is never a do-it-yourself private project. It is a gift of God to be lived into.

In our 'Public Worship of God', baptism is described this way: "In Jesus Christ God has promised to forgive our sins, and has joined us together in the family of faith which is his church. He had delivered us from darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son. In Jesus Christ, God has promised to be our Father, and to welcome us as brothers and sisters of Christ...Know that the promises of God are for you to show that you belong to him, and gives you Holy Spirit as a guarantee that, sharing Christ's reconciling work, you will also share his victory; that, dying with Christ's reconciling work, you will also share his victory; that dying with Christ to sin, you will be raised with him to new life".

However we envision what transpired at Jesus' baptism we know that clearly Jesus' identity, purpose, and life is being mapped out. "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased". Jesus realizes that he is the Messiah, God's Anointed King. Secondly this call will involve not power and glory on the earthly side, but suffering and a Cross. In our baptism our life's identity and purpose is also being mapped out, as well.

Through baptism God's relationship with us is not in reference to our sins. It is in reference to what we can become. Jesus' enfolds his life into ours. John points to Jesus as one who will baptize us with his Spirit and clear the threshing floor to gather the wheat into his granary. God is performing a cleansing, redeeming work in us, one that takes time. We grow into our baptismal vows as we live and trust Christ through the turning points and challenges of life.

Paul puts it this way; “Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life...But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him” (Romans 6:4,7).

Jesus is not our mentor, nor is he an example to be followed. He is not our secret weapon or a god that we can control or appease. It is I, yet not I, but Christ in me.

Governor John Kasich states that he is a Christian and speaks of how he has grown in his faith over the years. Listen to what he has to say: “Like for many, many young people, the Lord became a rabbit’s foot for me: Pull it out on test day, pull it out on Election Day. Come on, Lord, I got the rabbit’s foot” (Homiletics, Jan.-Feb., 2016, p.19). God is bigger now and cannot be manipulated.

What is it to know Jesus? I like the illustration of a bicycle. Do I know the bike if “I understand the function of gears and gear ratios, the physics of acceleration and friction, the frame’s geometry, the properties of aluminum? Or do I know the bike when I get on it, learn to ride it, to fix a flat tire, and get to know how it handles as I use it for both transportation and fun?” (Homiletics, p.22).

There are two ways of knowing that bike, of course. Both practical knowledge and theoretical knowledge are important. But I would wager that there are many more people who ride bikes all the time who do not believe that it is important to know the theoretical knowledge about them.

God through Christ lives his life in us. We know God practically. When we look to God in the difficult moments, we experience the living presence of God with us, holding us. Theories of God are irrelevant. Israel can testify. “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, I will be with you; when you walk through the fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. “ For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior”.

It has been the revisiting of my baptismal vows, the awareness of the indwelling Christ guiding me that I have turned to in each stage of my life. I see God’s presence through those waters that felt overwhelming and those fires threatening to undo me. We live our lives in reference to God’s call upon us and our willingness to live into that call. It is our baptismal vows that guide and define our choices.

As we join in renewing our baptismal vows, let us take a moment of silence before God in preparation...

