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“If I Had Known Then What I Know Now...”

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Baptism of the Lord (Year B)

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Genesis 1:1–5; Psalm 29; Acts 19:1–7 ; Mark 1:4–11

If I had known then, what I know now,

I wonder if I would have gone through with it?

I ask this because Martin Luther urged Christians

to practice the *daily* renewal of the baptismal covenant

by placing a hand on the head each morning and saying,

“I am a baptized person, and today I will live out my baptism.”

And John Calvin said that our propensity toward evil never ceases,

but we take courage because what begins in our baptism

must be pursued *every day* until it is perfected

when we go to be with the Lord. (*Institutes*, 4/15/11)

So, in remembering our baptism, *daily*, as Luther and Calvin advise,

I wonder if there is always some resistance to baptism on our part,

to weighing the invisible benefits of the sacrament’s grace in relation

to the costly reality of living out one’s baptism in a broken and fearful world?

Actually, I don’t remember my own baptism. Do you?

I’ve only heard stories about it,

having seen grainy black-and-white pictures of men in suits

and ladies in hats and gloves, holding a hefty tow-headed baby in a white dress.

My mother resisted baptizing *me* until I was nine months old
because as she tells it, I was a "spitter," and she did not want me
spitting up all over her Sunday best.

My own children resisted baptism, too, come to think of it.
Andrew fell right before we entered the church
and had a goose-egg knot on his forehead that blended well
with the blue and red of his little navy sailor suit.

Emily refused to wear her matching sailor dress
and insisted on wearing pink because to her, "blue was for boys."
And when we were summoned forward in the sanctuary, Emily screamed
at the top of her lungs, "No, no!" over and over all the way up to the font.
It was more like an exorcism than a baptism.
But baptisms are exorcisms in a way, aren't they, when promises are made
to renounce evil and its power in the world?

Maybe the perfectly human part of Jesus resisted his own baptism, too.
Perhaps he had approached the Jordan's edge many times before
as schools of people were pulled like fish from the watery chop by John,
cleansed and made ready to face the great judgment.

Perhaps he, too, had felt the magnetism of Cousin John's message
and had fought the urge to become a disciple of John,
to take the plunge, and be of one mind with the whole of Judea
and all the people of Jerusalem.

Perhaps he got a case or two of cold feet, thinking his time was not yet right,
that he was not ready to commit to all that complete obedience might entail.
Maybe his all-too-human heart beat too fast, and his all-too-human stomach
turned over every time his toes pointed down the sloping river bank.
Maybe he knew that the cousin who knew him so well
would expose him for what he really was,
blow his fully-human cover,

and submerge him in the amped up expectations of a people
so desirous of a savior-king.

If Jesus had known at the beginning of his earthly ministry

what he knew at the end of his earthly ministry,

do you think he would have gone through with it?

All of this is purely speculation, of course.

Jesus *did* go to the Jordan River to be baptized by his cousin, John.

According to Mark's Gospel, it is the very first public act of Jesus: submitting to baptism.

And regardless of how reticent or not Jesus might have felt at the time,

God was so pleased that he or she could not be contained.

And a hole opened up in heaven, and God spilled over

as the Holy Spirit overshadowed Jesus as it had his mother,

descending on him like a dove,

sheltering him under the shadow of its wing,

and the voice of God affirmed him as family, calling him Son, Beloved Son,

and expressing nothing but pure pleasure in that moment.

The term Mark uses for beloved is *agapetos* (*ἀγαπητός*), a Greek adjective that is

a term of endearment, signifying a special and deep bond

for one who is favored, one who is treasured and dear.

We mortals may be reluctant to step into the waters of baptism

and face head-on the cost of discipleship.

But if Jesus' baptism is any indication of God's inclinations,

then God, the parent, is as delighted as the prodigal's father

to welcome us into the God-family with open arms,

with signs of affection, with amnesia concerning our past history,

with total in-the-moment celebration of right relationship,

and a brief glimpse of the kingdom in its fullness.

St. Maximus of Turin, a fifth century church father, said this about baptism:

"Christ is baptized, not that he may be sanctified in the waters,

but that he himself may sanctify the waters,
and by his own purification may purify those streams which he touches.
For the consecration of Christ is the greater consecration of another element.
For when the Savior is washed, then already for our baptism
all water is cleansed and the fount purified,
that the grace of the laver may be administered to the peoples that come after.
Christ therefore takes the lead in baptism so that Christian peoples
may follow after him with confidence.”

St. Maximus believed that Jesus makes all water holy by his baptism,
thus protecting and giving confidence and courage
to all who follow him in baptism,
which is good because water has conflicting meanings,
according to Biblical testimony.

It can convey creation and birth, as Genesis attests,
or destruction and salvation, as in the Noah episode.

It can mean rescue and deliverance, as was the Israelites’ experience
in the Exodus story, or judgment and punishment, as was the Egyptians’
experience in that same story.

In other words, water can symbolize destruction and death or creation and life.
It can threaten or it can bless; it can drown us in a heartbeat
or gush like a geyser with new life.

No wonder we are reticent to entrust ourselves to the power of water!

But when Jesus surrendered to baptism in the Jordan’s swirling waters,
he changed all baptismal water and charged it with the
Christ-power to transform all who come under its pull.

So when my father spoke of the day in WWII when his destroyer
was kamikazied in the Pacific, and it started listing toward the port bow
to the point that he had one leg over the rail,

and it appeared to be sinking until they reversed engines
and were able to steer it in reverse all the way back to Honolulu,
I wonder now if it were the Christ-power of the baptismal waters that saved him.
And when I think back on the time when I was four
and slipped and fell into a hotel swimming pool
and was sinking down, down into the watery blue
until someone's great hand reached down and grabbed my clothes,
and the water spit me out as I gasped for breath.
I wonder now if it were the Christ-power of the baptismal waters that saved me.
And when our guest speaker this morning in Sunday School, Anthony Ross,
talks about the "mist of God" that has surrounded him like a cloud
and protected him as he has grown from a child
driven from home by an addicted mother wielding
a meat cleaver to a college graduate and law student against all odds,
I wonder now if it were the Christ-power of the baptismal waters that saved him.
I wouldn't have even entertained that thought when I was first baptized,
but I am ready to embrace that possibility now in reflecting on my baptism.

Contemporary theologian and writer, Adam Hamilton, says this of baptism:

"For Jesus, his baptism was *a defining act*.

In that moment, he identified with (us) sinners and heard God's affirmation
that he was the Father's beloved son.

He received the Spirit's power.

And it marked the beginning of his ministry.

Jesus' baptism was an ordination in which he was set aside and empowered
for his mission of drawing people to God, inviting them into God's kingdom,
demonstrating God's will, and ultimately laying down his life for (all) humanity."

"For us, as Christ followers," Hamilton says, "baptism is also meant as a defining act.
Through baptism we are claimed by God, anointed with the Spirit,

and set aside for God's purposes.

Our brokenness is recognized, and God's grace is promised.

And in our baptism we are initiated into, and become part of God's covenant people.

We are meant to remember our baptisms *each day*.

Even if we don't remember the act itself,

we remember that God has promised to forgive our sin (*each day*),

that we are called to service (*each day*),

that the Holy Spirit resides in us (*each day*),

and that we are God's (beloved) children."

(Hamilton, Adam. *The Way: Walking in the Footsteps of Jesus*)

From our baptisms henceforth, there is no place, no time, no circumstance, *no day*,

when we are apart from the redeeming presence of our triune God.

The affirmation of our God is the redeeming affirmation of our baptism in Christ Jesus.

Friends, the moment of our baptism is the moment of God's supreme pleasure:

the moment sublime goodness and right relationship of Creator to creature

meet together,

the moment love and faithfulness join forces

to make the courageous living out of our baptisms possible.

This is what keeps us moving forward beyond the font:

the supreme pleasure of the Father, the saving Christ-power of the water,

and the constant accompaniment of the Holy Spirit that makes

the daily living out of our baptisms our duty and our pleasure, also. Amen.