

“With you I am well pleased”

Today we mark the John’s baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River. Just a week ago we were imagining Jesus as a toddler and twelve days before that we were at the nativity in Bethlehem. Today he is thirty years old and after being baptized by John will embark on his public ministry in Palestine. The church year can feel a bit rushed sometimes that is one reason it is good to have Ordinary Time to give us space to let it sink in. But today it is essential that we deal with baptism in general and Jesus’ in particular.

Baptism is important in the life of the church and its people. It is one of only two sacraments¹ that all the Christian churches agree upon; the other being the Eucharist. These two sacraments are the ones that Jesus participated in during his earthly life. The other five acts that the Roman Catholic Church calls sacraments, other churches are more comfortable calling sacramental acts if they acknowledge them at all (the sacramental acts are confirmation, reconciliation/confession, anointing the sick, marriage, ordination/Holy Orders). Despite agreeing that baptism is a sacrament most of us are aware that there is not agreement on what baptism is and how it should be administered.

The basic division is between infant baptism and what is often called believer’s baptism. If we realize that the first people to be baptized in the church were adults coming from another faith tradition we realize that in the early church baptisms were believer’s baptism. Baptism as practiced in the early church followed extensive teaching and training or catechism. Baptism marked the end of that period and admission into the fellowship of believers.

However, over time and for a variety of reasons the Church began baptizing children and in particular infants. Once the Church was established and someone could be raised in a community of faith the idea caught on that one could never know a time when they were not a believer. They did not need to make a profession of faith; they did not need to convert, because they had always been a Christian. Of course, adult baptism continued to be part of our practice for those who were converting.

The church influenced by Augustine’s theology of Original Sin came to understand that all people are tainted by sin even infants, who most of us would find it hard to believe had ever committed a sin. The theology said that just by being human we are tainted by Adam’s sin. Therefore, baptizing a child could be a cleansing of sin just as it might be for an adult who had lived a life of depravity. But since a child could not take on the responsibilities for itself confirmation became the sacramental act that marked the child’s taking on the responsibilities of the faith and also marking a transition of to maturity for the child.

Interestingly the pioneer movement in this country brought believer’s baptism back as the preferred form of baptism for evangelical churches. Many of those on the frontier were not reared in a church. They did not have religious training in church living in isolated area. When itinerant preachers came through their area they took to baptizing people who would profess the faith, particularly those who had a profound religious experience. A conversion experience could point to a particular time when a

¹ Sacraments was described by St. Augustine as an outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible grace

person accepted Jesus as their “Lord and Savior.” Unfortunately, as I see it, that put a premium on having such an experience and undervalued people who could not point to such an occurrence in their life. Of course that person may not need to be converted if he or she had always been a Christian.

The Episcopal Church recognizes both baptism experiences as valid, and a great gift from God (as long as the baptism is made in the name of the Triune God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit). Regardless of how people of different traditions see baptism whether as a cleansing from sin or an initiation into the Church, most are confused about why Jesus was baptized. The concern revolves around why should the sinless Son of God needed cleansing of sin or initiation into a Church that did not exist. The situation is made most difficult because it undoubtedly happened. Otherwise such an awkward thing would have been ignored or covered up in the Gospels. It must have been part of the stories that everyone told about Jesus therefore the Gospel writers had to deal with it.

Mark simply has John say he is not worthy to even untie the sandal of the one who is to come after him.² Matthew adds on an argument between Jesus and John wherein Jesus insists on baptism.³ Luke, the same one who wrote long passages about John’s and Jesus’ birth among other topics, nearly glosses over Jesus’ baptism making sure we know that the, “Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus in bodily form like a dove.”⁴ John, the latest of the Gospels, does the most dancing around the topic using all the traditions around the baptism of Jesus without actually saying that John baptized Jesus. The one aspect that all four agree on is that the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus like a dove.

Years ago I asked a group of children why the evangelists wrote that the Holy Spirit was like a dove. I asked them to imagine what it would have been like if the Holy Spirit had descended like a hawk or an eagle. They said that would have been like an attack. Then I suggested the Holy Spirit could have descended like a hummingbird. They said that would have been too fast to catch. Then I suggested the Spirit could have descended like a chicken. That got great laughter and one child said the Holy Spirit could have laid an egg.

The dove is important because the children and we think of dove as soft, gentle, and peaceable. Doves don’t pounce they flutter in for a soft landing. Doves look soft like a pillow. Doves have the reputation of being gentle. Also, we use the image of a dove carrying an olive branch, an image taken from the story of Noah and the flood, to symbolize peace.

When the Holy Spirit came down on Jesus it was not like being slain in the spirit as Evangelicals call it. Jesus did not pass out. Jesus did not start speaking in tongues. However, Jesus did go out into the wilderness for forty days. Mark says that he was “driven” by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness. So while the experience of the Holy Spirit is not, at least in Jesus’ case, a traumatic experience it is one that requires attention.

² Mark 1:7-9

³ Matthew 3:13-15

⁴ Luke 2:22 NRSV

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The Baptism of Our Lord Jesus Christ, Year C

When you feel the urging of the Holy Spirit don't ignore it. Don't put it off for another day. Also don't dramatize the experience. Take the time to sit with it, meditate on what the Spirit is saying to you, allow the Spirit to work within you. There is no telling what the Spirit has in store, so give it a chance.

We Episcopalians are sometimes called the "frozen chosen." That is we are too concerned about decorum and good manners to do the things that Evangelicals do. But we do not have to be so stodgy we ignore God's call. And how do we know it is God's call and not a case of indigestion. Well, we don't unless we attend to it.

In these peaceful days after Christmastide and during snowfall and cold temperatures it might just be the right time to meditate and even ask God for the gift of the Holy Spirit. You might feel it descend, like a dove. You might even hear the words that I expect many hear when they are baptized. "You are my ... beloved with you I am well pleased."⁵

⁵ Mark 1:11 NRSV