

Jesus is Baptized

We all have heard how Galileo was persecuted when he reported his discovery that the earth revolves around the sun, not the sun around the earth. It is difficult, and often costly, to go against the status quo. It seems that just about all forms of progress, though, begin with people who take unpopular positions. Two hundred years ago people whom opposed slavery were considered unreasonable radicals. No one would speak in favor of slavery today. One hundred years ago the majority of people would not have thought that things like human organ transplants or space travel would be possible. But there were people who believed these things to be possible and today they are a reality.

John the Baptizer, out in the wilderness, with his strange clothes and bizarre diet, was certainly a guy out of the mainstream. He was not part of the religious establishment; he did not represent the status quo. Still, John's message about repentance, and the baptism he practiced, although quite radical, hit a responsive chord with populace, and they flocked to him. There was also a deeper level to John's teaching. John proclaimed that the long-awaited Messiah, the Savior, was coming and soon. A lot of false prophets had made that prediction before; only John got the timing right.

Lately I've been trying to pay more attention to modern people who are like John the Baptizer -- to the writers and thinkers and theologians on the margins of the church. I find a freshness and boldness of thought in them that I don't always find in the domesticated mainline. And I would encourage everyone to give an ear to those outside the status quo whatever field you are in. Give some consideration to

those on the outer edges of politics or culture or science or whatever. Those on the margins might not always be correct, but it is also true that sometimes long entrenched ideas that everyone believes true turn out to be wrong too. There might be some unknown, un-credentialed people out there with some very good ideas that we could learn from.

Jesus came to John as someone who was unknown. Jesus was not a person with credentials. In Mark's gospel Jesus had not done anything to warrant special attention prior to his baptism. He was just another face in the crowd. We don't know what Jesus might have thought about himself up until that moment. What had his parents told him about his unique birth? What was Jesus' unfolding relationship with his Heavenly father like when Jesus was a young man? We don't know. But any questions, or even doubts, that Jesus might have had about his identity and his mission, were allayed at his baptism by John in the River Jordan.

Often we refer to Jesus' baptism as the inauguration of his ministry, and it's true, it was. Of course, there is going to be a presidential inauguration in just nine days, and a comparison between the two shows striking differences. Washington, D.C., is going to have its biggest party ever and that city is going to be the most crowded it has ever been. A friend of mine a travel agent who lives near Washington emailed me to say he would give me a special rate if I wanted to come down for the inauguration – I could sleep on the floor of his condominium with several other people for only \$400 a night, breakfast not included! In contrast, Jesus' baptism, his inauguration, was a much smaller and quieter affair. There were no crowds, no fanfare, nothing much special going on for the public's view. There was only what Jesus could see himself, but that was even more spectacular than January 20, 2009 will be.

That scene of Jesus' baptism recorded in Mark 1:9-11 is just filled with powerful, important images for us. It says that as Jesus came up out of the water he saw the heavens ripped open and the Holy Spirit descended on him in the form of a dove. Thinking about our first and second lessons today, this is the same Spirit that brooded over the waters of creation and the same Spirit that filled the Ephesians with power at their baptism. Then we are told, a voice from heaven spoke to Jesus, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Right there you have a beautifully simple and complete picture of the Holy Trinity, with Jesus the Son, both God and man on earth, being filled with the Spirit that proceeds from the Father, and the Father, the voice from Heaven, addressing Jesus the Son.

The voice from heaven reminds us of a story from the Old Testament, the story of Isaac and Abraham. Remember how long Abraham and Sarah had waited for a son and how Isaac, born to them long after their normal childbearing years were over, was especially beloved. And remember how God told Abraham to take his Isaac, his beloved son, and sacrifice him on Mount Moriah. But in that story the voice of God calls out from heaven at the last moment for Abraham to stop the sacrifice of Isaac and God provided a ram for the sacrifice instead. We know Jesus to be the beloved only begotten Son of God who by his sacrificial death takes away the sin of the world. The sacrifice that God wouldn't require Abraham to do for him, God does for us and our benefit.

But perhaps the most spectacular, most powerful image of all in Jesus' vision at his baptism is that of the heavens being ripped open: the symbolic boundary between God and humanity being torn apart in a sudden, almost violent, sort of way. We could say that Jesus' human birth, and labor is always a painful, sort of violent

occurrence, was the first intertwining of the human and the divine. And, we are told, that when Jesus died, the curtain in the temple, the curtain separating the Holy of Holies from the rest of the temple, was torn in two. Again, that was symbolic of humanity now having direct access to God. The ripping of the heavens at Jesus' baptism is of that same order and type.

For some of us our relationship with God gets inaugurated in a similar sort of way. This is a tragic yet hopeful story. When I was growing up we had neighbors, I'll call them John and Mary, with three children, two sons and a daughter. John, the father of the family, was not a bad guy by any means, but maybe just "a little rough around the edges." I suppose he was nominally Christian, but he was not a "church-goer," and it would have been a stretch to call him a person of faith. One year, while the family was on vacation, the oldest son, the one who bore John's name, drowned while swimming. John was devastated. I have never seen anyone grieve as hard as John grieved for his son. His son's funeral was the saddest and most emotional I have ever witnessed.

We wondered how John was going to survive. But within a few months there was a remarkable change in John. He came to a newfound faith in Christ. He started attending worship. His lifestyle changed. His hope was restored. I am not saying God took John's son to bring John to faith. God doesn't work like that. But out of the terrible ordeal of losing a child John came face-to-face with his Creator and Savior. His love for his son helped him find his love for Christ, who promises that we will all one day be reunited in his kingdom.

Baptism began Jesus' ministry and baptism began our life in Christ. To be a Christian, to live a Christian life, we might call it "Waterlife," is not always easy or

popular in this world, but for those who have been signed and sealed by God, there's really no other way to live. We live out our baptism working for peace and justice, and coping with life's tragedies and injustices, as we look forward to that grand reunion, the great the heavenly banquet to come. Amen.