

The Rev. Joel C. Daniels, PhD
Rector, The Nevil Memorial Church of St. George
Ardmore, Pennsylvania
The First Sunday after the Epiphany: The Baptism of our Lord
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Year A

Isaiah 42:1-9

Acts 10:34-43

Matthew 3:13-17

Psalms 29

Baptism and Resurrection

Earlier this year a church in rural Louisiana was in the news. The congregation there had filled a crop duster plane with holy water, and from the air distributed the holy water all over their community in a kind of benediction. The priest pointed out, rightly, that the Church has been blessing crops for millennia; it is a long-standing tradition. This was just a new way to do it. From the air.

I should say that the news coverage of the event was bemused at best; this wasn't a story being told about the renewed relevance of the Church to society or anything. There was some definite condescension from the media's point of view. For the parish's point of view, however, it was a success. The priest said that the community really liked it, even if they didn't expect all the publicity, and they would do it again the next year.

The priest is right that the function of what they were doing wasn't very new, but the way in which they were doing it did highlight some of the assumptions behind the practice: specifically, that the reception of some kind of water, transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit, was a blessing, a life-saving blessing.

The Scriptural attitude toward water itself (unblessed) is more ambivalent. On the one hand, water as a source of life is imminently attested to: the Israelites in the desert very near had a rebellion against Moses when they couldn't find any water to drink (Exodus 17; Numbers 20). The prophets talk about living in a parched land as punishment for disobedience, and the alleviation of the thirst of the poor as a way that God takes care of them (e.g., Isaiah 41, 58; Jeremiah 17, 48; Hosea 2, 13). The psalmist talks about having a soul that is parched and wants the relief of the presence of God (Psalm 143:6). Jesus refers to himself as having "living water" (John 4).

On the other hand, there is something about water, particularly vast amounts of it, that represent for the Hebraic imagination the primordial, the chaotic, the dangerous, and the uncontrolled. In the first chapter of Genesis, one of the first ways that God creates a place that is fit for habitation is by "separat[ing] the waters from the waters," putting a dome in the sky, and then establishing dry land. The fish were called "good," but the destructive power of water was not.

You can see the attitude most explicitly in the gruesome story about Noah. In the early days of civilization, people were going their own way, and evil was everywhere. God wanted to start with a blank slate (except Noah the righteous), so he allowed the waters to return to their original, chaotic state. He didn't send them there; he just let them have their way with creation, the way they would in the first place if he didn't step in structure things in a way that is amenable to human flourishing, keeping the chaos at bay. Nature had its natural way, and things were destroyed.

The point is made over and over about God's sovereignty over the watery forces of chaos, for the good of his people, keeping the promise that was made after the Noah incident. This occurs

perhaps most obviously in the story of the Exodus, the escape through the Red Sea. After the Hebrews got through, like with Noah, God didn't send something new to keep the Egyptians away; he simply let the Red Sea return to its original state, which is a state of chaos, reflecting the moral chaos of Egypt.

Perhaps this is why, at the end of the book of Revelation, when St. John is describing the new heaven and new earth, he writes, "And the sea was no more" (21:1). In the heavenly country, there is no more evil, death, and chaos; there is no more sea.

This makes our commemoration today all the more rich. The first Sunday after the Epiphany has by long custom been kept as "the baptism of our Lord," a remembrance of when Jesus himself was baptized. We keep it during Epiphany because it is the first public manifestation of who Jesus is to the world. All four gospels record it as the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. The Spirit descends like a dove and a voice from heaven says, "This is my Son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Why does Jesus need to be baptized in the first place? John was preaching baptism for the repentance of sins, in a rather severe way. Repent, you brood of vipers, he said. Repent and be baptized, before the chaff is burned with unquenchable fire. John's baptism is about repentance; all four gospels record that, too.

Then one day Jesus shows up, St. Matthew says, "to be baptized by [John]." But why? It is a fundamental datum of both Scripture and tradition, and necessary for the economy of salvation to work, that Jesus was without sin in his life, and thus not in need of a baptism of repentance. He had nothing to repent of, so he had no need for the forgiveness that would come from baptism. But he shows up to be baptized by John, nonetheless.

Remember that this was baptism in the River Jordan; it wasn't the polite dribbling of water on the forehead that we practice. It was wading waist-deep, at least, into the running water, and being plunged in, such that the waters cover your eyes, your mouth, your nose, so that you can't breathe, you can't see, you are on your back—like you are dead. Plunged into the water: being immersed in that symbol of the forces of chaos, evil, and death, nature acting like destructive nature, the baptized feeling like the Egyptians in the Red Sea as the waters closed in, like the people of Noah's day as it started to rain and wouldn't stop. Chaos seems to have won, death and evil victorious, at the nadir of immersive baptism.

Then being brought back again, being raised. Going from death to life. Why was Jesus baptized? Perhaps to show that, wherever his people were, he would be there with them; whatever they would experience, he would experience on their behalf. In the moments when it seems like the world is falling apart, we can know that Jesus is there and has been there, no matter how dark it is. When Jesus is baptized, we are seeing a prefiguring of the trial in his life that is to come in time, when he would literally, not symbolically, die, pass through the gates of death into that parched and desolate country, and then be raised to new life, opening up the way for us. Maybe that's why Jesus was baptized. It shows that, with him, life can be brought out of death.

Why, then, are we baptized? There are a few reasons. One has to do with repentance, for those of an age to recognize things to be repented of; or, perhaps for the youngest Christians, to show how their parents and sponsors have set them in a particular stance, pointed them in a particular direction: toward Jesus, because being with Jesus is where we want to be.

But some of it is because we want to participate in that resurrection life of Jesus ourselves, and we want those we love to participate in it, too. That is a difference between our baptism and his: we say during the baptism ceremony that in baptism we are "buried with Christ in his death" and "by it we share in his resurrection" (BCP, pg. 306). Christ has been resurrected, not us. But, by our baptism, we can participate in his Easter resurrection, foreshadowed in his being brought out of the baptismal water.

As human beings, we cannot avoid the chaos, evil, and death that are symbolized in Scripture by water. Those things come, in ways large and small. Such is the nature of the world, and of life in a fallen world. They cannot be avoided, no matter how hard we try, and baptism is no promise that they will be staved off. Instead, it is a promise that even then, Christ is with us, and he will bring us out of it. Maybe not as quickly as we'd like—maybe we stay under water a bit longer than we would prefer—but in the fullness of time his strong arm will bring us to the dry land, well-ordered and safe. As St. Paul writes Timothy, we aim for a “quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity,” even if that life is the life hereafter.

This is what the Louisiana church and their crop-dusting holy water plane got right. The saving grace of God that happens in baptism is bestowed from above, quite without our deserving it. We don't show up to baptism with any credentials. It isn't a test to be passed. (Even the examination isn't a test to be passed; it is a promise about the future, not an evaluation of the past.) It's not something we earn. It is grace, the unearned gift that came into our lives for no other reason than that God loves us and wants us to flourish, which means being with him forever, even if we're no intrinsically better, ourselves, than the Egyptians oppressing the Hebrews or Noah's fellows following their own way. We are they. But out of the sky, so to speak, came the blessing of Christ, promising us new life. So that, at the last day, when the dead are raised, and the “sea is no more,” the Spirit of God will alight upon us, and the voice from heaven will say, “This is my son, this is my daughter, this is my beloved, in whom, in Christ, I am well pleased.”