

Baptismal Joy

The Rev. Debbie Cook, Grace Church in Haddonfield
The Third Sunday in Advent, Revised Common Lectionary, Year C
December 13, 2009

Well, you have to say one thing for John: he has an interesting way of doing baptismal prep.

“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath that is to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance.” It’s surprising to me how many people continued to come to John anyway. Of course, you don’t often hear about the people who chose not to come after hearing that discourse—and I imagine there had to be at least a few, especially those more aligned with the power structure of the day. Certainly, John’s opening words were hardly pastoral, hardly welcoming. Can’t think they would be too effective today, in this time, in this church.

Now, Fr. Pat and I have had numerous occasions to do baptismal preparation, and while part of that time is to rehearse for the service itself, the remainder is devoted to the meaning of baptism, and the baptismal covenant. We do our best, I hope, to make people feel more at ease, to understand this central sacrament of the church. We see it as an occasion of joy—and indeed, it should be. Hardly a time of lecturing or name-calling—though we do like to *encourage* our baptismal candidates (and their parents/sponsors) to continue to live out their baptismal covenant.

If you’ve gone through baptism prep with me (or will), you will likely hear one of my standard lines: “Baptism is not fire insurance against the gates of hell”. I cannot take credit for it (it came from a diocesan colleague), but its meaning is this: Baptism is not all about a ‘get out of hell free’ card; it is much more. Baptism is our response to God’s eternal invitation; to say yes to Christ, yes to living our lives in accordance with the gospel. As God’s creation, God loves us;

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and in baptism we decide to return that love by living lives of obedience to God. We are assured of God's love and mercy and forgiveness; through prayer and water and most importantly, the work of the Holy Spirit, we 'die' to living the world's way and receive new life by rising to live God's way. Renunciations against evil, affirmations of faith, and promises are made, and we strive to live them out to the best of our ability. Or at least, that's the idea.

So here then is where John and I come very close to meeting. In his strong and honest words, he is telling those that come to him not to count that since they are one of God's chosen people (the Jews) that they need not do any heavy lifting on their faith journeys. The Mosaic law that they live under needs to be carried out not only in ritual but also in spirit. Justice, honesty, a concern for the poor and vulnerable among them are essential, John indicates. It is not enough to say they have been born and raised a Jew, undergone circumcision, made the appropriate sacrifice at the temple. It is important, John exhorts, to live their lives as children of God should. And to that end, John gives advice and instruction to those who ask.

Notice, however, that while John's initial words in this discourse are almost harsh, his directions to those who ask are less so. He does not tell the tax collectors that they need to give up their job; he does not shut out the soldiers who seek his counsel. Both groups were often seen as cooperating with the despised Roman government, and shunned by the 'good temple-going' crowd—and yet, John does not turn them away. He just answers their question, as he does for the others: live your lives as God would want you to—with justice, with fairness, by 'loving your neighbor as yourself'. Care for those in need, follow the commandments, practice your

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faith in all aspects of your life, not just in the temple or synagogue. Your bloodline will not save you—God will; be grateful and live your life as God would have you live.

The same can be said about us. While in baptism, we acknowledge that the candidate is ‘sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ’s own forever’, we need to remember that being part of the Body of Christ is a privilege and carries responsibility. The invitation of God’s grace, to adoption as a child of God, is a great gift—one we could never earn on our own. God knows that, and through the work and sacrifice of Christ, that price has been paid. In accepting that gift, in being baptized into the body of Christ, we agree to honor that gift with our very lives. As we are all connected in and through our Lord, what damages me is damaging to another, and vice versa. Injustice and suffering are not someone else’s problem; in and through Christ, they are my problem too. Baptism, then, is not about receiving some magic mark that makes us special to God, and therefore exempt of the consequences of our actions. As beloved creatures of God, we are already special—and as baptized Christians, we have agreed to accept the gift and challenge of living a life that both celebrates and honors that in each and every person we meet. Our actions, our words, matter; and while God readily and willingly forgives us when we sin, we must consistently acknowledge and act upon our need for repentance.

But the joy in all of this—both for those who received the baptism of John and those baptized into the body of Christ today—is that forgiveness follows repentance. The Israelites of old learned this time and time again; each time they strayed from God (aka, sinned), suffering resulted, and after a time of repentance, God restored them again. The joy of God’s mercy and

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grace are shown most exuberantly in the reading from Zephaniah today: “God will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love, he will exult over you with loud singing”. Paul in the New Testament reading commands the church at Philippi to rejoice always for the Lord is near. God takes great delight in us when we commit to God in baptism, and God rejoices each time we renew that commitment through repentance.

The people of John’s time experienced that joy as well. In this baptism of repentance, they were able to let go their past, and start again, assured of God’s forgiveness. They rejoiced because a prophet had come to Israel; God had not forgotten God’s people. They were filled with hope and expectation because John pointed to one even greater than himself to come—one that would baptize with ‘the Holy Spirit and with fire’—a refining fire, one that would cleanse away all that stands between God’s people and God. A new time of restoration was at hand, a time when fear and shame are vanquished, when God breaks the back of sin’s hold over us and invites us to walk free. John was the herald of what was to come, and for us, what is.

In this season of Advent, we are reminded that we are to live out our lives in joyful expectation of Christ’s promised coming again. We are to honor our identity as baptized members of the body of Christ by being faithful to our Lord, with our words, with our actions. And remember that when we fall short, God stands ready to lift us up again, to welcome us home.

May the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

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