

SERMON- Baptism of our Lord (A)
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Isaiah 42:1-9

Acts 10:34-43

St. Timothy's (Herndon)
January 8, 2023

Matthew 3:13-17

Psalm 29

OPENING:

There is a tone-deaf rubric in our Prayer Book,
and I will explain why it's tone-deaf in a second,
that reminds the priest:
from time to time,
to remind the congregation,
of: *the duty of...all persons to make wills, while they are in health,
arranging for the disposal of their temporal goods,
not neglecting, if they are able, to leave bequests for religious and charitable uses.*¹

That's all fine and good but the reminder appears, in the section of the prayer book entitled "A Thanksgiving for the Birth of a Child."

In other words, right after all the joyful proclamations and thanksgivings celebrating new life, there is this jarring reminder that we are all going to die someday, so we should prepare to do so, to get your affairs in order, and...
... (not to mention) to throw in some shekels for the church while you are at it.

I thought about that reminder last week when I was doing the Blessing for Julie and Eric Gomez (at our 10 am service) who are themselves getting ready to welcome a child into their lives.

In THAT section of the prayer book, there is a reminder/ rubric that reads:
*The anticipation of birth is an appropriate time for the Minister of the Congregation to discuss with expectant parents the meaning of Baptism.*²

Again, good advice, not very subtle...
a little too on-the-nose for my sake in terms of pastoral wisdom.
I had a chance conversation, in fact, with Julie and Eric after church last week where we talked about their pregnancy...
but it never occurred to me to talk about baptism.

Maybe that's because I had a seminary professor who once said this:

¹ BCP pg. 445.

² BOS pg. 154

‘the best time,
to talk about Baptism,
is when no one is getting Baptized,
the best time to talk about death is
when no one has just died,
and the best time to talk about Stewardship
is when you are not asking for money.’

The idea was that in those moments, that’s when these things might sink in, and people might have the opportunity to reflect and think on them.

BAPTISM

Now this would be a great segue way for me to talk about making out one’s will or about stewardship. But I am not going to make Kent Miller that happy!

Today, we celebrate the Feast of the Baptism of our Lord,
and indeed no one is getting baptized, so let’s talk about Baptism.

(Just so you know, we have some candidates lined up for Easter, and I can’t wait. But, having none today means we don’t have to channel our anxiety and energy about Christian initiation into a particular infant and the poor family that happens to be getting baptized that Sunday.)

So here's what I wish that I would say when we have a Baptism:
I wish I would say something about the words “Just in case”—as in when someone says “I want to baptize my child.... Just in case...”

What they are thinking is that the baptism needs to happen “just in case” the child were to die and then God knows, and truly only God knows, what would happen to a child who died before having been baptized.

It's a difficult thought and it’s rarely expressed out loud, or in so many words, but it’s always in the background.

We need to get the baptism done as a preventive measure, to get all the ducks in a row, so we can cross over some threshold of safety.

I think it’s a leftover idea from when the infant mortality rate was tragically high. And it's a leftover idea from a Medieval understanding of how salvation and the sacraments work.

Even though we had a Reformation about 500 years ago partly about this very thing, we still have this notion of sacraments as “just in case”... and as a bulwark against a God who would sentence a poor child to oblivion for an “error” on his/her parent’s part.

Barbara Brown Taylor tells this story about her own baptism. Her parents were not particularly religious but they got her baptized in a Roman Catholic church as an infant according to the old rite, the pre-Vatican II medieval-style liturgy.

Afterwards the mother promptly left, never to come back, with her family, to that church or any church.

Barbara Brown Taylor later asked her mother: “Why did you do that?” and her Mother explained:

“(It’s because during the baptism) The priest took you out of my arms, going on and on about your sinfulness, my sinfulness, and I thought, ‘This is all wrong.’ You were the best thing I had ever done in my life, and I could not wait to get you out of there.”³

BAPTISMAL THEOLOGY

So this is what I want to say, on this Feast of the Baptism of our Lord:

Baptism is not “just in case” you are going to die, it’s “just in case” you are going to live.

It’s a Sacrament for the living.

Baptism does mean many things: it’s a commissioning into God’s army, it’s a proclamation of your identity, it’s a symbol of membership in a family where water is thicker than blood.

It IS a cleansing from sin, but not for purification’s sake, but as a second birth into a new life.

How do we know this?

Look at what happens in our Gospel. At the very start of his ministry, right at the beginning, Jesus gets down into the water into the depths of the dirtiness of humanity. He’s baptized so he can live... so he can live a life that goes about changing the world, so he can model what a Christian life will look like, which is death and resurrection.

Contrast that with the gross abuses of the practice of Baptism during the Medieval

³ Taylor, Barbara Brown. 1993. *The Preaching Life*. Cambridge: Cowley, 14.

period: where some would delay it UNTIL they were about to die. The thinking went, wait until the very end, then don't do anything bad until you actually die, where then you can then take the express line through the pearly gates.

That way of thinking sees the religious life, particularly the sacraments, as a form of celestial fire insurance. Instead, baptism should be viewed a "living will"—one that marks and shapes how you need to live, during your life.

CONCLUSION

Before I close out, I am not trying to heap criticize parents of young children, I know how frazzled being a parent is. I am particularly not trying to criticize mothers (and I have never had baptismal conversations with a father.... a sermon for another day). You have to get all these shots, sign up for all these things. Baptism can just become one more in that long list of preventative measures. That's okay. In the same way that a Loving God would not consign one to hell for not being baptized, a Loving God understands that the baptismal ceremony might be more about when Grandma and Grandpa can come visit and when the ancestral baptismal garment will fit, rather than what it "really should be about."

I thought this week about what my seminary professor said about when to talk about all these difficult things. The problem, of course, was that people are always dying, the church is ALWAYS asking for your money, and we also should be constantly thinking about our baptism.

Indeed, over Christmas we had a parishioner who Bill Spence died, suffered a heart attack on Christmas night. He was baptized, for what it's worth, June 9th, 1953, according to our records. He lived his whole life with that as a part of his identity. I talked with Emma, his widow, this week and she told me that, a few years ago, Bill just so happened to have brought home materials from Adams-Green Funeral Home one day and she gently chided him for bringing them home for thinking about those sort of things. This week, she walked into the Funeral Home and they said "It's all done. He did everything."

You could say the same thing about Baptism though, having signed up, it's done, we are ready to live our lives, we have been commissioned, we have papers, our living will is in order, our baptismal certificate has been signed, the seal of the holy Spirit, the immersion in the water. We have signed up just in case we decide to live... **AMEN**