

It was about 11 years between my ordination and my first baptism.

In between I served mostly small churches, often with no kids, and often as an interim pastor. Interims don't often get to perform baptisms because their term is so short—there just aren't that many babies born in a one-to-two year term unless you're serving a big church; plus, usually people—parents-- want to wait until the "real" pastor comes. I learned not to be offended by this—it's understandable that people want to be baptized, or have their children baptized, by someone they have a relationship with. Someone who might be there to see the child grow up, or to nurture the faith of a newly baptized youth or adult. Though I must admit I often rolled my eyes when the term "real" pastor was used!

But I think that just shows how seriously people take baptism, and that's a good thing because baptism is a serious act. In fact, it's a radical act, and act of courage and commitment. And it isn't an end to itself, but a beginning...

As the afternoon sun beat down on the land people gathered at the river to hear the words of the wild one, the one who lived in the wilderness and ate strange things. But something about him and the words he spoke drew them in, something about his message touched their souls. *Repent!* he called out, *the kingdom of the Lord is near!* Something about him, his passion and certainty, made them **want** to confess their sins, to be baptized in the Jordan River. Crowds came to see him, even Pharisees and Sadducees were intrigued and came to him, if only to hedge their bets. Out of the crowds stepped a man John recognized as the one to come. *You come to me for baptism? I should be baptized by you!* The man smiled. *Let it be so now,* he said, *because this is how God wants it.* And John baptized him and the heavens opened and the holy spirit landed on him and God spoke: *This is my son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased.*

As we read and retell the story of Jesus' baptism from Matthew's gospel we notice two things. First of all, this is the only version in which John and Jesus speak to each other. John is shocked: you come to me? Jesus is resolute: it is God's will. In the other 2 synoptic gospels the baptism just happens, the spirit comes and God speaks; and in John's gospel we don't see the actual baptism at all. But here the conversation is recorded. John at first stopped Jesus, resisted him—surely if he was the one he wouldn't need to be baptized?

Second, if we look at the scene in context we see that this event happens at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Up to now the narrative has been about the genealogy of Jesus—placing him in the context of the history of God's people—and also about his birth, the escape of the family to Egypt and their return to settle in Nazareth. Up to now Matthew has been setting the stage for Jesus to enter the scene, including the prediction of John that he was only the opening act, that another one was coming who would baptize with fire and the holy spirit.

And these two things are what make the act of baptism for Jesus so radical. John knew someone was coming, someone that he understood would be very powerful, someone sent by God. So why, if Jesus was the one, did he need to be baptized? Much ink has been spilled on this question and perhaps you've heard other preachers address this topic; still, it's a good question. As the Son of God why did Jesus need to be baptized?

Well, the obvious answer is given by Jesus himself: God wants me to be baptized. It is God's will. Here I am, the embodiment of God on earth, to undergo this ritual. A ritual that other human beings go through. So perhaps not so much a *cleansing* but an act of solidarity between God and humanity?

Because that's what baptism is to us as Christian Presbyterians in the 21<sup>st</sup> century—an act of solidarity. A sign and seal that we belong to the triune God the Creator, Christ and Holy Spirit. John Calvin wrote that *we are not our own, but the Lord's*; and we often repeat those words when we say the Brief Statement of Faith in worship: *In life and death we belong to God*. Baptism doesn't cleanse us of our sins as much as it acknowledges that we belong to God and live under grace—that as humans we will continue to sin but through our baptism and grace God has already forgiven us.

It's important to note that baptism itself wasn't invented by John. The Jewish people also have what is often called a "ritual bath", a spiritual practice undertaken by Jewish people at specific times. After a woman's menstrual cycle, before a priest does a divine ritual, a bride before her wedding, men on the eve of Yom Kippur, in preparing a dead body for burial, and as new converts prepare to enter Jewish life are some of the primary times that a ritual bath is done. Again, not for cleansing the body—a person must bathe first before undergoing a ritual bath—but for spiritual cleansing. John's baptism was in response to repentance for sin, a new way of using baptism. And as for Jesus, the ritual can be seen as a sort of "rite of passage" transferring authority from John to Jesus.

And this brings us to the importance of Jesus' baptism happening at the beginning of his ministry, and what that means for us. Before Jesus did anything, before he changed water to wine, before he called anyone to follow him, before he spent forty days in the wilderness he went to John for baptism. If this ritual signifies *belonging* to God then we have *given* ourselves to God—or our children, if we baptize them as babies or small children. The implications of this are that we are under God's direction rather than the world's direction, that we become like Jesus, who made the blind see and the lame walk, who was compassionate with the poor and oppressed and lived outside of the world's rules.

And this is why baptism is scandalous, shocking, outrageous. Once we are baptized we take on a role that flies in the face of the world's way of seeing and doing, where systems are established by the powerful and wealthy to benefit themselves and the meek don't inherit anything. Baptism isn't an *end*, even though we sometimes do it after a period of instruction in the faith, or we do it after a child is born. We baptize or are baptized and we think, *ok, it's done*, and check it off of our to-do list.

But what if we think of baptism as a beginning? A beginning of a new way of life, a new way of living in the world? What if we were conscious of our baptism every day of our lives? What difference would it make to the way we live and what we do in the world?

In the *Star Wars* movies the rebel movement is aided by a group of Jedi Knights, people who are conscious of something called *the force* that gives them powers and abilities over and above normal humanity. Luke Skywalker discovers *the force* when he encounters the old sage Obi-wan Kenobi, who tells Luke that the force is with him and he can harness its power. Luke begins to learn about the force but it is only after he sees his mentor killed that he fully embraces what it offers. It is a new beginning, one he doesn't seek but comes on him—not by accident but by design—and it changes his life forever (as well as the fate of the Rebel Alliance.)

When I think of living in ways that challenge the world's power I find it somewhat frightening, and I'm not even dashing through space! But the powers of darkness are real, they aren't just a figment of some filmmaker's imagination, and we face those powers every day. Darkness in our world doesn't come in the guise of Darth Vader and a Death Star—at least, not yet—but it is there nevertheless. It

is there in the heroin and cocaine and meth that steal the lives of mostly poor people. It is there in the unjust justice system that punishes people of color more harshly for the same crimes that white people commit. It is there in the expensive housing developments that push the poor out of affordable neighborhoods with no thought as to where they'll go or how they'll live. It's in the large corporations that enrich shareholders on the backs of low-wage workers, who lobby to strip workers of any rights to protest, and move jobs overseas to reduce labor costs, leaving our own work force underemployed or unemployed.

But when we are baptized we become lights in the darkness—and the darkness can't overcome us. When we are baptized we join with the great cloud of witnesses who have come before us, including and most importantly Jesus the Christ, who shows us the Way, the Truth and the Life. The Way of loving God and neighbor. The Truth that speaks to power in the name of justice. And the life we have in the new kingdom, a life filled with the Spirit and blessed by God.

It is outrageous to think that one small act in a person's life could make such a difference. It is scandalous to think that baptism brings us into Christ as fully human members of the body, so that we are one with him. It is shocking to believe that through the Way, Truth and Life that we live in, through and with Christ we can stand up to the power of darkness and with our light and love and hope. Amen.