

Date: January 9, 2005

**SUNDAY:** Baptism of Christ

**SERMON: Baptized for Ministry**

Text(s): Isaiah 42:1-9; Matthew 3:13-17

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In Barbara Kingsolver's novel *The Poisonwood Bible*, she tells the story of a Southern Baptist family who go to the Congo in 1959 as missionaries, just months before the Congo became independent from Belgium, and the story is about how this family got caught up in those tumultuous events. Kingsolver ingeniously makes the father the primary character in the novel, yet we never hear his voice or see him directly; the whole story is narrated through the voices of his wife and four daughters, whom he dragged off to the Congo against their will. The father is obsessed with a powerful sense that he and he alone is responsible for the salvation of all the darkened heathen souls (as he views them) in a remote village called Kilanga, where they are stationed.

Nearly all of his sermons end up being about baptism—the point being, of course, to get all these benighted heathens converted and baptized, but the more he preaches about baptism, the fewer people attend his services in the open-sided, thatched roof structure that serves as his church.

On Easter that year, he decides to try to stage an Easter pageant using the villagers as the characters in the passion story. His idea seems to be that if he can get them all excited by acting out the passion of Jesus and then preach them into a fervor they'll be ready to march straight to the river for baptism. (He was about forty-five years ahead of Mel Gibson.)

Here's how his fifteen year-old daughter Rachel describes the scene:

*So when the men with their bloodstained spears came jingling down the aisle of our church pageant on Easter Sunday, it represented progress I'm sure, but it wasn't what Father really hoped for. He had envisioned a baptism.*

*The whole point was supposed to be an altar call, followed by a joyful procession down to the river with children dressed all in white getting saved. Father would stand waist deep out there like the Baptist Saint John, and hold up one hand, and in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost, he would dunk them under, one by one. The river would be jam-packed with purified souls. . . But the men said, no, that was not to be. The women were so opposed to getting dunked in the river, even on hearsay, they all kept their children extra far from the church that day. So the dramatic points of Father's pageant were lost on most of Kilanga.*

It is only six months later that he discovers one of the main reasons for that resistance and why, whenever he preaches about baptism, which is nearly every Sunday, the women all stay away from church and keep their children away. He finally learns that a few months before he arrived, a little girl from the village was playing in the water's edge of the river, and had been attacked and killed by a large crocodile. And they see the missionary's constant insistence on baptism in the river as a hostile act on his part, as though this new God he's always carrying on about requires that they deliberately be willing to sacrifice their children's lives to the crocodiles.

He reports this to his second daughter Leah, who is the narrator for this part of the story, "*So they don't let their children step foot in the river, ever. Not even to be washed in the Blood of the Lamb.*"

There aren't many crocodiles in our baptismal font, nor were there any in the Jordan River when Jesus was baptized so far as we know. But we may be just as confused, sometimes, about what baptism really means as those villagers in the Congo were when the missionary insisted they had to be baptized in the river in order to be saved. Probably most of us who were raised in the church don't even remember our baptisms, since the majority of us come from traditions where we were baptized as infants. For many contemporary Christians, I

suspect baptism has come to be seen more as a cultural rite of passage than as a material sign that, as the liturgy for baptism puts it, “*we are initiated into Christ’s holy Church, incorporated into God’s mighty acts of salvation, and given new birth by water and the Spirit,*” Others of us, who may not have been raised in the church at all, may have little or no clue at all to the meaning of baptism. So perhaps, then, on this Sunday on which we commemorate the Baptism of Christ, it would be appropriate for us to take another look at baptism and what it means.

The meanings of baptism are many and rich, and time doesn’t permit us to touch on most of them today. But our lessons this morning point us toward two principal meanings that are absolutely essential for us to grasp. On the one hand, baptism signifies a particular relationship in which we stand with respect to God; on the other, baptism signifies a ministry to which we are called and for which we are equipped. Both of these meanings—relationship to God and calling to a particular ministry by God— appear in both of our lessons.

In our Gospel lesson, which tells the story of Jesus’ baptism by John the Baptist, and which the Church has always used as a primary model for understanding our own baptisms, there are direct allusions to our Old Testament lesson. In that passage, God refers to his servant as “*my chosen (or my Beloved—it’s the same word in Hebrew), in whom my soul delights.*” In the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist, the heavenly voice refers to Jesus as “*my Son, my Beloved (or chosen).*” In other words, both the servant in Isaiah and Jesus, and by extension, every baptized person, is someone who stands in relationship to God as a result of God’s decision and choice. This is not to say that our decision to accept or remain in that relationship is not important; but our decision is always a response to God’s prior decision for us. As those of you who studied Paul Tillich’s book *The Courage to Be* with Bill Geoghegan a few months ago may

recall, Tillich referred to this as as the fact that we are accepted even though we are unacceptable. We do not initiate our relationship to God; it is God who seeks us out and calls us by name and sets his love upon us. As an old hymn puts it,

*“I sought the Lord, and afterward I knew  
He moved my soul to seek Him, seeking me.  
It was not I who found, O Savior true,  
No, I was found of Thee.”*

As our baptismal liturgy puts it, “*All this is God’s gift to us, offered to us without price,*” which is simply another way of saying that our salvation is always by grace alone. By accepting baptism, we bear witness to that divine initiative, or as St. John put it so simply, “*We love God because God first loved us.*”

This relationship, however, carries with it a calling, a vocation. At Jesus’ baptism the descent of the Holy Spirit was the sign that he was commissioned to proclaim the kingdom of God. In the descent of the Spirit upon Jesus, we again hear echoes of the Servant Song from Isaiah.

There, God says of the servant, “*I have put my spirit upon him.*” If we take the clue to the meaning of our baptisms from the baptism of Jesus, then our baptism also means that we are called, we are commissioned, we are empowered for ministry by the Holy Spirit. That’s why, traditionally, when a person is baptized, we make the sign of the cross on their foreheads as we say, “*The Holy Spirit work within you so that you may become a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ,*” or similar words to that effect.

However, it’s not only *that* we are called and commissioned for ministry— the ministry of the baptized, but that ministry has a particular shape, a shape which is emphasized, in Isaiah’s oracle. God says of the servant, “*I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. . . he will faithfully bring forth justice...*

*he will not faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth. . . I have called you in righteousness; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon.”*

When Jesus began his ministry following his baptism, the Gospel writers tell us that he began to go about proclaiming the Kingdom of God, which means the God’s sovereign rule over human life. And God’s sovereign rule is a rule characterized by a particular kind of relationship between people, a relationship that both the Old and New Testaments describe as justice and peace. Three times, the word justice is repeated in that servant song of Isaiah. It’s even given specific content there; it consists of opening the eyes of the blind and bringing out prisoners from the dungeon. God’s rule, God’s kingdom, whatever else it is, is the setting of things right, of overturning practices and structures and systems that are unjust, that imprison rather than liberate people. It is the servant’s calling, the servant’s task, to proclaim by word and deed that rule of justice. We take our cues from the life and ministry of Jesus. If his commission was to proclaim the compassionate and just rule of God in human relationships, then ours can be no less.

And that, as nothing else, explains why Christians have been so much at the forefront of issues involving justice and compassion and fairness down through the centuries. Oh, of course, it’s easy to point to those times in our history and those places where Christians have perpetrated great injustices, and sometimes, perversely, in the name of the very God of justice. The failures of some Christians, and the Church in some eras, however, only highlight the faithfulness of others, who have stood up against injustice, against racism, against economic exploitation, against war as an instrument of aggression, against poverty that is the result of discrimination or greed, have stood up in defense of the weak or the powerless, even at the price of

their lives.

Christians have been the leaders in establishing hospitals in countries where none existed. Christians have been pioneers of education in developing countries or urban ghettos because they believed that education helps dispel the ignorance upon which injustice feeds. Christians have taken the lead in most of the progressive social movements within society. Christians who have given themselves to the causes of justice in the world are people who take their baptisms seriously.

The ministry of the baptized is for everyone—not only for those who get noticed by the media or are part of large or revolutionary social movements. Each of us is commissioned and empowered by the Spirit for that ministry.

While I was a pastor in Malaysia, I met a man named Polycarp Sim, who was a Roman Catholic layman from St. Joseph’s cathedral in our city. He came to a gathering of clergy from the different churches to enlist our help in a situation that was of great concern to him.

Islam is the official state religion in Malaysia, and at that time, the government of our state of Sarawak was offering scholarships to tribal youth from remote rural villages to come into the city of Kuching to study at one of the better high schools. The majority of these young people were Christians, but they were housed in government hostels, where all of the house parents were Muslims, and there these young people were subjected to constant pressure to convert to Islam. They were not put in touch with Christian pastors or churches; they were urged to attend Muslim prayers in the mosque; they were forbidden to eat pork.

Polycarp Sim, through his work with the Department of Education, discovered this situation, and became concerned. He began going to these hostels regularly and talking with the young people, encouraging them to remain true to their faith, and just being a friend and

counselor to them. He came to the pastors' meeting to fill us in on this situation and ask for our help in reaching out to these young people who were cut off from their families and villages and often feeling very lonely. Through his efforts, networks of Bible study groups were started in the hostels, and volunteers were recruited to transport the young people to church on weekends so they could be part of a Christian community.

One day, I was collecting my mail at the post office and saw Polycarp drinking tea in a nearby café, and so I went over to say hello. Another man, whom I didn't know was sitting with him, and as Polycarp introduced me, the man said, "So you know my friend Polycarp Sim. I'm not a Christian, but I can tell you, that I've never met a better Christian than Polycarp. He loves everybody he's ever met." Polycarp was very embarrassed at this praise from his friend, but as I came to know him better, I had to agree. Polycarp never made headlines in the media; he just practiced the ministry of the baptized as well as anyone I've ever met. He understood the grace that had claimed him and established his relationship with God, and he understood that such grace carried with it a vocation to be the servant of God and to proclaim God's kingdom of justice and compassion and peace, God's kingdom of *shalom* in his little corner of the world.

Martin Luther, it is said, each morning upon arising, placed his hand on his own head and said, "I am baptized." So may we all recover and live in that new identity as children of God, and go out to fulfill our calling to establish justice and be a light to the nations.