

“Baptism and Being the Family of God.”

When John baptized Jesus in the Jordan River, he was doing something the people of God had been doing for over a thousand years. And it's something which we continue to do today. However, what baptism meant for John and Jesus, was different from what it meant for their ancestors; and it's different from what it means for us today. And it's those differences that I want to talk about this morning, because I think they're important.

So, let's begin with the ancestors of John and Jesus. In the Old Testament, we find lots of references to men and women going through a specific ritual of cleansing themselves — and the technical term for what they were doing was baptism — and especially before to some interaction with God. And when we read these accounts, it makes sense at a practical level.

You see, those men and women lived a nomadic lifestyle, and usually in harsh desert climes where dirt was a common as ... well, dirt. And, because hospitality was important to them, they would clean up before entertaining guests or visitors. And because their religion was even more important than that, then even more would they want to be “clean” before going to God in worship or prayer.

And it didn't matter if the cleansing was a symbolic rinsing of the hands or feet, or a total immersion of the body; the important thing was that they thought that cleansing yourself was the proper way to prepare yourself for an encounter with God.

And so, apparently, the old adage that “cleanliness is next to godliness” has deep roots.

However, these cleansing rituals were thought necessary because a person could become ritually unclean through any of a variety of means. For example, accidentally coming into contact with a human corpse made you ritually unclean. Giving birth made a woman ritually unclean. Contracting leprosy made you ritually unclean. And, I mention these three in particular, to point out that a person didn't have to *intentionally* do something sinful or wrong to become

ritually unclean. Sometimes it just happened, and for those occasions there was a prescribed form for becoming ritually clean once more.

The familiar Bible story of how Naaman, the Syrian General, was cured of his leprosy by washing himself seven times in the Jordan River (2 Kings 5:1–14) is a good example of how the people of God really believed in the actual and physical restorative powers of ritual cleansing.

But then, at some point, they made the intellectual leap of rationalizing that if ritual cleansing was good for the body, it was probably also good for the spirit ... and for one's relationship with God. And so, ritual cleansing became part and parcel of their normal religious practices.

However, by the time we read about John baptizing people in the Jordan River, the meaning of baptism had changed. As the gospels explain, John is providing people a baptism for the repentance of their sins. John wasn't preaching to those who had become unclean or impure by *accident*; rather, he was talking to people who had willingly turned away from God. And the baptism he offered, was to be a sign and public demonstration of their re-commitment to God.

In other words, while John's ancestors saw baptism *as an actual agent of change*, something which actually purified a person; John saw baptism *as a sign*, as a public admission, that a change had already taken place.

However, about thirty years later, when St. Paul is teaching and preaching, baptism seems to have gone through another change in its meaning and significance. St. Paul writes that a person was baptized "into Christ," into union with him, into possession by him, and into all the benefits which flowed from being linked to Christ. In other words, baptism became a rite *by which a person identified with Christ*, and joined with Christ "for better for worse," and our Prayer Book describes how this works. In our modern baptismal liturgy, the priest says this prayer:

"We thank you, Father, for the water of Baptism. In it we are buried with Christ in his death. By it we share in his resurrection. Through it we are reborn by the Holy Spirit." (*Book of Common Prayer*, page 306).

I get the sense, when I read Paul's letters, that the person being baptized was declaring

Whatever Christ went through, I'll go through as well. If Christ had to suffer, then I'll suffer with him. If Christ had to die, then I'll die right alongside him. And if Christ was raised from the dead, I'm confident that God will raise me as well.

Now, ideas like this may seem foreign to us in the twenty-first century, but for the members of a young church, who lived in a time when publicly acknowledging that you were a Christian often meant being persecuted, these new ideas about baptism helped to give meaning to any suffering they might have to endure.

You and I live in time and place where personal hygiene is easy to come by, and where being a Christian doesn't entail persecution. In addition, we've had two thousand years to study the teachings of Jesus, and the writings of the early church fathers, and we see things like baptism in a new light. So, it makes sense, and it shouldn't surprise you, that baptism has undergone yet another shift in its meaning and purpose.

Today, our Prayer Book describes baptism as "full initiation by water and the Holy Spirit into Christ's Body, the Church." Although there are things that we need to renounce before being baptized, and things we need to affirm, the greater sense that I get from our Prayer Book is that baptism is the doorway through which we pass in order to become members of a community.

So, for the last three thousand years or so, we've seen baptism change

from being a ceremonial rite of cleansing and purification,

to becoming a sign of a person's conversion and repentance,

to becoming a way of giving a church under persecution some meaning to their suffering,

to what we have today in the Episcopal Church,

a rite of passage, a sacrament of belonging, a liturgy of welcoming into a family.

And thinking about baptism, and how it's changed over the years, has given me a new appreciation for how we think about baptism today.

In the twenty-seven years I've been a priest, the sacramental act I've probably enjoyed most is baptizing people. And although there have been many high points in my career, perhaps the highest was being able to baptize our two daughters: of holding them over the font, of sprinkling the "living water" of baptism across their foreheads, and especially of hearing the congregation say to them, "we receive you into the household of God." It just doesn't get much better than that!

Over the centuries, God's family, the church, has had more than its share of highs and lows. I think what's kept us together during the lows is the fact that we are a sacramental church, and that baptism is one of our core sacraments. And whether we were baptized as infants or as adults, it has been important to our unity and strength that we have a rite that not only welcomes us into the family of God, but also celebrates the fact that we are, indeed, by the grace of God, a family.

Let us pray: We thank you, God, for welcoming us into your family. We thank you especially for the love, comfort, and companionship we derive from being a part of this body. Strengthen the bonds of our unity, and enable us to look beyond our differences, and find instead all those things which draw us together in you, and in your Son, Jesus Christ.

Amen.