

THE BAPTISM OF JESUS (2012.01.08)

Isaiah 60:1-6

Psalm 29

Acts 19:1-7

Mark 1:4-11

I love our Wednesday morning study group at Westminster! Currently we are concluding our most recent video series entitled, “Eclipsing Empire” ... an examination of the life and work of Paul in the context of the first century and suggests that there might be lessons for the realities in which we find ourselves today. Biblical scholars John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg wander with a group through modern Turkey to the cities where Paul travelled and then share their thoughts about his theology, his writings, his style and the resistance that Paul encountered as he confronted the power of Roman occupation. Last week they talked about “Paul’s Eschatology!” **Now that’s a big word! Do you know what it means?** Eschaton is the Greek word for “end” so eschatology is the study of the end times. It involves such questions as “Will Christ come again? How will the world end? Will it end? Is there a judgment? Will there be a time of tribulation? Who will go to heaven?” Dominic Crossan, arguably the brightest mind in Biblical scholarship today, musing about Paul’s eschatology, talked about the relationship between Jesus and John the Baptist. He talked about John’s water baptism of repentance as preparing people to get ready for God’s intervention. God would soon act, so people should be cleansed and ready for God to come among them, ready maybe for the world itself to end, ready maybe for God to swoop them up into paradise. Crossan argued that John’s thinking was very different from that of Jesus. For John, God was going to do everything in the immanent future so you better be prepared; Jesus, however, announced that God had already acted, that the kingdom was now here and people should open themselves to that truth. God had already moved to begin “cleaning up the world” and was inviting humanity to join the crusade. For John it was all about God’s action while people waited passively; for Jesus it was to be a collaborative effort, God and the faithful together mending the creation and building the kingdom. **Here’s what Crossan actually said. WATCH!**

Eclipsing Empire “Paul’s Eschatology” (Session #10)

Do you like that idea? If the world is going to be as God intends, if the world is going to be as we desire then it will require a collaborative effort. God won’t do it alone, and we can’t do it by ourselves! Jesus believed that we need

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to work together, to prayerfully participate, to find the places where God was already at work and say "Here we are. What do you need us to do!" That's the way the end will come, that's how the Creator's intentions will be actualized.

In our gospel today Jesus felt God's Spirit touch his life as he emerged from the baptismal waters of the Jordan. I

used to think it was because Jesus was so special, because Jesus was unique, a sign that Jesus was God's beloved person. Today however I have a different thought! I wonder now if it wasn't a giant smile and affirmation from God that said, "I'm so glad you decided to get on board with the program. I've been waiting! And now here you are, ready to begin the work I had in mind for you to do. We are going to do great things together, my wonderful beloved child." **Maybe that's what happens in baptism!** Maybe those of us who have been baptized have taken the same step and said to God that we are ready and open for the work entrusted to us!

Preacher Billy Strayhorn tells the following story. He says:

I once heard the story of a recent seminary graduate, who was appointed to his very first congregation. He and his wife went to visit his family one Saturday afternoon for lunch. This preacher's mother sensed that her daughter-in-law was not all that happy, but not wanting to be one of those meddling mothers-in-law, she pretended not to notice. She figured it was just a lover's spat.

But as her son and daughter-in-law left, everything was cleared up because she overheard her daughter-in-law say, "All right, we can go by the church and you can practice baptizing me just one more time. But remember this, when you have your first funeral, you are not going to practice burying me!"

Muses Strayhorn ...

I personally don't think that practicing baptizing someone is all that necessary. But what I do consider absolutely necessary is practicing our baptism. Living our baptism so it makes a difference.

Our baptism makes a difference, doesn't it? Not just the act of getting wet with water (as the Acts reading reminds us today) but knowing through this action, through this sacrament the Spirit of God touching our life, affirming our identity and witness. Those of us who have been baptized, those of us who have felt God's Spirit in baptism are those who have said "yes" to God! We've said, "We'll help, we'll be light to the creation, we'll work with you to help make a difference. " And God has said (just as God said to Jesus at the Jordan), "Well done! You are my beloved. With you I am very pleased!"

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Forty years ago a Philadelphia congregation watched as three 9-year-old boys were baptized and joined the church.

Not long after, because they were unable to continue with its dwindling membership, the church sold the building and disbanded.

One of those boys was Tony Campolo, now author and Christian sociologist at Eastern College in Pennsylvania. Dr. Campolo remembers this reality in his life. He writes:

"Years later when I was doing research in the archives of our denominations, I decided to look up the church report for the year of my baptism.

There was my name, and Dick White's. He's now a missionary.

Bert Newman, now a professor of theology at an African seminary, was also there.

Then (says Campolo) I read the church report for 'my' year: It said:

This has not been a good year for our church. We have lost 27 members. Three joined, and they were only children."

Now, not everyone who is baptized grows up to be a Tony Campolo or a Seminary professor like Bert Newman.

And while we might not go on the mission field like Dick White, the waters of baptism change our life and our priorities as say "yes" to God and offer ourselves for service. It is a collaborative effort with which we are involved!

God wants and needs us! And what a difference even a few can make!

Sarah Jo Sarchet is a Presbyterian pastor in Chicago.

A 10 year-old boy in her congregation named Cameron, walked one day into her office and said he needed to talk to her.

Fresh from soccer practice, and wearing his Cincinnati Reds baseball cap, he had a request for her.

"I'd like to be baptized," he said.

"We were learning about Jesus' baptism in Sunday School.

The teacher asked the class who was baptized, and all the other kids raised their hands.

I want to be baptized too."

Using her best pastoral care tone of voice, Sara Jo Sarchet said, "Cameron, do you really want to be baptized because everyone else is?"

His freckles winked up at her and he replied, "No. I want to be baptized because it means I belong to God."

She was touched by his understanding.

"Well, then," she said, "How about this Sunday?"

His smile turned to concern and he asked, "Do I have to be baptized in front of all those people in the church? Can't I just have a friend baptize me in the river like Jesus was?"

Caught off guard, Sarchet conceded, "You have a point. But, if a friend baptized you in the river, how would the church recognize it?"

Realizing this was a teachable moment, she climbed up on her foot stool to reach for her Presbyterian Book of Order that was located on the highest shelf.

But before she placed her hand on the book, Cameron responded.

"I guess they'd know it by my new way of living" (he said.).

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Sara Jo Sarchet said that she nearly fell off her foot stool and left the Book of Order on the shelf.

Cameron's understanding was profound.

Baptism calls us to a new way of being in the world.

Today we are reminded of our baptism! We are reminded that we are a community marked by this sacrament, a community who has said to God that we will help, that we will get involved, we will make this world as you intend.

It's the reason that God has brought us all together.

In the name of the Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen.