

IN OVER OUR HEAD

Text on Sunday, January 9, 2011

The Baptism of the Lord

Exodus 15: 19-21; Matthew 3: 13-17

My mother, of blessed memory, remarked for years on a vexing boldness in her once tiny third son, myself: at two or three years of age, before he knew anything of swimming, this little boy so loved the waters where we summered that he would walk right off the end of the wooden dock and plunge in over his head, apparently unaware or unconcerned that he would shortly need to be saved. And then would do it again, and even again. The act is recorded on home movies! Now, it might occur to some of you that he is telling this story because he has gone and done it again: plunged into the ecclesiastical waters down by The Riverside Church, apparently unaware that he might need to be saved—again!

Be that as it may, I am really put in mind of my long ago immersions by the theme which is ours today—and ours every day at a Baptist church: baptism. Now, Baptists do this wondrous act in a more memorable way than do most of the rest of our sister churches. I am a little chagrined to report my degree of inexperience in this matter, but only two weeks ago this morning, seated among worshipers at the Abyssinian Baptist Church here in Harlem, did I for the first (and second!) time in my life witness baptism by immersion. You of course understand that I have been otherwise occupied most Sundays of the last quarter-century serving churches of John Calvin's lineage, those sometimes called "the frozen chosen." And you understand that the only thing worse for such as us would be the wet *and* frozen chosen. Nevertheless, we can all feel how it is that those two new Christian neighbors just north of here, perhaps forty years of age each, will have no trouble in years to come when the pastor bids the congregation, *Remember your baptism!*

Still, full and wet and wondrous as the event of baptism may be, it is a remarkably simple thing. Just water and a willingness. It is not magic. It does not automatically divide the seas from the dry land, the bad days from the good. The act of baptism does not save the baby or the brother. In a sense, it seems to go too fast, from *Do you trust in your Lord?* to down beneath the waters to up you come, into the arms of the church. Yet we know it is real.

Today, I want us to slow down our imagination of the movement in the drama of our baptism. For before baptism is a joy and a sign of our graceful reception by God into God's body, baptism means first a death by drowning. Before baptism is about a renewed creation, it is about the flood. Before it is exodus out of slavery into life with our God, baptism is down at the Red Sea and an awful enemy is in hot pursuit. Before it was Jesus' thing, baptism was John's thing and those who came out to him surely sang the psalm entering chilly Jordan: *Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck; I am sinking deep in mire; I have come into deep waters. The flood sweeps over me.* (Ps 69:1-2) Let us stay here a while. Let us feel the waters.

They've come pretty high down by The Riverside Church. If you are a visitor here today, or if you are new to this city, you may know nothing of the struggles the people of this church have gone through in recent times. Here is not the place and mine is not the voice to sort out when the rains of adversity began, which levies failed, who left what post, what friends were carried away, what homes of the heart were lost. But let's say it simple: we have come into deep waters. We have been sinking deep in mire. The flood swept over us—and we were not prepared. So many of you have kindly welcomed me here in these past weeks with voices and regards heartfelt, brimming with good will and hope, yet also filled with strong emotion but barely holding back the floodgates of that river that runs right through our eyes. Friends, there has been a lot of pain here. Distrust, fear, anger, fighting, hurt, confusion. A lot of people who were on the boat are not on the boat. A flood has whelmed us over. We are in over our head.

Now pastor, pastor! slow down, someone might say. How's that new member class that met yesterday going to want to join if you tell our story with such troubled waters? Well, let us say how. Remember your baptism. First, it is a death. First, it is a drowning. Let's not rush through this. Let us try our faith. Let's not talk sweetness and light, or be churchy polite with surface smiles holding a false harmony. Let us rather answer Jesus' blunt query to his disciples on the way to Jerusalem: "Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" If we are honest about our mire, people who are honest will admire our faith and our hope in the midst of the overwhelming flood of this, our new baptism.



Across the street in the 1950s, theologian Paul Tillich was thinking about modern art. Having observed in pre-Hitler Germany how ordinary people in Berlin's museum of modern art despised and mocked the works on display, he wrote a severe critique of that style of painting favored by most people in which everything is assembled and pretty, ordinary and calm. He referred to the style as "idealized naturalism." He wrote that it

. . . still is the favored form of art for many people. What does [this] mean? . . . It means the unwillingness to see and to face our real situation . . . [But] there are moments in individual life and in the life of society when something cannot be hidden, cannot be covered anymore. If the surface is maintained, then this can be done only at the price of honesty, of realism, of looking into the depths of our situation, and this price always includes fanaticism, the repression of elements of truth, and self-destruction. We must be able to face our present reality as what it is. (from "Existential Aspects of Modern Art")

Through more than five decades, has the situation changed? In the aftermath of the shooting and killing of public servants yesterday in Tucson, we see blatant in the violence of a disturbed mind what is latent in the violence of a disturbed nation who again and again choose politicians and practices that paper over the sorrows and injustices and greeds on which this nation's handsome tableau of success is mounted. May our preaching of the Word, indeed our whole celebration of worship, cease forthwith from being pretty and calming, Valium for the valley of the shadow of the death. No, may our whole conversation in this body function as a work of modern art, to—Tillich again—"to look into the depths of reality, below any surface and any beautification of the surface." Has not our own Lord and Master taught us to begin here—he who Isaiah said "had no form or comeliness that we should look at him, no beauty that we should desire him." Do you see why—when he came to the Jordan waters, and John, honoring him, desired not to plunge Jesus but to be plunged by Jesus beneath the waters—why Jesus said No? But "let it be this way for now, to fulfill all righteousness." And down went he, beneath the waters into the deeps, in over his head. Friends, this is where we start. This is where we are. This is where we are supposed to be. In over our head.

There is really one reason why The Riverside Church has struggled so, fought so, and hurt so in recent years—and by "recent" I might mean twenty, not just two. There is one reason at the top of all the reasons. The Riverside Church is wrestling with an angel of God. That angel is a vision of the beloved community, a dream, the elusive dream in which this nation was born, a dream in which all people are created equal, in which we are able, in brother Martin's words, "to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood." Let it never be said more plain than this: The great troubles of The Riverside Church are all because we have aimed to do a great thing which we do not know how to do, to bring home the vision, to end the legacy of four centuries of racism and sin, together.

I am of the mind that every church seriously endeavoring to be baptized with the baptism with which Christ is baptized should be in over its head. That is, putting our comforts at risk, going for a goal we can't grasp, and when we're tired, when we're weak, when we're worn, taking that hand, clinging to that rock that is higher than I. That is faith at work, trusting God Holy Spirit to guide my feet, down,

down. Most churches don't venture in over their heads. Tillich's article from 1956 includes the critique: "[But the churches] did not do what the [modern] artist did. They did not ask the questions over again as they should have out of the experience of despair in [our] society. The churches did not ask the question, and therefore their answers — all the religious answers Christianity has in its creeds — became empty. . ."

Friends, come to some peace with what has happened here. It has been a sea of confusion, no doubt; but it was a sea you had to enter, for the love of Christ. Do you know this fragment of a poem by Rilke called "The Man Watching"?

When we win it's with small things,
And the triumph itself makes us small.
What is extraordinary and eternal
Does not want to be bent by us.
I mean the Angel who appeared
To the wrestlers of the Old Testament . . .
Whoever was beaten by this Angel.

Went away proud and strengthened
And great from that harsh hand
That kneaded him as if to change his shape.
Winning does not tempt that man
This is how he grows: By being defeated,
decisively,
By constantly greater beings.

Now, I have been blessed to walk this way with some other churches, "being defeated decisively by constantly greater beings." This is what it means to be in over our head, to press on for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ. I want to tell you, nobody who really tries ever just gets this right because the peaceable kingdom, the beloved community, is not a human achievement, but a grace of God. That doesn't mean we're just going to wait around for God's grace, fighting and yammering and hurting each other until the silver hammer comes down on our head. No, there is a different word.

When you are in over your head, there are two modes of being. One is terrified. The other is trusting, faithful. Terrified is the mode of those who believe they are losing everything that matters, everything. Terrified is the mode of those whom terrorists so easily control. In over their head and terrified is the mode of those who say they want to take America back. Back to what? 1950? When you leave the shores and the riverside you knew for great waters, there is no going back.

But there is another mode of being in over our head, far from the peaceful shore. Faithful, trusting is the mode of being for each one and for all who are willing to lose whatever the flood will take away, so that God may give the life which has no end but God. Then, says the apostle, you can "set your minds on things that are above, not things that are on earth, for you have already died, and your life is hid with Christ in God." (Col 3:3) Then, with Psalm 46, we will shout:

"Therefore we will not fear though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult. There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God. And God is in the midst of her, she shall not be moved."

When you come up from the water, you see: Suddenly heaven is opened to you and the Spirit of God is descending, and you know the voice who is calling you, "My son, my daughter, my beloved in whom I am well pleased."

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