

**Baptized into Impartiality  
(Matt 3:13-17, Acts 10:34-43)**

Del 1/8/23  
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**The Meaning of Jesus's Baptism**

We are entering already into the season of Epiphany, which began this past Friday and ends at the beginning of Lent. Epiphany literally means “coming forth from the mystery.” So the question is, “Who is this Jesus who came forth out of the mystery on Christmas Eve?” And the most important answer comes from the lips of God at his Baptism.

The Baptism of Jesus is not an infant baptism. (The readings jump forward to his adulthood and his baptism by John the Baptist). His baptism is a public ritual of anointing, a coronation. And during the coronation, the voice of God from heaven announces “This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.” And we are to understand from these words that God has chosen Jesus as his representative; to be for us the fullness of his presence and to express his true intentions for the world.

This means that, for those who take scripture seriously, Jesus becomes the central focus for understanding God. Our participation in his life story and the cues that we take from him are what promise to lead us to fuller communion with God.

But baptism also provides us with a metaphor for the Christian life. In other words, the ritual reveals what life will be like for those who follow Jesus. Typically, we pour three small quantities of water on a person's head to identify that person with Jesus and as a child of God. And then we have an nice embroidered hanky ready to pat the forehead dry.

But baptism was not originally so pleasant and domesticated an affair. Baptism, in fact, symbolizes "drowning". It is a drowning of our old selves, of a life oriented around self-preservation, in order that a new and greater life may begin; a life of freedom from fear, in which God's love is at the center.

Jesus did not receive a few drops of water on his forehead. He was dunked fully under water in the River Jordan and would have tasted both the shock and panic of going under and the relief of air returning to into his lungs. In other words, Baptism helps us to see that the Christian life will take us through some alarming deaths and rebirths.

### **Being Drowned and Raised**

So what would be a real life example of this alarming experience of being drowned and raised? The second reading provides us with a clue

as to where to go in search of a good example. In that reading, Peter draws our attention to the claim that God is impartial. “God shows no partiality,” he says, “but in every nation, anyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable.”

It is a powerful statement that expresses one of the main convictions that separated early Jewish-Christians from their parent religion. But is it really true? Jews in ancient Palestine understood themselves to be the chosen people of God in a way that was not available to those who were not the offspring of Jewish mothers. It was an inherited identity that they believed afforded them a special intimacy with God.

But Jesus’s openness to embracing all people led early Christians to reject the idea that this special relationship with the God of the Bible was only available to Jews. According to Peter and other early Christians, that special relationship depended not on who you were born to, but on how you chose to live and who you chose to follow. And that freedom to choose was available all people.

And so, Christianity that is true to its origins will always champion the belief that God doesn’t favor any people because of their religion, the family they are born into, the country they come from, what color they are, or even how rich or beautiful or smart they are. The only thing that

matters is whether we choose to put God at the center of our lives, as Jesus did.

All in all, the New Testament argues that God is impartial in this way. But there is a difference between parroting this understanding and knowing in our bones that what scripture has told us is true. And dying to falsehood and being initiated into the truth is what the experience of baptism in our lives is all about.

### **Basic Training**

So I'd like to share with you part of my own experience of baptism into this truth. When I was 18 years old, I went to the Army recruiter's office and, after watching an inspiring video, signed up for a three year enlistment.

A couple of weeks later, after a lengthy flight and bus ride, I and a busload of sleepy recruits arrived in front of Company Delta Three Two in Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. And the yelling started even before we got off the bus. That was our introduction to the drill sergeants who would hound us for the next 8 weeks. They had more "colorful" ways of calling us lazy and useless, than you can imagine, and they always got their message across at a very high decibel level.

The crew cut I got didn't bother me; I kind of enjoyed rubbing my hand over it. But I was upset that they issued me boots without allowing me to try them on first. What I quickly learned was that making any special requests or drawing attention to myself in any way was going to be a bad idea.

I began to realize that there were things about my teenage romance around military service that were not going to be as pleasant as I had imagined. And some cracks were starting to appear in my own views about life that were difficult to accept.

The truth was that I was not quite the "real man" I imagined myself to be. I was brought up in moderately privileged circumstances, not wealthy by any means, but with enough pampering to feel entitled to special treatment. My father was a professor who surrounded himself with books and high-minded ideas and my mother was a music teacher then librarian, the daughter of a minister. They had raised me with the expectation that good people patiently hear each other out and consider their needs and that they can expect others to do the same for them.

I don't know why I ever imagined that this kind of considerate behavior would apply in the military. It didn't. At least not in basic training.

As silly as it seems, I wanted to say to my drill sergeant, “Don’t you know who I am? Don’t you see that I will be happy to work with you if you treat me nicely, and more happy to do as you ask, if you explain to me why you want me to do them? Don’t you see that you can’t treat me like a nobody?” But what I wanted to say would have sounded completely out of place. It would have made me look timid, which is what I was.

I was coming to terms with a great truth; that nobody in Fort Leonard Wood could care less who I was or where I came from or what I thought. When those drill sergeants looked down the line of recruits all dressed in green and standing in formation, they didn’t see me as any different than anyone else in that line. They weren’t obligated to treat me any differently than they treated anyone else, nor was there any good reason why they should.

I realized that I had been living under a personal delusion that people like me were somehow an exception, that we were somehow magically exempt from having to suffer the indignities and hardships of “the masses.” In my mind cleaning bathrooms or following orders were tasks that I could stoop to as a matter of choice and after which I should receive a round of applause. I had quietly believed that people

like me could just quit and walk away, if we didn't like the situation; that people like me didn't have to put up with being yelled at.

Now I was in a situation where I did have to put up with these things. And I was discovering that all that really separated me from my fellow trainees was a mistaken view that what was happening to me couldn't happen because I was somehow a cut above and therefore entitled to a more dignified existence.

I'm not saying that I agree with the way they break down your self-esteem in Basic Training. I think it is likely that as many people are damaged as are healed by the experience. But in my case, it was probably the best thing that could have happened to me. It brought me face to face with the experience of being at the bottom, where someone tells you what to do and you have no choice but to obey. It helped me to understand what it feels to be treated like dirt. And it made it possible for me to feel in my bones the truth in what Peter says in this morning's Epistle, that "God shows no partiality."

For Peter 2000 years ago, it meant that just because a person was of Jewish descent, didn't mean they were somehow inherently a cut above other people and or that somehow this entitled them to receive

special advantages from the hand of God. And in my case, it meant realizing that my life was no more precious than anyone else in my barracks.

### **A Baptismal Story**

What I am describing, by telling you this story, is a drowning that occurred in my life. And Company Delta Three Two, Fort Leonard Wood, MO was pool in which it happened. Trainee James Koyama who saw himself as an impressive example of manhood, a cut above and therefore entitled to not experience the humiliations and sufferings of others, was drowned. And the James Koyama who walked out of that place was ready to grow into a new relationship with God and with his fellow human beings that was no longer crippled by that illusion.

### **Special, but not Entitled**

One of the things that I think is wonderful about the ritual of baptism is the way it reveals a seeming paradox in our lives as Christians. In Baptism our infinite value is affirmed, but so is the infinite value of everyone else. And when we are freed of the illusion that we are somehow a cut above others, we also become opened to a greater compassion.



When we hear about Ukrainians suffering through the cold of winter or Ethiopians starving, we are not hearing about lesser beings or about things that God would never allow to happen to us. We are talking about human beings who are no less valuable than ourselves or our loved ones, who experience hopes and fears, joy and grief as intensely as we do.

Our God is a God of love, and on reflection, it seems to me that one of the most destructive and unloving things we can do is shield ourselves from experiencing the suffering of others by believing that some kind of divine favoritism is in play that will afford us a life free of suffering. That is why I have always been understanding of, but somewhat suspicious of the phrase: "There, but for the grace of God, go I." I think a better thing to tell ourselves is, "That's me." God's impartial love, is an important learning that comes to us through the ongoing baptism that is our lives and learning this truth frees us from isolation and makes it possible for us have relationships with others that are real. I believe that is so and that it is a great blessing.

