

Baptism of our Lord

Year A, 2014

Baptisms are dangerous. I know that might surprise you. It also might not be what the family of little Drake who is about to get baptized today will want to hear. But it is true.

It is hard for us to think of baptism being dangerous. That's because in the West, we have domesticated baptism for centuries. Think of it like someone who trains a lion. The lion may appear under control, but it remains no less dangerous. And sometimes baptism breaks free from how the church has made it safe and we feel its energy and power again.

Today we remember when our Lord was baptized. We have heard the story so many times that it may have lost its original power for many of us. But let's consider what was happening back then when Jesus came to John at the Jordan River.

First, 1st century Palestine was a diverse and dangerous place. The Jewish people had been conquered by the Roman Empire. The temple leaders and aristocracy, for the most part, had sold out and were cooperating with Rome. There were various religious and political sects who offered solutions that ranged from military revolt to spiritual withdrawal from the world; or attempting a faithful existence within the world that tried to strike a balance between withdrawal and compromise.

In the midst of this complex world, came the voice of John the Baptist. We only get snippets of his ministry and words in the Gospels. But what we hear gets our attention and inspires our imagination. John took on the religious and political leaders and told them what he heard from God. He preached both a personal morality to the king, criticizing that he had married his brother's wife while his brother still lived; and a public morality to people like soldiers, whom he told not to use their power to extort; and regular folks, whom he told to share what they had with others.

John's was a dangerous voice to people. And yet many people responded to him. That made him even more dangerous to the religious and political leaders. The main act of ministry John seemed to do in addition to his preaching was to baptize people, to use water as an outward sign of their repentance, forgiveness, and pledge to live new lives consistent with their repentance. We're told in the Gospels that the crowds that came to John included a lot of folks considered outsiders—sinners, prostitutes, tax collectors. The people not welcomed in the local congregations.

And one day, among that crowd coming to see and hear that dangerous John the Baptist; and in that dangerous time and place; came Jesus. Again we don't know much about Jesus before that introduction. We're told he was born in an unlikely place with strange circumstances. His parents migrated to Egypt and came back when he was little in response to a dream that predicted a threat against his life. His parents left him behind in Jerusalem once (that may have been an issue in his therapy later). But other than that, we don't know much historically about Jesus before the day of his baptism. Most of us assume he was a very good man.

And yet this very good man got in line. He went to hear his relative John the Baptist. We can only imagine what led him there—prayer, a vision, some intuition, or something else. But Jesus went and lined up. In Matthew’s version, John seems to be shocked by this. That may be some of the church’s interpretation after the fact, but still Matthew’s version remains for us to consider—John was surprised and didn’t think it was right. And yet Jesus was baptized.

So why did Jesus get baptized? There are a lot of questions and theological assertions that try to answer our questions. But for Jesus, almost two thousand years ago, why did he do it? Why did he identify with this dangerous man, John the Baptist, and do this dangerous thing, getting baptized? There are many things we can speculate, but let’s see what happened according to Matthew.

The first thing is that Jesus’ baptism made clear to him at that moment that God loves and affirms him; and then God sent the Spirit to rest on him. So learning that and receiving that was worth whatever danger would follow. That danger began right away as we’re told the story of Jesus’ temptation in the desert. Being identified with John, being identified with God’s mission, would require some testing and clarifying even in the life of Jesus.

After his temptation, Jesus started doing what John was doing. He preached about God’s kingdom. He called people to repent. And then he was off on his work of teaching and healing. Not much later, John was arrested and then murdered by the king. If there was any doubt about the danger that Jesus had signed up for, Herod’s evil action against John made that danger very clear. Jesus’ baptism confirmed his acceptance of the danger; and then God provided what Jesus would need.

After Jesus’ death and resurrection, baptism continued to be a dangerous act. It was especially dangerous in the early decades of the church. Baptism clearly identified a person with a movement that would not worship Caesar. Once baptized, a person might lose status, property, even freedom and life. People knew their baptism would bring great joy and power—and danger.

Part of the domestication of baptism occurred after Christianity became the state religion. Being identified with the church became a social necessity. That approach defined baptism for many people for centuries. The power of baptism did break free from time to time as people really heard and responded to the Good News of Jesus and the implications for how we are to live. But often there was not much danger to baptism at all. In fact the biggest danger was often from one group of Christians against another because they disagreed over how baptism was done; or when conquerors would try to force others to be baptized or face the loss of freedom or life. That’s not the type of danger associated with baptism that I am talking about.

Today, around the world, there are places where baptism is still dangerous. Like in the early decades of the church, to be baptized in certain lands and under some governments can mean the loss of status, property, freedom, or even life. It is very important for those of us in the safety of our country to remember the danger that many of our Christian brothers and sisters are facing around the world. For them, baptism is a source of danger as well as the power that comes from new life in Christ.

So for those of us who live in religious safety, how can we see our baptism differently? To be clear, there is nothing wrong with the words we say or the reverence and beauty with which we do baptisms, like today. But we do need to remember its danger. If baptism meant we would lose our job or be alienated from our families or even lose our freedom or our lives—would we still do it? Of course we won't know that for sure unless we face that type of choice. But it helps us to recall the danger associated with this brave act.

So how can we remember baptism's danger and its power? We can begin with Jesus. Remember what baptism meant to him— Jesus experienced God's love and affirmation and God's anointing Spirit. And then he joined in with the dangerous ministry that John the Baptist began. For Drake who is about to be baptized today; and for all of us who renew our baptismal vows with him; let's take seriously what we are doing. For us, it may not be persecution, but a willingness to live dangerously based on God's love and affirmation of us and God's Spirit's presence among us.

An example of living dangerously might be going to a foreign country, like the apostles of old, to bear witness to our faith. When we go there, we might be afraid. But if do it anyway, we will find that God has gone before us and prepared the way for the ministry we are called to do. It will not be all on us to perform in a super human way—we just need to do our part, despite the danger. And some of us will be doing that in the months ahead.

Another example of living dangerously is ministering in a prison. I imagine that most of us— other than Cathy—have never done that or even thought of doing that. I made my first prison visit with Cathy a month ago and I can tell you that most of the ministry I experienced was from the prisoners to me. Their faith and testimony were strong. I was glad to call them my sisters in Christ. And the danger for us who go to minister there is mainly in our imagination. Because of our baptism, some of us will be facing our fears and going to minister in prison in the months ahead.

So baptism is dangerous. For some folks it is a literal danger. For us here, it is a danger to the status quo of our lives. If we are baptized-- or if we remember our baptism and live it out through God's grace—it will be dangerous. But through that danger, God will be with us and let us and others know God's great love for all of us. Amen.