

Lent 1 2018 What's Baptism Got to do with it?

There is a very popular song and movie titled "what's love got to do with it?". Being the good seminarian that I try to be I must acknowledge that every good idea is stolen from a thief. So, with that being said, my sermon theme this morning is "what's baptism got to do with it?" the it being Lent.

As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my son, whom I love, with you I am well pleased." (Mark 1:10-11)

It is interesting that Mark's account of Jesus' baptism tells that only Jesus saw the heavens open, the spirit descending like a dove and only Jesus heard his father's words of approval. This gives a clear understanding that this is a retelling of a narrative passed on. On this first Sunday of Lent it doesn't matter if others heard it or not as described in the other gospels. What does matter is the public acknowledgement and receipt of Baptism by Jesus son of God, with no sin. His obedience and devotion to his father is on full display.

A general definition of the word baptism is "a rite of washing with water as a sign of religious purification and consecration." This rite was practiced frequently in the Old Testament. It signified purity or cleansing from sin and devotion to God. Since baptism was first instituted in the Old Testament many have practiced it as a tradition yet have not fully understood its significance and meaning.

In the Christian tradition, we baptize babies. Some say this is a way of giving them back to God. If this is the only reason we baptize then we have missed the stern notes from Mark in the summons to repentance, we have missed the acknowledgement that life will test us as Jesus was tested. Perhaps not as immediate as Mark indicates but we will be tested and tempted. Unlike Matthew and Luke, Mark does not explain how Satan tested Jesus in the wilderness. However, he does allow us to know that Jesus remains faithful to God and God never left his side. For me this is all I really need to know, God will never leave my side. Since we are more comfortable with the New testament lets look at how baptism is presented there.

In the New Testament, the significance of baptism is seen more clearly. John the Baptist was sent by God to spread the news of the coming Messiah, Jesus Christ. John was directed by God (John 1:33) to baptize those who accepted his message.

John's baptism was called "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." (Mark 1:4, NIV). Those baptized by John acknowledged their sins and professed their faith that through the coming Messiah they would be forgiven.

Baptism is significant in that it represents the forgiveness and cleansing from sin that comes through faith in Jesus Christ. Isn't this what Lent is all about? Repentance? Scholars tell us Lent began as a way for Catholics to remind themselves of the value of repentance. The austerity of the Lenten season was seen as similar to how people in the Old Testament fasted and repented in sackcloth and ashes which we read about in (Esther 4:1-3; Jeremiah 6:26; Daniel 9:3).

However, over the centuries Lenten observances have developed a much more "sacramental" value. Many Christians believe that giving something up for Lent is a way to attain God's blessing. But the Bible teaches that grace cannot be earned; grace is "the gift of righteousness" (Romans 5:17). Also, Jesus taught that fasting should be done discreetly: "When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen" (Matthew 6:16-18). Jesus' command to "wash your face" seems to conflict with the practice of rubbing ashes on one's face on Ash Wednesday.

Fasting can be a good thing because it is a way of cleansing, and God is pleased when we repent of sinful habits such as drinking in excess or smoking harmful products. There's absolutely nothing wrong with setting aside some time to focus on Jesus' death and resurrection when we fast. However, repenting of sin is something we should be doing every day of the year, not just for the 46 days of Lent, forty minus the six Sundays.

If a Christian wish to observe Lent, he or she is free to do so. The key is to focus

on repenting of sin and consecrating oneself to God. Lent should not be a time of boasting of one's sacrifice or trying to earn God's favor or increasing His love. I don't think God really cares if we give up interacting on Facebook, not eating meat, or playing video games especially if we go back to those things when lent is over. God's love for us could not be any greater than it already is. What he wants from us is a change for the better permanently. This is why Jesus' public baptism was so important.

Jesus, the servant is introduced by John the Baptist, and God the Father identifies Him and puts His stamp of approval on Him. I don't know about you, but I want God's approval, I want to hear him say, "well done, with you I am well pleased."

The gospels tell us Baptism becomes important because it identifies the believer with the Godhead: Father, Son and Holy Spirit: Providing instructions that are so very important:

"Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." (Matthew 28:19, NIV)

Baptism identifies the believer with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection: Paul tells us,

"When you came to Christ, you were 'circumcised,' but not by a physical procedure. It was a spiritual procedure--the cutting away of your sinful nature. For you were buried with Christ when you were baptized. And with him you were raised to a new life because you trusted the mighty power of God, who raised Christ from the dead." (Colossians 2:11-12, NLT)

Just as Christ was obedient, Baptism is an act of obedience for the believer. It should be preceded by repentance, which simply means "change." It is turning from our sin and selfishness to serve the Lord. It means placing our pride, our past and all of our possessions before the Lord. It is giving the control of our lives over to Him.

"Peter replied, 'Each of you must turn from your sins and turn to God, and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. Then you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.' Those who believed what Peter said were baptized and added to the church--about three thousand in all." (Acts 2:38, 41, NLT)

Baptism is a public testimony: the outward confession of an inward experience. In baptism, we stand before witnesses confessing our identification with the Lord. Through Baptism we are presenting a picture representing profound spiritual truths of death, resurrection, and cleansing. We read this affirmation in our second lesson today.

"And this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also – not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ." (1 Peter 3:21, NIV)

Oftentimes, the outward act of baptism is emphasized, but it's the inward change that we truly need to focus on. We must focus on the removal of hatred, envy, anger, deceit and prejudices. We must train our minds to believe it is love that wins and conquers hate. We all are guilty of having prejudices. At some point we all have been envious of someone. For example, I totally don't care for those individuals that seem to be able to eat whatever they want and as much as they want and don't gain a pound. I see food and pounds just seem to jump on for the ride. And if I am to be honest, I hate pedophiles because kids deserve to live a life that is free from abuse and harm. Not only pedophiles but anyone who fractures the sanctity of a child's space like what occurred in Florida this past week. I, like so many others probably would like nothing better than to have a go at the assailant. I am indeed a work in progress repenting daily for things done and praying unceasingly for God to remove my hurt and anger towards injustice. The Bible clearly states that we are saved "not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy, He saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost; which is shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior" (Titus 5:6) This "washing" is what baptism represents, but it's only Jesus who can wash us. Our own actions simply cannot bring us salvation. But if we are walking with God and seeking to do His will, then why wouldn't we want to be baptized? Since 1 Peter 3:21 tells us that baptism is "an answer of a good conscience towards God" which means that it's what God wants us to do since it's one of the important steps we take in the Christian walk, then during Lent the changes we make should be those things that move us closer to God.

During this Lenten season, let us not be so concerned with the giving up of things we probably at some point in our lives will return to, but let us be about including in our lives the things we know will bring us closer to God. Such as, prayer, loving and respecting one another and giving of ourselves to make our communities and the world a better place. To answer the question asked in the beginning, what's baptism got to do with Lent? Everything! If we have been washed clean through baptism, Lent offers the opportunity to focus on keeping those things that were removed from us far away from us and if for some reason they reappear in our lives, through repentance we can be cleaned again and again. Thanks be to God.