

The Baptism of Our Lord

Today we celebrate the feast day of the baptism of our Lord.

This feast day happens during the week of the Epiphany, which celebrates God's word moving into the whole world.

So perhaps the first question this morning is:

Why baptism?

Why a dunk into water?

Why not some alternative initiation rite, like a magic decoder ring or shaving a circle on top of our heads?

To understand what baptism is, perhaps we might start with what baptism — is not.

Baptism is not a Willy Wonka ticket into the Candyland of the Kingdom of Heaven.

While we have baptized infants since the earliest days of the church, this practice really took off when Christianity became the religion of the empire.

People were told that unless you were baptized, you would go to hell — forever!

Many Christian denominations preach that claptrap today!

It's lousy theology, but fantastic marketing!

It got millions baptized, not because of any change of heart or transformation of spirit, but just to be safe.

They got their magic Willy Wonka ticket, guaranteed entry into heaven should they die.

But that is not what baptism is about at all.

Baptism is a symbolic drowning.

It is a symbolic death.

Baptism is coming to a deep awareness, a profound understanding and acceptance, that death is at the heart of life.

For we modern folks that's kind of an astonishing thought.

We are used to fearing death.

Our whole medical industrial complex is built on the foundation that Death is Public Enemy Number 1.

And in our world, death follows life, like night follows day.

First life, then death, first daytime, then nightfall.

And yet from the earliest days of our faith, from Genesis, we are told that our understanding of life and death is actually backwards.

In Genesis, at the dawn of creation, "first there is evening, then there is morning, the first day."

Night, then day.

Death, then life.

John the Baptist experienced exactly this, facing many small deaths as he encounters this strange Messiah from Galilee.

John had a huge following.

The Jewish historian Josephus, who wrote around 90 AD, some 60 years after John's execution, tells us that John the Baptist had a huge following.

And what did this super popular prophet do when Jesus approaches him at the Jordan?

Why, he realizes that he must grow smaller as Jesus grows larger.

John's small deaths continue because his expectations about the nature of the Messiah are radically challenged by Jesus.

John is preparing people for a Messiah who will take the axe to the base of the tree of humanity, while throwing the chaff of riffraff and lowlifes into the burning fire.

John knows what Messiah should be like!

And yet here comes Jesus, eating with harlots and tax collectors, all of which is driving the good folks — totally nuts!

John expects fire and brimstone.

Jesus brings mercy and compassion.

Which leads to the day when John, languishing in Herod's dungeon, sends his disciples to ask Jesus:

"Are you the one or is someone else to come?"

Another small death for John as his expectations about the Messiah are shattered.

And then of course John endures his own physical death, for having the temerity to challenge the political powers of his day.

Baptism and death.

Death and baptism.

Why?

Here's why.

Because experiencing death, in the many ways it presents itself to us, until we close our eyes for the very last time, is the only way to life.

When Jesus is baptized, he begins his public ministry.

He starts wandering around the country telling people to –
Metanoia!

What's metanoia?

We translate this Greek word as "repent," but the better translation is (:to enter into the "beyond (meta) mind (noia)" – of God.:)

Meaning, can we leave behind our obsessions with power, fame, and money?

If you're a guy or gal who always has to be right, let it go!

Let go of the need to control people, places and things.

Metanoia invites us to dip our toes into the flow of life - seeking the guts to dive totally in!

As we taste the life that really is life.

The life that finds itself immersed in self-giving love.

In humble service.

In trusting life's inherent abundance.

A life that's not about looking out for Number One, but a life looking out for the whole community.

A life that's willing to lay itself down for one's neighbor.

This is the point of baptism.

It's why we hear repeatedly from Jesus's own lips:

Give up in order to receive.

Pick up your cross.

If you want to live, learn how to die.

THIS IS THE ESSENCE OF OUR FAITH.

It's to prepare us for the transformation that faith requires — if we are to discover God's life, in this life.

You here at Emmanuel have gone through your own experience of death in these last years.

The death brought about by disappointed expectations.

The death of unpleasant surprises.

The death of perhaps mutual trust between some clergy and some lay folk.

And yet those deaths have prepared you for what we can now experience today, as a new life.

One of joy and gentleness.

Perhaps, without those deaths, we never would've gotten here.

Other deaths bring the hope of similar transformation.

Just this past week, ICE agents murdered Renee Good in Minneapolis.

She was white, which regrettably brings far more attention than the over 50 deaths that ICE has caused involving people of color.

What life has Renee's death given birth to?

Across the nation people held vigils as we did here in Hawai'i.

Friday night's vigil was very well attended, and people spoke passionately of the need to stand up against what seems to be looming fascism in our country.

ICE agents masked, with no identity tags, no body cams, invading various cities based on the political whims of the president, terrorizing the population.

For Renee Good, her encounter with ICE, and her senseless death, came right after dropping her 6 year old at school.

And as soon as she died, she was defamed by the highest authorities in the land, as a terrorist.

But the videos reveal she was nothing of the sort.

Will her death become the spark that sets aflame a country on the precipice of losing its freedom?

Then there's the woman who's terrified of sleeping alone in her home when her husband went on business trips.

If he left, she always took the kids to a friend's house to spend the night, so deep was her fear and anxiety.

And then her only daughter died of leukemia, and she never again was afraid to be home alone.

When someone asked why, she replied:

"Well, when you've died, what else is there to fear?"

When you've had to let go of your most precious possession, what else could happen that would be worse?" Willimon at 15.

An old world dies, and a new world is born.

Isn't this the heart of baptism?

While we often speak of our faith as a slow growing process; it is just as often some kind of catastrophic loss or injury — or death — that really gets the whole show on the road.

In ways I will never understand, it seems we need this kind of crisis, these deaths, because without the crisis, without the deaths, we just don't develop the eyes to see the new world that God invites us into.

Without a broken heart, we tend to see only the obvious: things like jobs and family obligations and wounded feelings.

It's the hard smack of death, that comes in so many different ways, that helps us enter a world where kindness reigns.

Where forgiveness is the path to peace.

Where violence is rejected.

Where friendship is the norm.

Perhaps it takes the death of the world we know — to find ourselves — in God's new world.

This is the promise, this is the gift, of baptism.

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