

“A Tale of Two Baptisms”

“It was the best of times and the worst of times.” It’s been my summary of how life has been for us here at Mount Calvary Lutheran Church in recent months. It’s been the best of times and the worst of times. To be sure, this can only go so far. When we stand back from our own small corner of the universe, it’s hard to say the pluses and the minuses have been showing up in equal measure. 1.9 million virus-related deaths in a year, violence in our streets this summer and violence in the halls of Congress this year—these sorts of big picture developments make it hard to say that progress and regression have lately been locked up in some sort of tie. But, in my own small, small corner of the universe, these have been the best of times and the worst of times. There have been unique accomplishments I’ll always remember, along with plenty of fatigue related to widespread death and division.

Now up until quite recently, I knew I was channeling someone else with my talk of the best of times and the worst of times, but I didn’t know who. Here’s how that changed. After reviewing today’s collection of scriptures, I said to myself, “This is a tale of two baptisms.” Pretty quickly I realized I was channeling Charles Dickens’ *Tale of Two Cities*; only to learn it’s this novel which begins by saying, “It was the best of times. It was the worst of times.” One mystery solved, I guess. But what about the observation that today’s appointed scriptures are a tale of two baptisms; a kind of prequel to Charles Dickens’ much later tale of two cities?

In justifying the use of that language, let me point out the writers of the New Testament had a conundrum on their hands. They had to somehow reconcile Jesus with his predecessor John the Baptist. John the Baptist loomed so large, he was a figure of such import, that he couldn’t be brushed aside. He and his preaching, he and his baptismal ministry out at the Jordan River, had to be reconciled with Jesus’ later preaching and teaching; including Christ’s Easter day command that all nations be baptized in the name of the Triune God. Today’s readings from Acts and Mark both try to advance this kind of synthesis. In these scriptures, we’ve got a tale of two baptisms; a tale of two baptisms both ordained by God which are both similar and dissimilar.

As to the similarities, both baptisms are rites of ritual purification. The basic idea is that God is holy and pure and we are not. Being sinful and impure, we have to be prepared and purified for community with God. In Judaism and its many, different offshoots, the idea that we need to be prepared and purified for community with God is commonplace. Sometimes blood does the trick. Sometimes fire does the trick. And sometimes water does the trick, as in the two baptisms our appointed readings do their best to describe.

I think of how nearly a year ago Julia and I visited the ruins of ancient Qumran in Israel. Known as the Dead Sea Scrolls, an important collection of ancient scriptures was found there just after World War II. Along with these scriptures, Qumran was the place a group of ancient Jewish separatists called the Essenes lived. The Essenes thought the religion of their time had gone south so they established their own religious community out in the desert by the Dead Sea. Still today there’s evidence of the ritual baths the Essenes built and regularly used. These baths functioned like John the Baptist’s bath at the Jordan River, the baptism instituted by Jesus, and the ritual bath known as the mikvah still used in observant Jewish circles today. What these baptisms have in common is the notion that sometimes the relationship between God and humankind needs to be renewed and reset. In their mutual use of baptism, we learn that both Jesus and John were preachers of repentance; calling us to be preachers and teachers of repentance ourselves.

I don't know about you, but I think there's a great need for repentance right now. We live at a time where people of competing political perspectives are both making excuses for violent protest. There is no excuse for violent protest. Instead of continuing to make excuses, we need to relearn how to say, "I was wrong and I'm sorry." When we repent, we call a spade, a spade, even if it comes at some kind of personal cost or embarrassment, and this is sorely needed today as even the most passing review of social media posted since the storming of the Capitol makes clear. But when we repent, we don't just say, "I was wrong and I'm sorry." We also commit ourselves to turning to God for answers rather than turning to a sinful and broken world for more of its predictably sinful and broken answers. This too is quite needful today.

It's hard to believe but it's been a little over eight years since military-grade weapons were used to slaughter twenty children and six teachers in Newtown, Connecticut. It's even harder to think of all the similar massacres which have taken place since with nothing, absolutely nothing, being done to make schools and churches and other places of public gathering safer. This is a national embarrassment on the order of so many other national embarrassments we've been asked to endure. The practice of repentance, the practice of turning back to God for answers, would change all of this in a hurry. In God's word, you will not find the slightest justification for the all too familiar idea that my rights are under all conditions more important than the health and wellbeing of my neighbors and the community at large. I would challenge anyone who says or thinks otherwise to use the Bible, and not just one verse here or there, to make their point. It can't be done. Jesus had a right to the glories of heaven. He gave it up to be born in a barn and to die on a cross for you and me and commanded us to love each other similarly. This is Christianity at its ethical essence and it applies to a whole lot more than keeping schools, churches, and other places of public gathering safe. It's just one measure of how we need to repent; need to reexamine ourselves and the issues objectively and honestly; need to turn to God's word rather than world's word for answers. And it's precisely here in our need for ongoing repentance and reformation that the primary difference between the baptism of John and the baptism of Jesus comes to the fore.

Unlike the baptism of John, the baptism of Jesus confers the Holy Spirit. This is an important addition. As our reading from Genesis makes clear, God wants light and life where there is darkness and order where there is disorder. And it's here where the Holy Spirit comes in. More often than not, the Holy Spirit we receive at baptism is the One who brings God's ongoing desire for light, life, and order to fruition. Just think about what Jesus went on to do after he received the Holy Spirit in today's reading from Mark. As the appointed scriptures in forthcoming weeks will remind us, after his baptism, the Spirit leads Jesus to overcome temptation, to heal, to cast out demons, to teach with authority, and to call those around him to higher pursuits and priorities. This is what the Holy Spirit we receive through baptism does. Through us and others, the Spirit makes good on God's desire for light, life, and order.

It's the Spirit who leads us to reverence all that God has made; including our enemies and those we don't know the slightest thing about. It's the Spirit who steers us towards repentance or resistance depending upon what the circumstances require. And it's the Holy Spirit who equips us for our individual purpose in life and enables us to trust that what isn't ours to handle will be capably handled by those whose purpose in life is different from our own. Put this altogether and it becomes pretty clear that the Holy Spirit we receive thanks to the baptism of Jesus is just what the doctor ordered both now and later. And so, in these moments and those that follow, let's lean on the Spirit we receive at baptism; the Spirit who inspired the scriptures to be written; the Spirit who blesses us with faith, hope, and love; the Spirit who led John the Baptist to do what he was

called to do and will lead us to do our own, individual part over time and as needs change and evolve. For the end result both now and later shall be that as we learn on the Spirit, we'll get just what we need to carry on faithfully; doing it God's way and not the broken and sinful way of a world in need of repentance. Amen!