

Sermon Preached January 11, 2015 – only 8:00 am service
Year B, Epiphany 1
St. John's Episcopal Church
Beverly Farms, Massachusetts
The Rev. Stephanie Chase Bradbury

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

There is a story about an intoxicated man who stumbles upon a baptism service on Sunday afternoon down by the river. He proceeds to walk down into the water and stand next to the Preacher. The minister turns and notices the man and says, "Mister, Are you ready to find Jesus?" The intoxicated man looks back and says, "Yes, Preacher. I sure am." The minister then dunks the fellow under the water and pulls him right back up. "Have you found Jesus?" the preacher asks. "No, I didn't!" says the man. The preacher then dunks him under for quite a bit longer, brings him up and says, "Now, brother, have you found Jesus?" "No, I did not Reverend." The preacher in disgust holds the man under for at least 30 seconds this time brings him out of the water and says in a harsh

tone, "My God, have you found Jesus yet?" The man wipes his eyes and says to the preacher... "Are you sure this is where he fell in?"

This morning we heard the story of John baptizing Jesus in the River Jordan. However, it's interesting to reflect that John's baptisms are not Christian baptisms. Because they happened before Christ's death and resurrection they have a different meaning. So what exactly was John doing? Did he invent the idea of baptism?

A couple of years ago I saw a PBS special entitled "Jews and Christians: A Journey of Faith" which illustrated parallels between Christian and Jewish beliefs and practices. One practice was new to me. I was struck by how Christianity's use of baptism evolved out of the traditional Jewish mikveh. As one religious scholar put it. "I don't call him John the Baptist, but the John the Mikveh man!"

What is a mikveh, you might ask? Turns out it is a tool associated with ancient Israel's concerns with ritual purity. In ancient Israel, you could not enter the temple if you were impure. To appear before God while unclean meant you would die.

Much of the book of Leviticus outlines the circumstances of what causes ritual uncleanness and how to purify yourself afterwards. How to get pure and remain pure was an extremely important issue if you believed impurity is what separated you from God.

One of the tools used in the purification process was the mikveh. It is a pool or river of running water in which one is immersed. In excavation sites of Israel in the time of Christ, many homes, and in the Temple itself, you can find mikvehs. These pools of "living water" allowed people to ritually clean themselves in order to be able to enter the Temple and come before God. The sort of things which caused uncleanness included menstruation, childbirth, touching dead bodies, and most anything involving human secretions.

As you read in the gospel of Luke, the Virgin Mary had to go through a seven week waiting period after giving birth, before she could go to the Temple. And the first thing she probably did was wash herself in the Mikveh, after which we know she offered a burnt sacrifice to God. Both of these practices were to purify her after having given birth.

The mikveh was not to wash away dirt. In fact, people were required to bath themselves before entering the mikveh. It was to make one ritually clean, to make one worthy to stand before the Holy One. A thousand years before Christ, the ancient Israelites would banish unclean people from the community, in case their impurity rubbed off on others and jeopardized the entire community's relationship with God. Being ritually clean was critical not just for the individual, but for everyone with whom they came in contact.

John takes this understanding of the mikveh and ritual purity and builds on it. He is the new Elijah, the one who prepares the way for the coming Messiah. John proclaims to the people that God is coming.

He says to prepare. But the preparation he advocates is not a ritual purity, but a spiritual purity. Just as you cannot appear before God in the Temple while ritually impure, you cannot appear before the coming Messiah with an impure heart and having committed impure actions.

John's big proclamation was, "Repent! Repent of wrongdoing. Repent of cheating others, repent of greed. Embrace generosity and fairness. Help the poor. God is coming and you'd better have your house in order."

John's baptism is about starting over with a clean slate.

John stands in the Jordan River, a stream of living water, encouraging folks to repent of their sins, and enter the mikveh as an outward sign that they choose to be inwardly clean. This is not about ritual purity in the Temple, but spiritual purity and righteous before the coming of the Lord. About purity of heart in daily life.

John's conviction and passion naturally made people wonder whether he was the Messiah. John of course said no, he said Jesus was coming and that "He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."

In the passage from Acts we learn about some of the confusion in the early church between John's and Jesus' baptisms. Paul says, "John baptized with the baptism of repentance" while baptism in Jesus is about baptism in the Holy Spirit. The Ephesians had only known of John's baptism, but when they heard what Paul said, they were baptized into Christ's death and resurrection, and received the gift of the Spirit.

In other words, there are three sorts of "baptisms" illustrated in scripture. There is the mikveh purification rite used by ancient Israelites. There is the baptism of repentance and purity of heart which John administered, based on the Mikveh rite. Finally there is Christian baptism in the Holy Spirit brought about Christ's death and resurrection. *(Here begins the long quote)*

"There may have been discomfort in the early church (as there is today) with the idea of Jesus needing to be baptized. For if a baptism is a ritual way of cleansing from sin, then why is Jesus being baptized?"

[In Mark it says] “In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him.” Where else have we seen heavens opened, water, and spirit? Does it help to know that in both Hebrew and Greek the word for spirit is the same word as the word for wind?

[So now, bearing those words in mind] “Listen again to the Genesis passage, slightly modified: “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters.”

“When Mark tells the story of Jesus’ baptism, he is reminding us of the Creation story. And therefore, Jesus’ baptism is the sign of the New Creation that God is working in Jesus Christ. In Christ, God begins new creative activity. Not simply cleaning the old thing, but creating a new one.

[John and his mikveh were cleaning, but Jesus and his baptism is creating.] Mark is telling us from the very beginning of his gospel, 15 chapters before the Empty Tomb, that God is working a New Creation in Jesus Christ. It is this new creation that has the power to cancel out our sin. This New Creation so radically transforms our lives that our sins, even those stains that we think will never come out--and if you're like me, you have plenty--even those blotches are overcome by the power of God's New Creation.

[Our baptisms are not something that we must do over and over again, like the mikveh rite, but a once and for all cleansing of sin, because we are made new. It makes us righteous before God. Christ's death and resurrection began a new life in which we now participate.]

“Our baptisms are not something we do. They are something God does in us through Jesus Christ. To be baptized is to be born again. Created anew.

They are not simply the magical washing away of all that has gone on before like a tub of OxyClean. They are about the beginning of a new creation in us....

“I wish I could stand here and tell you that once you’re a Christian everything is fine. That once you’ve been reborn, you never mess up. You never make mistakes... [but] We do make mistakes. We do mess up. But new beginnings abound. [Each time we repent and confess is a new opportunity to start over.] To wipe the slate clean.”

“In the same way that a sudden wind comes along blows the clouds away and creates a new day, so too can the Spirit of God blow through us and create something new within us.”¹

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We are at the beginning of a new week and a New Year. It is appropriate that as we start fresh, and consider new beginnings, we invite the Holy Spirit into our hearts. Her role is to guide and comfort us along the journey, to inspire us to new imaginations of our lives and our world, to breathe hope and life into that which was hopeless.

In those dark and hurting places of our soul, let us pray for the coming of the Spirit, for healing, and newness of life. Because we know that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Amen.