

“And He Was Baptized”

Rev. Tom Steffen

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Baptism of Our Lord Sunday – Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Now that we find ourselves sitting in a rather stark sanctuary, after five weeks of greenery and lights and large mural, I thought it would be a good time to tell you about a Christmas tree that I saw a couple years ago. I didn't see it in person, but by way of a picture that someone sent me via email. This Christmas tree was fully decorated with ornaments, silver garland, and packages under it. And from what I could tell, it was an artificial tree. But it was located in a real grocery store somewhere in a Chicago suburb. There wasn't anything all that unusual about it, except that it was hanging upside down from a high ceiling, and that made it interesting and maybe scandalous! “What a perfect symbol for Christmas,” the email stated, “since Christ was born into the world in order to turn everything upside down!”

On this Sunday when we remember that Jesus was baptized, maybe we should first remember that just a month ago we were singing: “O come, O come, Emmanuel,” something we've been singing for 2,000 years. Now we get to decide if we really mean it. “O come, thou Wisdom from on high, and order all things far and nigh.” Really? Come, turn our lives and churches, communities and nations upside down? Or maybe right-side up? That picture of an upside down Christmas tree reminds me of a line from a Lawrence Ferlinghetti poem: “Christ climbed down from His bare Tree this year and softly stole away into some anonymous Mary's womb, again, where in the darkest night of everybody's anonymous soul Christ awaits again...an Immaculate Re-conception, the very craziest of Second Comings.” (“Christ Climbed Down,” from *A Coney Island Kind of Mind*)

I want to suggest that Christ comes, again, to you, to me, today, this hour, as re-conception in us. Emmanuel, God with us, Messiah, as St. Luke has it, comes and stands in line with the poor and proud, the sick and successful, and asks not to baptize but to be baptized. In spite of John's protest, John lowers Jesus into the same murky waters of the Jordon like he does everybody else. This is God with us. With us. “With” is about relationships, which is almost redundant to say. Jesus' baptism is one of the earliest episodes as God with us, which means as baptism is about relationship. Yes, I know that the gospels and Paul as well link forgiveness with baptism. The logic goes like this: If baptism is about forgiveness, and we all need forgiveness, well, we all need baptism. But it wasn't long that this logic sounded upside down, like that Chicago Christmas tree. Once the idea that Jesus is the perfect Lamb, sacrificed for our sins, started to get traction, well, someone asked “Why then was Jesus baptized?” It is a good question, which allows us to plumb more deeply into baptism. In other words, what if baptism isn't primarily about forgiveness, any more than Jesus' baptism involved God literally becoming a dove that day? I'm trying to be provocative, not disrespectful.

A former intern of mine, David Lose, who has already served as a College President and is currently back in a local church, writes a wonderful blog. I'm so proud of David; he is now my teacher. This week he agreed that baptism is linked with forgiveness, but it is mostly about being in "relationship," he said. It is primarily about being named and claimed as children of God. David writes: "For most people, forgiveness is seen as a mechanism rather than a result or gift. That is, we can easily slip into thinking that God forgives us in order that we can be named, claimed, and called God's children. But I don't think that's accurate at all. God forgives us not to make us God's children, but because we already are God's children. Forgiveness is a result of God's love for us, not the condition of that love."

God forgives – I sure hope so. But not to establish a new family but because God already has one.

Do you know the name Sam Houston? He was the first president of the Republic of Texas, served as Governor, Senator, a decorated soldier and astute politician. He was referred to by some as a "nasty fellow with a checkered past." But late in life, he professed faith in Christ. And on the day of his baptism, the preacher walked him to the river and said to him "Sam, your sins are washed away." And Houston supposedly replied "Well, God help the fish."

We don't know what Jesus said when John baptized him, but I'd like to think that, however he internalized the words, "Beloved, in you I take pleasure," it was that relationship that he enjoyed, that helped him turn this world upside down. And your baptism? And mine? I pray that our relationship with God, which enlivens our relationships with each other and all of creation, will continue to sustain us as we do our part in turning things "upside down," which may end up being "right-side up."

Perhaps you remember the movie "O Brother, Where Art Thou." It is a whimsical retelling of Homer's Odyssey set in Mississippi in the 1930s. Three hapless escaped convicts – Everett, Pete and Delmar – are hiding out in the woods, running from the law. There they encounter a procession of white-robed people going down to a murky lake to be baptized. The people are moving, almost trance like, 50 or 60 of them, and as they walk they are singing "Let's go down to the river and pray." As the baptism ceremony begins, Delmar is overwhelmed by the beauty and the mystery of what is taking place. And so he runs into the water and is baptized by the minister. As he returns to Everett and Pete, all dripping wet, he declares that he is now saved. He explains that the minister has told him that "it is the straight and narrow from here on out...my sins is washed away, even when I robbed that Piggly Wiggly store back in Yazoo." Everett interrupts – "I thought you were innocent of those charges." And Delmar replies, "Well, I was ly-in, and the preacher said that even that's been washed away..." "neither God nor man has got nothing on me now. Come on in boys, the water is fine." Several scenes later, the three convicts steal a hot pie from a window sill, and Everett and Pete immediately take off running. But Delmar hesitates, and places a dollar bill on the window sill before he takes off after them.

Well, baptism didn't make Delmar perfect, and it won't make any of us perfect, I suspect. But it revealed a desire to enter into a new relationship, and it signaled the hope of beginning again.