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Baptized in Terror or in Grace?

by Gary Simpson

Call to Worship

One: Today we remember Jesus baptism.

**All: In baptism, our Creator calls us
to use love to free people from hate.**

One: In baptism, we celebrate being one in Christ
No longer are we divided by identity.

**All: No longer citizen or immigrant.
No longer slave or free.
No longer rich or poor.
No longer male, female, other.
No longer straight or LGBTQ.
We are one in Christ Jesus.
We welcome and celebrate all.
Making all one in Christ.**

One: Baptism the Spirit anoints us for ministry
Anoints us to embody divine love.

**All: Today, the body of Christ
remembers and celebrates all.**

One: Let us worship God and celebrate each other!

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22 (KJV) And as the people were in expectation, and all men mused in their hearts of John, whether he were the Christ, or not; John answered, saying unto them all, I indeed baptize you with water; but one mightier than I cometh, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to unloose: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost and with fire: **17** Whose fan is in his hand, and he will thoroughly purge his floor, and will gather the wheat into his garner; but the chaff he will burn with fire unquenchable.

21 Now when all the people were baptized, it came to pass, that Jesus also being baptized, and praying, the heaven was opened, **22** And the Holy Ghost descended in a bodily shape like a dove upon him, and a voice came from heaven, which said, Thou art my beloved Son; in thee I am well pleased.

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Baptism becomes baptism when God is present. According to both Martin Luther and Augustine, “Without the word of God the water is simple water’ and is not baptism.¹ The empowering of the Spirit is what makes the simple act of getting wet a baptism.

There are a number of different meanings of the word baptize. One Bible commentary in my library states that there are about 20 meanings for the word.² Some people emphasize meanings that relate more to water or more to immersion. I tend to emphasize more symbolic and more spiritual meanings. In baptism, we identify with Christ, with Christ’s death, with Christ’s resurrection. The most important meaning of baptize has almost no connection with water.³ There is a sense in 1 Corinthians that the children of Israel were baptized into Moses.⁴ In the Exodus narrative, the children of Israel did not get wet. They crossed the red sea on dry ground. The Egyptians were the ones who got wet that day.⁵ James Dale wrote a book about John’s baptism. He describes baptism as taking place when the “character, state or condition” of an object is changed.⁶

A case can be made that Jesus’ baptism was unique. John the baptist baptized people in a ‘baptism of repentance’.⁷ Jesus’ baptism was not like the baptisms normally conducted by John the baptizer, because Jesus was not repenting. Baptism signifies submission to God, allegiance to God’s will and inclusion with the restored people of God.⁸ Through baptism, Jesus shows that He is in alliance with God, with the will of God and with humanity. Perhaps, in some way, Jesus’ baptism was an example for us and was a marker showing a change in Jesus from being a Jewish carpenter to being a powerful Jewish teacher.

Jesus was probably about 30 years old when He was baptized. Verse 23 is not part of the lectionary reading. In verse 23, we learn that Jesus was roughly 30 years old when He started

¹ Cited W.H.T. Dau. “Baptism (Lutheran doctrine),” *ISBE*, I, 395 in “What Is the Primary Meaning of Baptism? Some Translational Difficulties.” *Bible.org*. 04 March 2006, 20 Dec 2018. <https://bible.org/article/what-primary-meaning-baptism-some-translational-difficulties#P14_2475>.

² J. Vernon McGee. *Thru the Bible with J. Vernon McGee*. (Pasadena, California: Thru the Bible Radio, 1998) ebook.

³ McGee. (1998) ebook.

⁴ 1 Corinthians 10:2-5.

⁵ McGee. (1998) ebook.

⁶ James W. Dale. *Johannic Baptism*. (Waucona, IL: Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, 1993, vi), cited in “What Is the Primary Meaning of Baptism? Some Translational Difficulties.” *Bible.org*. 04 March 2006, 20 Dec 2018. <https://bible.org/article/what-primary-meaning-baptism-some-translational-difficulties#P14_2475>.

⁷ William Barclay. “Daily StudyBible.” *Study Light*. n.d., 18 Dec 2018. <<https://www.studylight.org/commentaries/dsb/luke-3.html>>.

⁸ Walter J. Harrelson, et. al, eds. *The New Interpreter’s Study Bible*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 1858.

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his ministry. Priests were supposed to be at least 30 years of age to be installed in ministry.⁹ Because Jesus is the high priest for humanity, it makes sense for Jesus to start His ministry at about 30 years of age.

John the baptist's ministry is not one that I find particularly attractive. A description of his ministry makes me think of some of the street preachers in Edmonton, who stand on a box and yell into a public address system that everyone needs to repent or they will be doomed to hell. I try to scurry past them, in an effort to protect my ears from the loud preaching. In fact, I am not sure that I would want to be seen to have any association with John the baptizer's ministry. Depending on the translation, John the baptist called people a generation of vipers¹⁰ or a children of vipers.¹¹ In fairness to John, he might have been calling the scribes and pharisees the children of vipers. We get that sense from Matthew's Gospel. The religious leaders might have been present only to witness the baptism,¹² not to gain spiritual blessing from John the baptist. I wonder if they were there to see if John was preaching heresy. I am still left feeling that no matter how you slice it, either being told that your parents are poisonous snakes or that you are a poisonous snake is not a compliment. To John the baptizer, the people he was calling a generation of vipers were the descendants of the snake that deceived Eve in the Garden of Eden.¹³

John's comments indirectly challenge racism and challenge ultra nationalism. And I am not sure if John won any friends among the Jewish nationalists of his day. In verses 7 and 8 of this chapter, he reminds the people that being children of Abraham is nothing to brag about. He essentially says that God can create *good* Jewish people from stones. I am wondering how well his message would be received by a room full of people wearing Make America Great Again hats. Nationalists might find John's message that God does not care about your national identity or your skin color a bit unsettling, possibly even a little jarring. In John's personal theology, being Jewish did not place you in a special position above other people. He saw a need for Jewish and non-Jewish people to repent. John's message to Jewish people was that being Jewish did not exempt people from judgment and that "racial privilege meant nothing" to God.¹⁴

⁹ See Numbers 4:3. "Adam Clarke Commentary." *Study Light*. n.d., 17 Dec 2018. <<https://www.studylight.org/commentaries/acc/luke-3.html>>. This point is also made in the Barnes Bible Commentary. "Albert Barnes Notes on the Entire Bible." *Study Light*. n.d., 17 Dec 2018. <<https://www.studylight.org/commentaries/bnb/luke-3.html>>.

¹⁰ Luke 3:7 King James Version.

¹¹ Luke 3:7 William Barclay's New Testament.

¹² Good News Study Bible. (New York: American Bible Society, 1993), 1297.

¹³ Lane T. Dennis, et. al., eds. *ESV Study Bible*. (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2011), 1953.

¹⁴ William Barclay. "Daily StudyBible." *Study Light*. n.d., 18 Dec 2018. <<https://www.studylight.org/commentaries/dsb/luke-3.html>>.

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John the baptizer seemed to have good ethics. He told tax collectors to only collect the taxes that they were supposed to collect.¹⁵ He informed Roman soldiers that they were to be content with their wages, do not blackmail people and do not be violent.¹⁶ While his ministry impresses me as being harsh and insensitive, he was popular. Crowds appeared to follow John.¹⁷ And for some reason, Jesus came to John to be baptized. Perhaps, Jesus wanted to be baptized by John, because they appear to have been relatives. According to Luke Chapter 1, Mary, Jesus' mother, was related to John's mother.¹⁸

One of my favorite Bible commentators is William Barclay, a Biblical linguist and scholar. He translated the New Testament and wrote the popular *Daily Study Bible* commentary, which covers the entire New Testament. His commentaries are so good that they can be used as a devotional book. William Barclay comments, "Nowhere does the difference between John and Jesus stand out so clearly because, whatever the message of John was, it was not a gospel. It was not good news; it was news of terror."¹⁹ At Jesus baptism, a dove descended upon Jesus. The dove symbolized purity and harmlessness.²⁰ In the presence of a ministry of terror, the dove, a symbol of peace, comes down from the heavenly. A harmless, life-giving, hope-filled ministry that touched hundreds of millions of people in the last two thousand years took flight on the wings of the dove.

There is a reason why I am giving this background. Jesus baptism is in no way diminished by the fact that He was baptized by John. Some people who attend progressive churches and many LGBTQ people have suffered a lot at the hands of blunt ministers, harsh churches, demeaning church doctrine. If you were baptized, confirmed, ordained or served in a church system that hurt you or that hurt others, your call to be a person of faith or your call to ministry is not diminished by that church. You are more than your past. Like Jesus, you can have a powerful ministry and you can be a powerful force of good news, despite the frightening messages of churches.

The Gospel of Luke portrays Jesus as the one who fulfills John's prophecy that there is a better, a greater, a more significant spiritual leader coming. John indicates that this person who comes after him is so much better than John is that John is not even worthy of untying his

¹⁵ Luke 3:12-13.

¹⁶ Luke 3:14.

¹⁷ Luke 3:10 indicate crowds were asking John the baptist questions.

¹⁸ Luke 1:36.

¹⁹ William Barclay. "Daily StudyBible." *Study Light*. n.d., 18 Dec 2018. <<https://www.studylight.org/commentaries/dsb/luke-3.html>>.

²⁰ "Albert Barnes Notes on the Entire Bible." *Study Light*. n.d., 17 Dec 2018. <<https://www.studylight.org/commentaries/bnb/luke-3.html>>.

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sandals. Slaves typically untied sandals.²¹ The early followers of Jesus would have understood that John the baptizer was saying that he is not good enough to be Jesus' slave. A spirituality of terror is not worthy, is not fit to be the slave of a spirituality of hope and peace. The bad news gospel that condemns people based on their identity is not worthy of tying the sandals of the Gospel.

Jesus submitted to being baptized by a person who was a bad news minister, so that we would not have to submit to bad news belief systems, so that we could hear good news, the Gospel.

There is tremendous power in stories, so I am going to share a story, as I conclude. Ken Wilson, author of *A Letter to My Congregation*, tells the story of his daughter, Grace. His daughter was in a science class, which was taught by a devout Catholic teacher. A student asked the teacher what he thought of homosexuality. The teacher replied that homosexuality is morally disordered. Grace looked over and saw a boy, who identified as gay, starting to cry. To Grace's credit, she stood up and said, "Well, both of my parents are pastors, and I don't know what they think about this, but I know that Jesus accepted all people!" Through tears, the teen said, "Grace, you're my hero!"²² And that day a gay teen was baptized in God's love. That day Grace lived up to her name.

My prayer is that many people in the city will be baptized in God's love through people who are part of this church. And that they will say, "Your church, is my hero!"

God is a lot like Grace and God calls us to be like Grace!

Today, you are declared grace incarnate, grace wrapped in flesh, grace that baptizes many with love. Amen.

²¹ Good News Study Bible. (New York: American Bible Society, 1993), 1379.

²² Ken Wilson. *A Letter to My Congregation: An Evangelical Pastor's Path to Embracing People who are Gay, Lesbian and Transgender in the Company of Jesus*. (Canton, Michigan: Read the Spirit Books, 2014), 41.

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