

Faith Mennonite Church  
January 8, 2012  
Phil Stoltzfus

### **Baptism as Radical Newness** Isaiah 42:1-9; Mark 1:4-11

In the mid-1990s the traditional site of Jesus' baptism was rediscovered on the Jordanian side of the Jordan River near the Dead Sea. This area, which the gospel of John identifies as "Bethany beyond the Jordan" (John 1:28) had been a closed military zone up until 1994, when a peace treaty between Jordan and Israel allowed access to it for archeological exploration. A competing site on the other side of the Jordan River was opened just last July by the Israelis, after clearing their area of landmines.

How appropriate that is, really, because this baptism text is itself a dangerous story, littered with theological landmines. John the Baptist, we are told, cried out in the wilderness for repentance and forgiveness of sins. But why does *Jesus* need to repent? Does Jesus need his "sins forgiven"? Why does Jesus need to submit himself to be a disciple of *John*? Even though the voice from heaven declares *Jesus* to be the Beloved Son, Jesus himself up and joins somebody *else's* movement! Luke and John sort of fudge the issue—they don't explicitly say that John baptizes Jesus. But Mark does. Mark goes right ahead and tells us of the dramatic, surprising, transformative nature of this event right at the very beginning of his gospel. For Mark, there's no nativity story, no shepherds, no wise men from the East. For Mark, *baptism* is the true beginning of the gospel story. The moment where the world shifts. The moment of epiphany. The moment of radical newness.

In our text today from Isaiah we have a similar theme of newness. We learn that Yahweh is a God who puts aside things of the past in favor of "new things," in favor of making justice today. Something new is springing forth—don't you see it? For Jesus, baptism re-enacts this promise, creating a new, holistic reality that we can see manifest in three different dimensions of life--the personal, the social, and the vocational.

1. First, baptism as a personal newness. For those of us who come from a background influenced by American Pietism, evangelicalism, revivalism—personal conversion is central. The dramatic struggle of the soul, hitting the sawdust trail "just as I am," the moment of emotional catharsis and acceptance. For some, certainly, the conversion experience was one of liberation; for others, it was one of ambiguity, coercion, or even abuse, that later required a period of reassessment and healing. It's a part of the Christian story that many of us would rather put behind us.

There's no doubt, though, that the baptism and temptation stories of Jesus are meant to show us a radical shift in Jesus' inner sense of identity. Who was Jesus, anyway, up to this point in his life? In a world when Roman citizens and cultured Greeks ruled the day, he was a Jew. For Jews, Jerusalem and the Judeans set the religious agenda, but he was a Galilean. And among the Galileans, he was from Nazareth, and as Nathaniel retorts in John 1:46, "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" Furthermore, this Jesus was the son of an unwed mother, and as the new Bret Hesla song we sang this morning points out, Jesus was—at least when he was an infant—poor, homeless, and a refugee.

Yesterday, there was a 3 Kings Day fiesta put on in our fellowship hall by the Centro Trabajadores Unidos en Lucha (Center of Workers United in Struggle) which has offices at Bethany Lutheran Church. It was quite a program, and I wonder when the last time was that an honest-to-goodness mariachi band has played in this building! The celebration prompted me to reflect upon how the epiphany theme of unexpected extravagance—gold, frankincense, myrrh—in the context of poverty, squalor, fleeing in the night from the governing authorities—would appeal to the Latino worker community here in our city.

In the same way, the Jesus that we know about before he was baptized did not have a particularly auspicious beginning—not a background that would have been conducive to a strong sense of personal identity, worth, spiritual health, or empowerment. But at Bethany beyond the Jordan, Jesus gets a new identity. This child, who undoubtedly had some issues with his family of origin, gains a new parent. He gains the assurance of being loved, of being a beloved son. Of being a child of God. He doesn't have to keep running, to try to earn something, to try to prove something. He is now gifted with a new life. And he is now for the first time filled, as the gospels say, with the Spirit. This is all consistent with a way of approaching baptism as a radical personal break from your past. The soul moves on from past baggage, burying or drowning it, and then rising up again out of the water to new life, as Paul says in II Corinthians, echoing Isaiah, "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation, everything old has passed away, see, everything has become new!" (II Cor. 5:17)

2. But Jesus' baptism is far from just a personal, inner decision or experience, far from just an individual rite of passage. It's also a profoundly social enactment of newness. In the passage from Isaiah, we see the writer trying to convince the Israelites to return from Exile, to re-establish a new Israelite community. The Servant that Isaiah talks about is sometimes conceived of as a future Messiah figure, but other times it appears to be a personification of the Israelite community itself. It is the community, through its common experience of suffering in Exile, which will experience the "new thing" of God's chosen-ness and God's justice, like in days of the Exodus, but now in a new way. A new people, and sense of peoplehood, will emerge.

For Jesus, it was a commitment first of all to the discipling community of John the Baptist, and then, to his own circle of disciples. It was his *social* rite of passage, his initiation into and participation in a new form of social organization, and political reform, and Kingdom living.

For the Anabaptists, too, baptism was not symbolic merely of the inner struggle of the soul, but also it enacted the outward commitment to community. Baptism was a radical, subversive act, which demonstrated one's new accountability to a visible, gathered, local body of believers. The first one took place on Jan. 21, 1525, in a meeting in Zurich in the house of Felix Manz, who by the way wrote the final hymn that we will sing today, "I sing with exultation." After prayer, Georg Blaurock turned to Conrad Grebel and said, "baptize me!" And he did. And then Blaurock turned and baptized the others. This was the new social reality, a new way of being church, that emerged that evening, and from which sprang the Anabaptist movement, the beginnings of the Mennonite Church, and the roots of all Christian traditions that practice believers baptism, the separation of church and state, and the form of spiritual communion that we now call the believers church or the free church.

This was the experience of the Jesus movement, too. The claim of baptism by the Holy Spirit in the ministry of Jesus meant to his audience nothing less than the in-breaking of the eschatological reign of God, right here on earth. That band of a handful of people, perhaps not much more than a hundred at the time of Jesus' death, would eventually, after a few generations, turn the whole Roman Empire upside-down. It was indeed a world-changing shift. John the Baptist and many of his contemporaries, both Jewish and Christian, were convinced some sort of apocalyptic, cosmic drama was about to be played out. The very heavens are being "torn apart" in this story, right?! I remember being fascinated as a kid with the idea in Hal Lindsey's book *The Late Great Planet Earth*, that the End Times were upon us—back in 1980! Or that the Mayan calendar was going to end in the year 2012, and this was going to have some sort of big significance. How easy it is that we as humans get so grasped by the specter of some sort of big, ghastly, violent natural or supernatural earth-shattering bang. But sometimes radical newness starts out small, a little kernel, a seed that sprouts when a few people get together and say to one another, "let's do something special—let's make something happen that hasn't happened before." That's when the social dimension of radical newness can really take off.

3. But there's also in our story a third dimension to which we need to turn—the vocational. Yes, it's all well and good that we have created a new social body. We're in a new group, we're in a new clique. But is that it? Is baptism just a hazing ritual—just an initiation into some sort of social club or political movement? Yeah, it's nice to belong to a tight circle of friends, but what is the *point*? What is the *purpose*?

The punch line of this story is that God declares Jesus to be the Beloved Son—the Son of God. What in the world does that mean? Do you think you know? For the ancient Chinese, their emperor was considered “the son of heaven.” For the Greeks, son of God meant a divine being, like Apollo, the son of Zeus, or Athena, the daughter of Zeus. For the Israelites, Israel itself was God's son, and the people who followed Torah could be referred to as sons and daughters—children—of Yahweh. Roman rulers like Ceasar Augustus, or the emperor Domitian who persecuted Christians, consolidated their political power by having themselves declared to be, and worshipped as, “son of the divine” Julius Ceasar. It seems that “sons of god” were a dime a dozen in the ancient world! So what did it mean for the early Christians?

Well, in the gospels the term “Son of God” is rarely used by Jesus or the disciples to refer to Jesus himself. Usually, it's either evil spirits, the devil, disciples who have the wrong answer, or authorities trying to trap Jesus into a charge of blasphemy, who invoke the term “Son of God.” Twice *God* declares Jesus to be the Son, in this baptism story and in the Transfiguration story. So what's up with that?

The final clue in our story today is the appearance of the Spirit of God in the form of a dove—that ancient symbol of peace and new life that appears after the death and destruction of Noah's Flood. There is one time in the Synoptic gospels, right in the center of Jesus' teaching ministry, where Jesus himself uses the term “son of God.” And amazingly, it's directly connected to this image of peace. It comes in the Beatitudes, Matthew chapter 5: “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called daughters and sons of God.” That's the one location that prompts us to say that for Jesus, divine sonship does not signify a state of being, but rather an action, a vocation, a practice of making peace, a practice of loving enemies, a practice of nonviolently enacting justice.

Claiming the title “daughter or son of God” is not (contrary to what you might expect), something radically new. Lots of people tried to claim that. What was radically new, indeed what had never been advocated for up to that point in human history by anyone, in any existing document that we know of, was the idea that we should act in a nonviolent way not just toward our friends and neighbors, but *toward our enemies*. *Only Jesus taught this*, and only Jesus linked this concept of peacemaking to the function—to the vocation—of acting as a divine daughter or son. This is what makes Jesus's sonship unique. This is what is so radical. This is the spark. And it is no wonder why, later in the New Testament, we find the claim repeatedly made by the early Christians (John, 1:12, Romans 8:14, in Galatians 3:26) that those who live by faith, those who are led by the Spirit in this new Way of Jesus, have now become, themselves, “daughters and sons of God.”

This is the promise of baptism, and the challenge for us, today. Yes, baptism points to a personal, emotional shift in our life. Yes, baptism points to a social, structural shift in our collective identity. And yes, baptism points above all to a vocational shift for us. For Jesus has put peacemaking and enemy-loving at the center of who we are, and who we are becoming, and what we get to do, as children of the Spirit—in this new year, in this new church community, in this new reign of God, in this new heaven and new earth that is, even now, being reborn among us. Amen.