

Faith Mennonite Church
January 11, 2015
Joetta Schlabach

The Three “R”s of Baptism *Acts 19:1-7; Mark 1:4-11*

Having just come through the Christmas season we are well aware of the ways that Matthew and Luke began their gospels, with stories of Jesus’ unusual birth, complete with dreams and angel visitations and attended by shepherds in Luke and magi from the East in Matthew. In both of those gospels, the baptism of Jesus doesn’t happen until chapter three. But as Pat said in her welcoming remarks, Mark begins his gospel with Jesus full-grown. And by verse 4 of the very first chapter we are introduced to John the baptizer, out in the wilderness, calling people to repentance and baptism.

Repentance. That’s the first of the three “R” words we will explore this morning as we think about baptism, a Jewish practice that was brought forward and imbued with new meaning within the Christian context. Repentance. It’s not a word we use a lot in our everyday speech. We talk of confession, admitting we’re wrong. But the Greek word *metanoia* that is often translated as repentance is not simply an admission of guilt or wrong-doing, a purely mental activity, but a turning around and reorienting one’s whole life as a result of a new realization.

It’s not insignificant that John the baptizer was in the wilderness calling for repentance. Throughout the biblical story, the wilderness is always a place of disorientation leading to reorientation. Think of the wilderness sojourn of the children of Israel after they left Egypt. It took a multi-year, wilderness experience to prepare them to move from slavery to a promised-land existence. The experience of exile, after years of failed attempts at monarchy, was also a wilderness experience, a time when Israel came to a new understanding of what it meant to be “chosen.” It was during the exile period that the notion of Israel as a “Suffering Servant” was developed and would shape, for some, the expectation of the coming Messiah. And just after Jesus’ baptism he moves into the wilderness for a multi-day period of temptation and clarification of how his ministry will unfold.

John the baptizer’s ministry in the wilderness no doubt had both a personal and a corporate aspect. Each person, of course, needs to respond to the invitation of God to move out of self-centered living and accept this radical relationship with the Divine. But, in first century Palestine, John was likely calling people away from the temple culture of the holy city Jerusalem that had accommodated itself to the Roman occupation, and that was functioning more as a self-protective institution than a life-giving, breathing community of faith. In the desert, new communities, one centered around John and another centered around Jesus would emerge.

This two-fold nature of repentance, of reordering our lives personally as well as socially, is contained in our understanding of the meaning of baptism. Baptism is a symbolic personal cleansing, based in one of the most basic uses of water. We leave our sins of the past behind as we experience forgiveness through Christ. And, to the extent that we can, we leave the structures of a broken world that rules through violence, fear, privilege, coercion, and security.

But this notion of baptism as repentance has left Christians in every age perplexed by the baptism of Jesus. The church has believed that Jesus was both fully human and fully God, one without sin. Why then, would he submit to John’s baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins? The gospel of Matthew indicates that this was a challenge for the community from which that gospel emerged, for Matthew has John wanting to prevent Jesus’ baptism and rather to have Jesus baptize him. One possible explanation is that Jesus’ baptism was a precursor, or a foreshadowing, of his eventual death. It was the first act of a ministry that constantly involved taking on himself the sinfulness and death of the world as he healed and offered forgiveness. It also seems that Jesus wished to affirm and align himself with the movement of God in the wilderness. In Mark’s gospel, Jesus never enters Jerusalem until the time of his passion and death. His baptism established the direction and location of his ministry.

The gospel passage gives us the first “R” word, repentance, fairly directly. As you think of the meaning of the baptism, what other “R” words come to mind?

The other two that came to mind for me as I reflected on today’s readings are *rebirth* and *revival*. If repentance turns us in a new direction, rebirth, or renewal, is the *process of living* into the new reality. And revival is what *fuels* that new life. It is clear from both of our readings this morning that the first Christians held this multivalent view of what happened in baptism. Repentance and forgiveness were certainly a part, but even John anticipated that there was more to come—that Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit. Indeed, Jesus himself, had an experience of God’s Spirit coming to him in the form of a dove and with a word of affirmation, as he emerged from the water. In Acts, when Paul finds disciples of John in Ephesus who evidently hadn’t yet received the full story of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection, Paul re-baptizes these followers with a specific invitation for the Holy Spirit, the spirit of Christ, to fill them and empower them. Similarly, the Anabaptist movement in the 16th century was probably quite similar to at least some aspects of the pentecostal movement as we know it today, with a strong emphasis on the Spirit. In the adult class this past fall on “Discerning God’s Will Together,” the curriculum reminded us a number of times that one of the central aspects of biblical interpretation in the Anabaptist tradition is the role of the Spirit in guiding our understanding as we read and discern together.

It is not always easy to hold all aspects of the diverse meanings of baptism together. One critique of our Mennonite practice of adult baptism is that we sometimes place the emphasis on the human response and agency in baptism. Baptism is something *we* do to mark *our* repentance and *our* decision to follow Jesus. In sacramental traditions, and especially with baptism of infants, the focus shifts to *God’s* agency, *God’s* work of salvation and redemption through the community of faith. The opening words of Mark’s gospel, quoting the prophet Isaiah, remind us that baptism is both call and response: “the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make God’s paths straight.’” God calls; we respond and in baptism we begin a life-long process of call and response, over and over and over again.

While baptism is a one-time event and experience, it is something that we recall as we continue to walk in the new life and as we daily pray for the Holy Spirit to free us, to lead us, and empower us to live in the wilderness in our time, that place where God is most fully known.

Please turn to #776, a reading at the back of the blue hymnal, which invites us to remember, or to anticipate, our baptism. Please stand, as you are able, and remain standing for the hymn that will follow.