

BAPTISMS FIERY, ICY, OR TEPID

Luke 1:68-79 Luke 3 1-6

December 6, 2009 J. S. O'Neill

Luke 1:68-79 *"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. ⁶⁹ He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David, ⁷⁰ as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, ⁷¹ that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us. ⁷² Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant, ⁷³ the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us ⁷⁴ that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, ⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. ⁷⁶ And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, ⁷⁷ to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. ⁷⁸ By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, ⁷⁹ to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."*

Luke 3:1-6 *In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, ² during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. ³ He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, ⁴ as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. ⁵ Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; ⁶ and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"*

There are three wonderful *canticles* or biblical songs provided in the early chapters of the Gospel According to Luke. You might think of the first two of them as the very earliest Advent carols and the third the first Christmas carol. First in order of appearance is Mary's song, often called the *Magnificat*, which Mary sings while visiting her kinswoman Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist. Second is the *Song of Zechariah* which we sang a few moments ago, known liturgically as the *Benedictus*. The third is Simeone's song which appears in the gospel when Mary and Joseph present Jesus in the temple for dedication when he is eight days old; it is known as the *Nunc Dimittis*.

Each is a song of praise for God's faithfulness, of thanksgiving for the fulfillment of long-held dreams, and of hope that now the world's unjust ways will be undone and God's reign of peace will be inaugurated. Zechariah sings at the birth of his son – who will become known as John the Baptist – that he will “go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation...by the forgiveness of sins...to give light to those who sit in darkness...to guide our feet into the way of peace.” Then, our second scripture reading from Luke's gospel tells about the fully-grown John out at the edge of the desert, on the far side of the Jordan, baptizing those who flocked to him.

The gospel, like any really good story, gives us strong characters, a powerful plot, heroes and villains, and a sense of an underlying plan which mysteriously unfolds slowly over centuries. The gospel is not a lengthy essay or craftily-built argument nor a set of abstruse doctrinal statements. It begins as simple stories about the most natural thing in the world: mothers having babies. And then the gospels make the audacious, unbelievable claim, that what has profoundly changed the world is not some triumphant battle, not a market surge or crash, not or a monumental scientific discovery, but a couple of pregnancies come to term.

Which of us can't resonate with the miracle, the majesty, and complications of all that? Few of us likely broke into song when we became parents – but then we didn't have Luke writing up our stories. Few experiences in life are more life-changing, however. The birth of every child is momentous in ways we never dreamed. As D. W. Winnicott, British pediatrician observed, "Sow a baby; reap a bomb." Each of us projects our dreams onto our offspring and fancifully imagines what kind of person he or she will grow up to be. Hopes soar high for our precious package of promise: our little tyke growing up to be president, becoming a great doctor, an entrepreneur, a philanthropist, the parent of our grandchildren. The years to come will inevitably edit those dreams, but we adjust, knowing that even a future tycoon might have to start out learning how to say, "Want fries with that?"

It's easy for us to get ahead of ourselves – way ahead of diapers and colic and 2AM feedings and inoculations and all the surprise children represent in our lives. There is the issue of choosing a name, and that much larger issue of building a context wherein the child can grow up and come to know who she or he is and how the family traditions shall be borne. As an expression of our understanding that each life is precious in God's sight, and certain that our own baby's life is especially deserving of God's special attention, we Christians – as did Mary and Joseph, or Zechariah and Elizabeth in their ancient ways – participate in a ritual that defines what we might term the Three P's: our *past*, our *place*, and our *purpose*. For them that ritual came eight days after birth in a naming and dedication ceremony; for us the parallel might be baptism.

The word is from the Greek meaning "to immerse in or wash with water." Washing rituals were common in Jewish worship. On the Day of Atonement, the high priest bathed before and after offering sacrifice. Visitors to the Temple washed their hands and feet before entering. Cleanliness of the body was a way of expressing intent for spiritual, cultic, and moral cleanliness. Baptism signifies washing, but etymologically it is related to the Semitic word for "drowning," which is to add a degree of darkness to our picture of this word acknowledging that baptism carries pain and risk.

When I arrived to begin ministry at the church I served in Evanston, Illinois, I was told some of the community's stories, one of which concerned a woman named Alice who had been attending church for some time and wanted to become a member but had never been baptized. In discussing the membership process with the minister, she expressed a desire for a baptism of total immersion rather than the typical Presbyterian style of sprinkling or dabbing.

A church building close by, of another religious tradition, had a baptistery – a pool into which the baptizer and the baptizee could wade – and they graciously allowed Alice and the minister to use the facility one evening. As her family and friends

gathered around the pool, the minister who was dressed in waders, led Alice, who was wearing a white baptismal robe, into the baptistery. Since the minister was clad in rubberized canvas, he couldn't tell that there had been a malfunction in the baptistery heater, and instead of the normal 80 degrees or so at which the pool would usually be maintained, the temperature had climbed to about 110.

As I said, baptism carries risks. Alice was in agony, but as she was devout and wanted to take the ceremony seriously, she said nothing. The service lasted several minutes, of course, and in the process Alice turned very red and stayed that way for several days afterward. Later, one of her friends observed that the language of the baptismal service talks about transformation and new life, but she guessed no one had told Alice that she would be changed into a lobster.

And then there was my friend Gordon, who had been reared without any church background, but got involved in a congregation when he went away to college in Nebraska. Total immersion was also the practice of that church, but they used a local river for their baptisms. My friend had put off joining the church, as he was a transient student and knew he would be settling somewhere else permanently. But he had grown so close to these people that it seemed only right to become baptized in that church. But here, too, there was risk. He had put the event off to the last possible moment, and he was graduating at the end of fall term. The problem with all this didn't sink in on him until they had all gathered at the river on a December morning, and a couple of burly deacons had to walk out into the river as an advance team to break the skim of ice that had formed on the surface overnight.

Once upon a time a colleague of mine, a minister in a Methodist church, had a baptism to perform on a particular Sunday, so on the day before he made sure everything was ready. In that church the practice was to use a large silver urn and bowl which was placed on the communion table and conduct the baptismal service from there. So on Saturday he filled the urn with water and set everything in place and went home. The next morning, with the congregation gathered and the parents and baby standing next to him, my friend tilted the urn of water into the bowl...and out flowed a dead bat.

This fall we have celebrated about half a dozen baptisms here. We are careful to make certain that the water we use is neither scalding hot nor bone-chilling cold and contains no bat, bird, bug, or any other loathsome impurities. Indeed, we want the water to be as close to baby body temperature as possible so as not to startle, awaken, or distress the baptizee. As for our inauguration into the Christian life, we do what we can to make it as tepid, innocuous, and nothing-out-of-the-ordinary as possible.

There's something very problematic about all this. Our manner of baptism contradicts the essential truth that is conveyed, that as the words of the service say very clearly there is a death being symbolized here and a death that is neither easy, pretty, inoffensive, or without meaning. Jesus' baptism was a bit more dramatic, we read, and even more dramatic for him and for all Jewish boys is the eighth-day-after-birth ritual known as *bris* or *brit millah*, what we call circumcision. Life all by itself is not easy. Life as a disciple of Christ takes life's rough road and makes it even rougher; for surely there are easier ways to live our lives than having to shoulder a cross and following him who was crucified on it. How ironic is it that we carefully contrive to make baptism as though

no inconvenience or discomfort at all in order to prepare for a life that is inconsiderably inconvenient to live!

Most of us were probably baptized by that philosophy: nothing startling, nothing dramatic, nothing wounding, chilling, or burning. Most of us had forgettable baptisms, and if it weren't for the certificate kept in our keepsake file we would have no lingering evidence of it. Or, as one theologian has put it, so many of us were inoculated with such a mild form of Christianity, we've developed an immunity to the real thing.

I'm not suggesting that Alice or Gordon are better people for having been respectively burned or frozen at their baptisms, nor that the rest of us are lesser folk for having been comfortably eased into the covenant. I am, however, raising the question that if baptism should define the Three P's for us – our past, our place, and our purpose – in life's challenges, cold or hot, how do we maintain faith with having been claimed and sealed by God and joined with Jesus Christ in his death and resurrection with no marks to show for it? Baptism has a dark side: it is not just a ritual cleansing, it is a ritual death and resurrection.

Robert Frost's poem *Fire and Ice* reads,
Some say the world will end in fire,
Some say in ice.
From what I've tasted of desire
I hold with those who favor fire.
But if I had to perish twice,
I think I know enough of hate
To know that for destruction ice
Is also great
And would suffice.

In the Book of Revelation, the concluding book in the New Testament, there is a letter from the Spirit to the church in Laodicea, which says, "I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth. (Rev. 3:15 - 16)"

Someone has observed that Christians are just like any other people, except they have been dampened, and that makes all the difference. But it only makes a difference if we remember what it's about, that it has defined our *Past*, which is the entire story of God's having called a people into being and establishing a covenant with them. It has defined our *Place*, that we are called into the church and into community with one another. It has defined our *Purpose*, that we are to take up our cross and follow him who is Immanuel, God-with-us.

Far more prominent in our minds, I suspect, is a past with shallow roots in family and geography, and is more conscious of a national past than a spiritual one. As for place, we know where we live and how we have carved out a nice living in that place, and it is private and secure. And purpose...most of us have a generalized understanding that we are all here to make our way, earn a living, and be kind. Not very exciting stuff, I'd say. Not much in it to stir the soul.

What difference does it make? What difference has it made to the world that we dampened people are in it? If we simply increase the general population of the

culturally washed, what good is that? If we are living as inoffensively as our sanitized baptisms, what good are we to God's purposes?

Our scripture readings on this second Sunday of Advent – readings about John the Baptist who preached and performed a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins – call upon us to remember our baptism and see if the memory burns, or if it chills, or if it was as if nothing at all has happened to us. Helen Keller was asked if there was anything worse than losing one's sight. She thought for a moment and then replied, "Yes, losing your vision." If our baptisms remain as long ago moments passed in a pleasant, innocuous, inoffensive, soulless ritual, we have lost the vision of what it's all about. The words of baptism do not say "have a good day! live long and prosper!" It says, "Take up your cross and follow me." When we lose the distinction between those trajectories, we lose sight of the one who lived his life in the manner of "the last shall be first and the first last."

Advent means *coming*. If we see nothing extraordinary coming in this Advent, maybe it's because we've lost the story of our past. Maybe we've forgotten that we are a people called together by the Lord of the Universe. Maybe we've lost the melody to the ancient songs that sing of promises made of a world to be redeemed.

"If sympathy for the world's wounds is not enlarged by our anguish, if love for those around us is not expanded, if gratitude for what is good does not flame up, if insight is not deepened, if aching for a new day is not intensified, if hope is weakened and faith diminished, if from the experience of death comes (understanding of) nothing good, then death has won..." (Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Lament for A Son*), and the promises have been forgotten, and we have abandoned our "place," and we have lost the ability to say anything of a future that is whole and wholly good.

We are the people of the God of long memory and deep promise. We cannot be the people who have forgotten this, who have lost the vision of a world redeemed and made holy, who have sought comfort over conviction and safety over self-sacrifice and ease over uneasiness that flares in compassion at injustice. "It's hard to remember," writes Stanley Hauerwas, "that Jesus did not come to make us safe, but rather to make us disciples, citizens of God's new age, a kingdom of surprise."

Remember your baptism and be grateful for receiving a mark of discomfort, of dis-ease, of a life more broad, more sacrificial, more troubling. In all of New Testament scripture, the word *Christian* appears only three times, but the word *disciple* appears 269 times. You were not baptized Christian, and certainly not Presbyterian or Catholic or Lutheran; you were baptized *disciple of Christ*. In the words of Reynolds Price, "Become, in your immediate world and however momentarily, your own reflection of a merciful Creator; behave in your suffering, as attentively and generously as you can to your immediate neighbors. Bury your *self* and leave only the odor of mercy behind you."

And then we will show the world the marks of our baptism.