

There are those events in life that hold special importance to us and there memory is imbedded in us. They may be births, marriages, deaths or baptisms. Perhaps it is the baptism of a child, a spouse, a friend or our own. We may not think of it often but there are those times when an event triggers our memory of that day and its significance in our lives. One of the themes around Epiphany is the renewal of our baptismal vows, our commitment to Christ and to the Church.

I have been reflecting on this passage in Matthew and the other Gospels this week. I have tried, without the help of commentaries or writings of others, to discern what this means to me and what it means to us here in Mountlake Terrace in 2008. Why was Jesus baptized by John in the Jordan? If baptism is the taking away of sins, why did the one who was without sin submit to it?

The “servant” of Isaiah now comes to John who is preaching and baptizing in the wilderness. John is calling Israel to repentance, back to faith. Baptism was seen as a cleansing and purifying action in Israel. New converts to Judaism were required to partake in a ritual cleansing ceremony. It was an indication of their acceptance of a new life in God and the leaving behind of the past, the old was washed away. They were cleansed and welcomed into the new community of faith. John, however, was using it as a re-dedication ritual. He was challenging the idea that all one had to be was “born” a Jew and faith was automatically present. There is more to faith than being born into a family or nation. Faith must be lived out and shared.

It reminds me of a “revival” meeting atmosphere. How many of you remember revival or camp meetings? These were local evangelistic campaigns designed to bring people into the Kingdom. An oversimplification is that the evangelist told people how bad they were, how much they needed a Savior and how Jesus was the answer. Some evangelists delighted in describing Hell and what an eternity would be like there – scaring people into the acceptance. (After some sermons you believed in it!) Then you sang 100 verses of *Just As I Am* until someone came forward and made the evening a success. John is holding a revival meeting in the desert.

Suddenly Jesus is standing before John. He is next line for baptism. John has been teaching about the *lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world* and this lamb now stands before him. John immediately recognizes Jesus and asks that their roles be reversed. It is Jesus who should be baptizing John. The perfect now stands before imperfection. Jesus quietly (in my mind) says to John, “It is okay as it now stands. For now, this is how it is to be.” John baptizes Jesus in the Jordan and as he comes up from the water a dove descends and God thunders. I like image of thunder – God does not whisper here, the heavens shake as God speaks. You only hear gentle thunder if you are a long way from the scene – God is here – the voice thunders from heaven – “This is my son!”

Jesus is affirmed by dove and the voice from heaven. His baptism is, for me, his affirmation that he has now chosen the road to the cross. It is not to cleanse him from sin or even to provide for us an example (it may well be) but it is Jesus' affirmation of God's call on his life and his decision to abide by that call.

I got a frantic telephone call one day. It was from a member of the church that I had not met. She wanted me to come and baptize her grandson right now! There could be no delay. After a little questioning I discovered that her grandson was 19 and was heading off for a summer in Europe. She was concerned that should something happen to him in Europe and he die, he would go straight to hell because he had never been baptized. I asked if I could speak with him and did. He had no desire to be baptized. He was willing to go through with it "Only to shut grandmother up!" He had no real faith. He was in no way interested in the Church, in Christ or his eternal future. I said no. I am not sure if they ever found anyone willing to baptize him and I still have not met the grandmother. For her baptism was some magic ritual that guaranteed entrance into heaven.

In many faith traditions today parents make such decisions for their children. It is an affirmation by the parents in hopes that someday the child will affirm or confirm the decision the parents have made. And, even the confirmation of the decision is often just another step without any real significance or decision in the life of the person. It is what one does.

For Jesus, this act of baptism is his affirmation of the decision he has made: the cross. He has consciously decided to fulfill the role of Isaiah's servant. He could say "no". After living among us for 30 or so years he could have decided that we were not worth the pain and suffering that lay before him. His baptism was the affirmation to the world of God's hold on his life. In the words of Paul, "*And being found in appearance as man, he humbled himself and become obedient to death—even death on the cross*" (Phil. 2:8).

Our baptism, too, was a public affirmation of our decision to follow Christ. As an adult we became conscious of the decision that was made. It was/is a public affirmation of God's call on our lives and our accepting that call.

I was meeting with a young couple who wanted to become members of the church and we wanted to be baptized. She asked if the baptism could be private. My initial reaction was no. Baptism is a public expression of our accepting Christ. As we talked I discovered she had a fear of water. Her fear was so great she could not even shower. It was not that she did not want people there but she was afraid that she might "loose it" and did not want people witnessing that. It may take a couple of hours for her to get up the courage to go into the water she said. I talked it over with the Diaconate and we agreed to do it privately with only myself, her husband and two deacons present.

On the appointed day we gathered at a private beach. I took her husband into the water and he was baptized. The two deacons (one male and one female) and her husband slowly led her into the water. There she was baptized.

As we were walking back to the beach she turned and asked if we could do it again so everyone could see! Now, this did not take away her fear of water. She still has it... but for a moment, her decision to follow Christ and make a public affirmation of that Jesus was the higher priority. It was an affirmation of her decision.

If you visit the Cathedral of Our Lady of Angels in Los Angeles you will note a large baptistery, a baptistery large enough for several adults to be immersed at the same time. If memory serves me it has four sets of steps leading down to the water. The reason, many who are now coming to faith are requesting baptism by immersion. They have read of Jesus' baptism and see the significance in the act. In fact, I was talking to one priest who said the baptistery is causing some theological problems. Some who were baptized as infants now want to be re-baptized! They too, want a public affirmation of God's call on their lives. We have decided to follow Christ and this is a symbol of our decision, a public affirmation of our calling.

It is more than water. It is new life, new hope, new direction. It is the public affirmation of God's hand and call on our lives. It is Jesus' visual statement to the world of his willingness to follow the path for which he came. As I said earlier, he could have said "no". He could have walked away from the journey before him. By coming to John and the Jordan Jesus is affirming the path he has chosen, to be the servant spoken of by the prophet Isaiah. He has chosen to love as God loves by accepting the role for which he came.

*I, the Lord, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant people and a light for the Gentiles, to open the eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.*

*I am the Lord: that is my name! I will not give my glory to another or my praise to idols. See, the former things have taken place, and new things I declare; before they spring into being I announce them to you." (Is. 42:6-9 NIV)*

Jesus is telling us: I am announcing it to you. The new time of God is here!