

A BAPTISM-SHAPED LIFE

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Scripture: Luke 3:21-11, Luke 4:10-21; Acts 2:37-47. The scripture readings may be found at the end of the sermon.

This is a written transcription of the video message Jana Reister offered on Sunday, October 11, 2020. The full video can be found at knox.org/sundayoctober11

With every baptism we celebrate as a church, we have an opportunity to remember our own baptisms. Those of us baptized as infants or very young may not remember our actual baptism, of course. But we are called to remember that the water of baptism is a sign of our being forgiven and renewed and claimed as God's own beloved children. We remember the baptismal vows taken at each baptism, to renounce sin and evil, to be faithful disciples of Jesus Christ, seeking to follow the Way of Christ and to share God's love in all we say and do.

Whether we are baptized as infants, children, or adults, whether we are baptized by immersion in a bathtub or river, or with a few sprinkles of water, what really matters about baptism is what happens *after* baptism. We are called to live out our baptism, to live a baptism-shaped life. What does that "shape" look like?

In her commentary on Luke's version of Jesus' baptism, the Rev. Dr. Barbara Lundblad points out that there is no mention of the actual moment of Jesus' baptism, no mention of water at all. About those details Luke doesn't seem interested. But what Luke *is* interested in telling us about is what happened next, about the shape Jesus' life took after the baptismal water had dried (Day1@75 broadcast, 1/7/07).

Luke 3:21 says, "...when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying,..." Here we are shown the first characteristic of a baptism-shaped life: prayer. Jesus centered his life in prayer, in his relationship with God. Throughout his life, he was ever going off to quiet places to pray - to pray for wisdom, strength and

guidance for his path, to pray for his disciples, for those he healed, for all of God's children entrusted to him. He prayed to God with thanksgiving and praise. While he was praying his post-baptism prayers, Jesus received the gift of the Holy Spirit which descended upon him in the shape of a dove accompanied by the word of God: "You are my son, whom I dearly love, with you I am well-pleased." Jesus was now empowered by the Spirit for his earthly ministry.

Jesus' first act of his public ministry reveals something more about a baptism-shaped life. We're told he traveled to his hometown of Nazareth and entered the synagogue on the sabbath to pray. And then, being handed the scriptures, Jesus unrolled the scroll and read a passage from Isaiah, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Along with a prayer-centered life, another characteristic of a baptism-shaped life is to actively help realize God's Beloved Community here on earth by studying God's word and acting upon it, doing acts of justice, healing, liberating and relieving the burdens of the poor, the enslaved, the blind and oppressed.

In Luke's second book, the Acts of the Apostles, the story of the first followers of Christ, the first church, reveals again that a baptism-shaped life is a life shaped by prayer. Our reading from Acts 2 describes the reactions of the crowd to what happened at the festival of Pentecost. The Jesus-followers were prayerfully gathered and suddenly they received a "baptism" with the Holy Spirit, which Jesus promised they would. Suddenly, a fierce wind blew, and tongues of fire appeared above the apostles' heads and the Holy Spirit enabled them to speak in the unknown languages of the other nationalities present there in Jerusalem. A miraculous display. Those who witnessed were amazed and astonished and, wanting to be a part of this wonder, they asked the disciples what they should do. Peter replied, "Repent, believe the Good News of Jesus Christ, receive forgiveness and the gift of the Holy Spirit." They did, and about 3000 people were baptized that day.

What was the first thing those newly baptized believers did? They prayed. Their baptism-shaped life was marked by prayer. And, just as Jesus was devoted to the Word of God in the scriptures, they too devoted themselves to the Word of God and the apostles' teachings, and they broke bread together often, generously sharing all their possessions with one another, with any who had a need, while having the goodwill for all and praising God for all things.

Lest we think it was simple for the first Jesus followers to choose to live a baptism-shaped life, let's recall a few verses back, when Peter exhorted the amazed and astonished crowd saying, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation."

As citizens of the world, our faith ancestors faced daily choices between good and evil, that which leads closer to God and that which leads away from God, that which leads to growing in faith hope and love and that which leads to the diminishment of faith hope and love. From the beginning of time this has been true - there is righteous living, there is corrupt living, with corruption often disguised as good, easier, more appealing. We live with the same tension.

The kind of living demonstrated by Jesus and the apostles will lead to a baptism-shaped life. The kind of living the world promotes likely won't because it's not meant to. Professor of theology Dean Brackley describes the shape of the world as a ladder - hierarchical, consumerist, capitalistic, upward mobility based. This is not to say that this way of life is by nature corrupt, but it can easily lead us away from God – to a diminishment of faith, hope and love.

In his book, *The Call to Discernment in Troubled Times*, Brackley describes what ladder-shaped living looks like. Our hierarchical society, he says, is structured like rungs on a ladder. "Some people are [believed to be] more important than others. It is not just that some perform more important functions than others, or that some exercise authority. Rather, some are [considered] more human than others, - more valuable as persons." This is what the world of capitalism tells us, sells us, and is dependent upon for its survival. (p.94). As people living in this ladder-shaped world, we live as if hemmed in by parallel sticks of wood, our hands on one rung of the ladder above, our feet on another below. We hope the people above us don't step on our knuckles as we cling tightly to our rung, trying not to fall off. We feel we need to keep climbing no matter the cost, and as we do we step on the hands of those below us. But we keep climbing, anxious about losing our spot, fearful that those below may pass us and take our share of whatever it is we are climbing after.

Are we going to live a ladder-shaped life or a baptism-shaped life?

"We are insecure by constitution," Brackley writes, and our ladder-shaped world "aggravates our fear and insecurity. We worry about crime, environmental disaster, [the effects of structural racism, and COVID-19.]; whether rich, poor, or in between we are all subject to the [vagaries] of [financial] markets. Capitalism [serves] to weaken traditional bonds, so that we also feel more alone than our forebears did in stable rural communities and tight-knit neighborhoods. Individualism reigns...but without wider social support, both individuals and families sink into crisis" (p. 91,92).

We all want a sense of security, In the US, we're told that ladder-shaped living will give us that. If we keep climbing, we're promised, we'll get the degree, the high paying job, a home of our own, a car, and more and better of everything and at last, one day, a sense of security. Along with money and possessions, we're told guns can grant us additional security. In these days of heightened anxiety due to the pandemic and racial injustice, gun sales in the US have

exploded. *This past spring, an estimated 3 million more guns were purchased than the estimated “normal” amount. But do people feel more secure?

Even if we are climbing higher up the world’s ladder, loneliness and insecurity can haunt us. In a ladder-shaped life, we don’t journey side by side, but single file, rarely making eye contact with other above or below. It is fear-driven and stressful. In a baptism-shaped life, we are not climbing but are grounded on the earth, traveling side by side with others, and because we are in prayer, we remain close to God and discover more each day about the faithfulness of God to provide for us. No longer fearing for our security, we become aware of others and their needs and how we can help them. We live in solidarity with one another. We live in the freedom for which God created us.

Christian theologian and mystic St. Teresa of Avila demonstrated the freedom of a baptism-shaped life. She was dedicated to a life of contemplation and action:

Contemplation: Searching and finding God in all things, giving thanks for God’s gifts and for sustaining us in all things.

Action: Out of gratitude to God, carrying out works of justice mercy, kindness; seeking the welfare of the City – the Common Good - in every word and deed.

In her prayer-steeped life, St. Teresa grew ever closer to God and was sustained by the truth that God lives within us and that nothing will ever separate us from the love of God in Christ. James Finely, in the podcast *Turning to the Mystics*, says that Teresa was then free to ask herself, “How [am I to live, then], here with all these people that God is utterly in love with, just as Jesus walked the streets, mountainsides, and valleys with God’s ordinary people whom God so loved?” On her spiritual journey, Teresa at last came to the one question remaining for her baptism-shaped life, “How can I be helpful?”

As God’s own, we are heirs to the promised gift of the Holy Spirit just as those first disciples in that first church we learn about in Acts. Baptized by the Spirit, God empowers us to live a Jesus-shaped life – doing justice, loving kindness, walking humbly and asking each day, “How can I be helpful?”

In the name of God our True Love, of Christ our Salvation, and of the Holy Spirit our Guide and Friend, may it be so.

*<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2020/07/13/three-million-more-guns-the-spring-2020-spike-in-firearm-sales/>

NEW REVISED STANDARD VERSION

²¹ Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, ²² and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved;^[a] with you I am well pleased.”

LUKE 4:10-21

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¹⁰ for it is written,

‘He will command his angels concerning you,
to protect you,’

¹¹ and

‘On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’”

¹² Jesus answered him, “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” ¹³ When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

¹⁴ Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. ¹⁵ He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

¹⁶ When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷ and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

¹⁸ “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

²⁰ And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹ Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

NEW REVISED STANDARD VERSION

³⁷ Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, “Brothers,^[a] what should we do?” ³⁸ Peter said to them, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹ For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.” ⁴⁰ And he testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.” ⁴¹ So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. ⁴² They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

⁴³ Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. ⁴⁴ All who believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵ they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds^[b] to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶ Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home^[c] and ate their food with glad and generous^[d] hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.