

Holy Baptism: Sacred Promises to Be Christ's Own Forever
A Sermon by The Rev. Craig Lemming, Associate Rector
St. John the Evangelist Episcopal Church, Saint Paul, MN
Sunday, January 13, 2019 – The Feast of the Baptism of Our Lord

In the name of the Creator, the Christ, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.



A blessed Feast of the Baptism of Our Lord to each of you! In a few moments, we will join thousands of Christians around the world in reaffirming our Baptismal Covenant: sacred promises that define who we are. Our identity as Christians is inextricably bound up in the spoken words of our promises: sacred promises we will make to God, to each other, and to ourselves. Friedrich Nietzsche proved that our human conscience – which governs how we take moral responsibility, make

moral choices, and live moral lives – exists because of our uniquely human ability to make promises, to remember our promises, and to keep our promises.¹

Before the Baptismal Covenant, we'll delve into the Gospel account of the Baptism of Our Lord in three ways. We will explore former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams' clear, accessible, and powerful insights about Baptism; I will share an outrageous personal story – this time, a story involving eels (yes, eels!); and some of you know how utterly obsessed I am with Eastern Orthodox Icons, so we will also read the Icon of the Baptism of Our Lord which is so pregnant with meaning. You will find a small icon of the Baptism of Our Lord in your service bulletin or you will have received one from our ushers when you arrived. Pray that the words of my mouth and meditations of all our hearts will prepare us to make the sacred promises of our Baptismal Covenant again, remember them, and keep them.

In my last year at Seminary I had the joy of completing an independent study of Eastern Orthodox Iconography with Dr. Wilson Yates. I was mad enough to read all the patristic treatises of St. John of Damascus and St. Theodore the Studite; to study every lusciously color-drenched iconography book I could get my

¹ <http://fs2.american.edu/dfagel/www/genealogy2.htm>

hands on; and I loved visiting Orthodox Churches in the Twin Cities metro where I could stand in silence and gaze at the icons for hours, receiving the Holy Word of God preached in the icons' visual language of symbol, gesture, and intoxicatingly rich color. In his book *Doors of Perception: icons and their spiritual significance*, Anglican Priest John Baggley writes that the icon of the Baptism of Our Lord both

celebrates the manifestation of Christ and the beginning of his public ministry, and also the revelation of the Holy Trinity through the voice of the Father and the descent of the Holy Spirit on the Incarnate Son who enters the waters of the Jordan. In this icon Christ stands stripped naked in the waters of the Jordan; the dark cave shape in the center of the icon emphasizes the humility of the one who empties himself (Phil 2.7) to take the form of a servant and experience death and burial.²

Let's pause here in our reading of the icon for a brief detour into my outrageous personal story, which connects the symbolism of Christ's full immersion in the foreboding rapids of the river Jordan with our human experience of chaos and terror. Last summer, at the invitation of the Bishop's missionaries, I served as the Chaplain for young adult leaders at the Episcopal Youth Quest Camp in Northern Minnesota. Needing to deepen my ministry experiences with youth, I accepted. Now, as you all know, your Associate Rector is the furthest thing from being an outdoorsman. I am an urbanite, and the idea of placing my body in the world of wild animals, fish, birds, mosquitos, and "every creeping thing that creeps upon

² John Baggley, *Doors of Perception – icons and their significance*, (London & Oxford, UK: Mowbray, 1987), 124.

the earth,” not to mention sleeping in log cabins, then in tents – for me, all of that is outrageous! I love and respect the Minnesotan people who enjoy that “Book of Genesis” experience with God, so I said, “Lord, even though this is not my culture and I can’t be involved; I will do this outrageous work for Jesus.” So, I went.

Now all the campers – some of whom are confirmands here at St. John’s – went for a daily afternoon swim. Persuaded by the joy everyone else was having in the lake, I called deep on my courage, put on my swimming costume, and I jumped into the lake. But then my feet felt the sand, pebbles, and slimy water plants; the water was was murky and muddy and little fish were trying to nibble on me. Then one of our youth, seeing my uneasiness, said, “Rev. Craig, be careful! There might be eels in the water!” He said, “eels,” and an instantaneous release of adrenaline coursed through my veins, transforming me into Michael Phelps, and I swam for my life to the floating dock. More terrifying than swimming in the lake was the day we went whitewater rafting on the St. Louis River. I am still haunted by the overwhelming terror of the river’s massive torrents carrying our puny inflated river raft into the midst of rapids – six of them! – where the mighty river crashes into sharp, jagged rocks and violently plunges you into severely steep cascades. In that nightmarish terror, God’s Word, proclaimed by the

Prophet Isaiah in today's Old Testament Lesson became very real and held me secure:

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you... Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you... Do not fear, for I am with you.³

Let's go back to reading the icon of the Baptism of Our Lord. The life-threatening chaos of existence and the terrifying, hidden truths about ourselves that the shadow side of our psyche reveals,⁴ is symbolized by the river. You will note at the bottom of the icon that one of those two little allegories of the river and the sea is actually riding upon a hideous-looking eel! See! My fear of eels may be irrational but there it is in the Orthodox icon – just saying. Now, when we look more closely at the icon we notice, with John Baggley, that, **“with his right hand Christ blesses the waters of the Jordan and sanctifies them by his immersion in them so that the waters of Baptism become for the Church the means of a new birth into the life of Christ.”**⁵ Christ blesses the chaos, terror, and fear you and I experience in this oftentimes overwhelming river we call Existence.

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Isaiah 43:2 and Isaiah 43:4.

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Robert A. Johnson, *Owning Your Own Shadow: Understanding the Dark Side of the Psyche* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993).

5

Baggley, 124.

Christ is immersed in our fully human reality, and Christ is not overwhelmed by the violent rapids of the river; Christ blesses that very real chaos. Rowan Williams writes,

the gathering of baptized people is therefore not a convocation of those who are privileged, elite and separate, but of those who have accepted what it means to be in the heart of a needy, contaminated, messy world. To put it another way, you don't go down into the waters of the Jordan without stirring up a great deal of mud! When we are brought to be where Jesus is in baptism, we let our defenses down so as to be where he is, in the depths of human chaos. And that means letting our defenses down before God. Openness to the Spirit comes as we go with Jesus to take this risk of love and solidarity... That is surely one of the most extraordinary mysteries of being Christian. We are in the middle of two things that seem quite contradictory: in the middle of the heart of God, the ecstatic joy of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit; and in the middle of a world of threat, suffering, sin, and pain.⁶

Buried with Christ in Baptism, we are also raised with Christ to new and unending life in Him.⁷ We are graciously accepted as living members of the Body of Christ who is fully immersed in and has blessed the river of threats, suffering, and chaos of human existence. By God's love and grace in Christ incarnate, we are restored to the image of the Holy Trinity which is the eternal joy of right relationship. Applying the wisdom of Nikolai Berdyaev,⁸ our shadowy

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Rowan Williams, *Being Christian: Baptism, Bible, Eucharist, Prayer* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Erdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 6-7.

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Colossians 2:12.

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subconscious (symbolized by the river), our creative consciousness (symbolized by the fully immersed Christ whose right hand blesses the waters), and our super-consciousness (symbolized by the Holy Spirit breaking in as a dove); all three are integrated, made whole and Holy in Christ Jesus. In a world disgraced by the broken promises of the morally bankrupt, we as Christians respond to threats, suffering, sin, and pain by keeping the sacred promises of our Baptismal Covenant. We pray, we administer and partake in the Sacraments, we resist evil, we repent when we sin, we proclaim the Good News of God in Christ, we seek and serve Christ in all persons, we love our neighbors as ourselves, we strive for justice and peace among all people, and we respect the dignity of every human being. We have been sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ's own forever. This is why we make, remember, and keep our sacred promises again on this High Holy Feast Day: because *we* are God's children; *we* are beloved; and with *us*, God is well pleased.⁹ Amen.

Nicolas Berdyaev, *The Destiny of Man*, (San Rafael, CA: Semantron Press, 2009), 39; 67-79.

⁹

Luke 3:22.