

“Once Is Always Enough”

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Luke 3:15-17, 21-22 = Baptism of Jesus

On arrival in Jakarta to begin ministry in Indonesia, the whole family was hopelessly jetlagged. That very first Sunday we were invited to worship in a large downtown congregation not far from our guesthouse. 12 time zones away pretty much wrecks the old sleep cycles ~ sleeping all day and up most of the night. Yet even though quite bleary-eyed and near narcoleptic weary, nevertheless I remember that worship service vividly ~ on account of the baptism.



Or I should say “baptisms” plural, of which I lost count at well beyond sixty, all adults. Not one complaint about the long length of the service, just joy to welcome the newly baptized.



Each baptizee came forward, dressed all in white and knelt down. The pastor she would take great double handfuls of water from a giant basin beside the kneeler and then inundate each bowed head. Three times for the Father, Son and Holy Spirit ~ water cascading down onto the shoulders. Each would kneel down in humility and rise up in new life, drenched. An elder was close by to hand each a large white towel.

If you are not already impressed by the power and magnitude of the event, the basin of water needed to be refilled time and time again. Attendants were constantly scurrying back and forth with great pitchers of water and replenishing the rapidly disappearing stacks of towels.



While it was technically baptism by so-called “sprinkling,” it felt to be much more towards the immersion end of the scale.

It was beyond memorable. I have experienced similar services throughout Indonesia. Yet I have never experienced in our own country anything like it ~

nothing like the incredible rejoicing at becoming a follower of Jesus that I saw there.

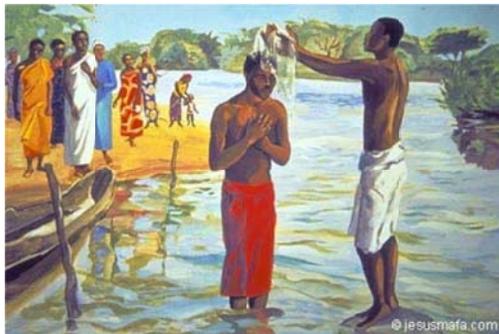
As Luke paints it, it was a scene much like that. Luke and all the Gospel writers tell us Jesus' earthly ministry began when Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan. Some say only John saw the descending dove. Luke implies all persons, everybody gathered there, saw it. The Holy Spirit appeared as a dove and the very voice of God proclaimed:



“You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

Remember Jesus' baptism in the Jordan, when you contemplate your own baptism, wherever in the past or future. A once-in-a-lifetime event for Jesus, a once-in-a-lifetime event for each of us as well.

We believe and we practice the belief that baptism is a once-and-for-all event. Not all Christian denominations hold this same view of baptism.



The Baptist Church got its name shortened from Anabaptist which means 'to baptize again.' The Anabaptists felt and practiced that baptism of infants and children was invalid ~ that infants should be re-baptized as adults on their own commitment, a personal decision.

There is truth in this. Baptism based on our own decision to follow Jesus is more salient, more emotionally authentic and more spiritually faithful ~ a stronger commitment than one made on our behalf by others.



On the other hand, the truth in infant baptism is that there is no way that an infant has done something, anything deserving of God's wrath or forgiveness. Infant baptism is not based on the child having faith. Rather infant baptism shows forth God's unconditional love from birth and throughout our lives. Grace unearned; grace undeserved; grace abounding! Infant baptism shows dramatically that it is not we who choose God, but God who chooses us.

But there are limits. Early in my ministerial service, I had the experience of attending an Assembly of God revival in Irving, TX with a friend, our church organist. She invited me to the revival, and I succeeded in feigning enthusiasm so skillfully that I ended up having to go.

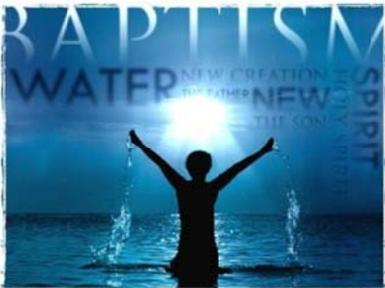


At the revival, there were a number of things which would make a young Presbyterian preacher uncomfortable. It was noisy. It was emotional, and Lord knows we don't allow that in Presbyterian worship. Some spoke in tongues. Some prophesied right in the middle of the service. Miracles were performed and extolled.

Near me set a woman, well-dressed, immaculately coiffured. She was visibly distraught, openly weeping. Toward the end of the service the worship leader invited anyone who had decided to follow Jesus to come forward and be baptized. This well-dressed but distraught woman was the first to go forward, and in short order we saw her and others being fully immersed.

I mentioned this to my organist and she volunteered: "Oh her, this is about the 10th time she has been baptized. Every time there is a setback in her life, she wants to be baptized again."

Now I am not at all sure this is the norm in the Assemblies of God, but the norm for mainline Protestants is once is enough for baptism. That goes for baptism by pouring over infants or children or adults, or adults only by total immersion and everything in between.



After all, in baptism we see how great God is. Whether as infant or adult, whether by pouring or immersion, we celebrate what God does ~ not what we do.

It is less about what God can do for us, and more what we can do in service. It not about us choosing God, but about God calling us.

For that distraught woman in Texas, there must have been a hole in her soul that she thought another baptism could fill. This might be a consequence of the Assemblies of God deemphasizing the Sacrament of Communion, the sacrament intended to sustain us in the life of



faith. They like Baptists only have the one Sacrament of Baptism, representing the first, baby step in the life of faith.

How can she fill the need for sustenance on the path? It really isn't possible to relive that special first moment, to feel that feeling again, to relive that moment over and over again, as much as we might desire it.

She may have gotten the cause and effect reversed. Baptism is a consequence of an overwhelming experience of the living God, not the cause as she seems mistakenly to understand it. You can't go back. You can't go home again. You cannot repeat it with the same effect. Once is enough. Once is all we really get for the full experience, the full effect.

We don't have to be baptized again. We can remember our own baptism as I encourage you to do today, rather than repeat it. Even those of us baptized as infants ~ we remember what we were told by pastors and parents and a great cloud of witnesses, that we were baptized in water. Promises were made to raise us in the nurture of God with the hope that when we came of age, we would "confirm" the baptism vows taken on our behalf.



For those of us who have not yet experienced baptism, we are not left out. Today the yet-to-be-baptized know along with everyone else that we all, baptized or unbaptized, have been called and consecrated children of God since even before birth, called while still in our mother's womb.

For those who have been baptized by total immersion in God's waters of life, we remember how special it made us feel.



All of us remember how special we are that God has called us. Remembering or anticipating that wondrous moment, we rededicate ourselves to being disciples. We

redouble our efforts for God's realm. We hear the ancient words: "Remember you are baptized, and be thankful."

We hear once-again as for the very first time, once is never enough to hear: "Remember you are a child of God. And be thankful."

