

## Embodied Stories: Baptism

Luke 3:15-21

Brent Newberry

January 13, 2019

Baptism of Jesus Sunday

A Baptist minister, preaching in a Baptist church, preaching about baptism, you'd think we'd do it more often than we do. Of course, we stick relatively closely to a lectionary that invites ecumenism even if it's distinctly non-Baptist. Add to this the varied faith backgrounds and traditions alive within your hearts and families, and well, talking about baptism can quickly become a bit slippery.

The first thing most people want to know, is why was Jesus baptized? Especially if John the Baptist--who was not the first Baptist, by the way--is preaching about repentance, and we've been taught by creeds and tradition and the Scriptures that Jesus was without sin—then why was Jesus baptized?

It's worth reminding ourselves that baptism in the Jewish tradition existed, if by another name perhaps, but the practice was a cleansing ritual. So, while not salvific, the imagery of emerging from being submerged--which the literal meaning of the Greek word for baptism is "to immerse"--was one that would provide profound and lasting meaning, something physical with their bodies that would help them to remember, maybe as often as they bathed, because we know they sure weren't using adjustable showerheads back then. Each bath could remind people of their baptism, as it were.

Similarly, Jesus, while it's not necessary for us to think of him as repenting from sin--

though again, the literal meaning of the word repent in Greek is helpful to note, it actually means "to change one's mind," so in theory Jesus could have been heeding John's call to repentance as a means of changing his mind about what he might or might not have wanted to do with his life, we can relate to that can't we?--We can recognize in Jesus' baptism a model, a gesture, a symbol of his being clean before God. For if he is to be the Chosen One for the people, the Christ, then this is Luke showing off Jesus' credentials. Immediately after this moment, Luke lists off Jesus' genealogy, another piece of this curriculum vitae of Messiahship as it were. Clean hands and good genes, I suppose.

But let's move from Jesus to us. Baptists believe strongly in freedom; freedom of religion, freedom of the soul, freedom of the church, freedom to interpret the bible, freedom of the pulpit, freedom of the pew, etc. Indeed, this libertarian impulse means there are very few things that Baptists can agree on, but one of them is baptism.

If those of you from other faith traditions can hang with me for minute, Baptists have traditionally believed in something called "believer's baptism." It's borne out of various Scriptures, not the least of which when Jesus is about to ascend to into heaven, and he tells the disciples to keep making more disciples, teaching them what he has taught them, and baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The implication is that those who are being taught are consciously understanding the

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words, and they make a decided shift in their lives to follow the Way of Jesus. They believe, and they are baptized. From this, Baptists in the past, argued that these new disciples had to have been of a certain age and not infants, for infants couldn't make such a decision on their own consciously. And this is where we get the phrase, "believer's baptism."

Now, let me interject here, that even if most Baptists have united around a practice of baptism that is by immersion--both because Jesus was immersed and the literal meaning of the Greek word--it is not a universal practice to reject the baptisms of others or their faith traditions. While many Baptist churches will require a person wanting to join their church to be "truly baptized" or "re-baptized" not all Baptist churches do this. We are one of those Baptist churches who find the practice of "re-baptizing" someone to be arrogant and insulting. It is not our way. Since the 1920s, we have welcomed new members, whatever their faith tradition, by baptism or profession of faith alone--all of this being churchy lingo for: if you've been baptized before as an infant or otherwise, then you are baptized in the eyes of God, and in our eyes too.

This is our way of welcoming and including people into our community of faith, even as our practice as a congregation is to fully immerse and baptize people who are old enough to understand what their baptism means to them.

Because like I said before, it is a physical experience, not just something for the head or heart, but for the entire body, something that marks not just one moment, but unlocks a lifetime of them, by providing us reminders whenever we see a baptism, or touch water, go for a swim or take a bath—that we have been born anew in the life of Christ, buried with Christ in baptism, and raised to walk in the newness of life.

I remember my own baptism, New Year's Day in 1995, and even then, as a young teenager, I didn't fully recognize what I was doing.

I remember in seminary, in a class called Life and Work of the Pastor, one of the two classes that helped me realize I was called to be a Senior Pastor, and the professor told us we were going to practice baptizing each other in the Baylor health center pool because he didn't want our first baptism to go like his. That moment when he went to put his hand on the chest of the person, but had forgotten to tell her to cross her arms, so instead of placing his hand directly on her chest, he hesitated, and facepalmed her into the water instead.

I remember when my friend Randall baptized me in that pool with a water slide in the background, his words resonating, the water washing over me, as if this was the time I was truly baptized.

I remember baptizing my first congregant, one of the youth back in Dallas, and how it reminded me of my own. But how even

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more profoundly, I realized that every baptism, each of these stories of yours and mine, are connected within a two-thousand-year history, each baptism one of billions that line those millennia. Each of these significant markers in someone's life, all somehow comprising parts of this greater life of Christianity and humanity, each one an individual story, within lives filled with stories, all of which are interwoven in this greater story of God's.

### HERO

Which can seem a bit overwhelming or even confusing to wrap our minds around. It reminds me of a novel I've been reading, all of these stories interwoven within one another and a larger story.

It's a graphic novel called "A Hundred Nights of Hero," written by Isabel Greenberg. If you remember "A Thousand and One Nights," you'll understand the framework of this new novel. It's a similar model of storytelling, a broader story that tells stories within it, but this version is described as a "feminist fairy-tale...wondrously intricate...and a witty attack on the patriarchy."<sup>1</sup>

Two women, one named Hero from which the title gets its name, who need to tell a story for their love to survive. So, she tells a story to the enemy that continues each night, for a hundred nights. And her story has a framework from which other stories are borne, connected to one another and

on and on. Even the story of Hero telling these stories is a story within a bigger story told by two other people, of whom theirs is a part of the greater story.

It's wickedly fun. In both the traditional and New England sense of the word.

I was drawn into the story itself, but as a person who enjoys writing, I was enthralled by this storytelling mechanism. And I couldn't help thinking about how this is like life. So much is interconnected. You drive by a home with the shades drawn, and you see a family gathering for Thanksgiving dinner. Each of them a person with a lifetime of stories and memories like you, just like the people on TV or on the corner or in the shelter or the White House or house next door to us. Everyone's life is a story of full of stories. All of these lives of stories are part of one larger story.

God's story is unfolding like Time, begun at the moment of Creation, however it happened, and unfurling ever since. And it seems like that should instill both humility and significance. That we are but a small piece amongst myriad others, yet we are so important that God would include us in the story at all, but more than that, that God would care about each of us individually, with all of our circumstances and concerns. Or better, God cares about each one of our

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.penguin.co.uk/books/1101472/the-one-hundred-nights-of-hero/9780224101950.html>

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individual stories that comprise our life-story.

And that beautifully confounding truth is what we'll look at this year together. A year-long theme about Story. How we're a part of God's story, and what that means for us as a church, as a community, as individuals.

And within that year-long theme of Story is a set of other themes, seasons like Epiphany, when we will be looking at Embodied Stories. Stories that we take on, that we flesh out, that we tell with physicality. One of the characters in *A Hundred Nights of Hero* reminds Hero that "humans are storytellers." Our lives aren't told in the passive voice; we tell our stories by how we live.

Baptism is that kind of story. One that's connected and embodied, that's active and physical, that represents what we believe about who we are, or what others believe about who we are and who we will one day become and what we will one day believe.

Our baptism is the locus of all of those interconnected stories and lives of the past and present, coming together in Christ's story; it is in that moment when we are reminded of the expansive grace and goodness of God, when, like it was with Christ, the water somehow peels back a layer of earth to reveal heaven behind it, to expose the world as God sees it, and dreams it, and intends it to be.

It's that moment when we embody the active love of God in our lives, physically experiencing that which is imprinted on our hearts.

One of Hero's characters explains why she passes on her stories that are interwoven inside of Hero's story. Because, she says, we live in places that "are sorely in need of good stories."

And the Baptism of Jesus, a story within Luke's story, within the biblical story, within God's story, is one where a layer of earth is peeled back to reveal a glimpse of heaven, and we hear the words of God the Parent saying, "This is my Son, my beloved. In him I am well pleased."

And those are the words God speaks over you, at your baptism and always. "You are my daughter, my son, my child, my beloved. In you I am well pleased."

Words we would do well to remember. A good story we would do well to embody. Don't stop remembering that story. Don't stop telling it.

We live in a world that is sorely in need of good stories.

Amen.