

Disrupting Grace

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church
January 12, 2020, Baptism of Jesus Sunday
by Rev. Dave Le Grand

So, I'm confident that we all know something about Baptism. It involves water – either splashing babies, young people or adults or immersing them in water.

My hunch is that most of you know something about the symbolism of Baptism: the immersing of the individual (or sprinkling water on them) is a metaphor for transformation – death of old ways and the birth of new ways of being.

There is rich theology at the heart the story of Jesus' baptism. One commentary¹ on Matthew's version of Jesus' baptism points out the striking parallel between this Christian story and the Hebrew Scripture in the book of Genesis.

just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him...²

Now figuratively turn in your Bibles back to the open chapter of Genesis...

Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.³

Sit with the thought of that for a moment: our foundational Creation story, Jews and Christians, nothingness ... the darkness in its creative potential, but it isn't nothingness – the Spirit of God hovering over water. And that moment when Jesus is baptized, there is the Christian story invoking the primal power of Spirit hovering over the water. The theological word for these and any of our holy moments when something of God's nature is witnessed by God's children – that holy revealing is called Theophany.

One Bible Scholar suggests that theophanies in the Hebrew Scriptures "... often [happened] at significant natural locations: mountains, springs, rivers."⁴ An interesting observation, and very true as we recall Moses receiving the commandments on the mountaintop, and Jacob's famous dream of wrestling with the mysterious angel at the riverside. In our modern context, we might assume that our friends and family will not have many theophanies when their eyes are glued to their cell phones!

There is great power in that moment of Baptism of Jesus, and significance. If you read the opening chapters in Matthew leading up to today's story, you will notice that Jesus neither does anything, nor does he say a thing. This rite of baptism *inaugurates* the ministry of Jesus – a ministry, I might add, that challenges, even **disrupts** the systems of oppression and abusive power of his time.

I want to focus on this for a moment – a story and ritual we inherit from our Bible that exudes the Creator's power to disrupt the ordinary systems of the time. Think about it. I'm guessing that people might have taken notice when a voice from heaven speaks to all who are there to witness it!

¹ Stephanie Buckhanon Crowder's Commentary on Matthew's story of the Baptism of Jesus. Workingpreacher.org

² Matthew 3:16 New Revised Standard Version

³ Genesis 1:2 New International Version

⁴ Greg Garrett. "Homiletical Perspective", *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*– Year A, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration.

You know, my friends, this moment as we hear again the story of Jesus baptized, filled with wonder and awe, I feel like our modern routines, systems of thinking and acting need some disruption; especially when you think about what “normal” in our world seems to be these days. Part of us yearns for comfort food worship on Sunday, but don’t we really need hearty manna of God’s Good News that: speaks Hope that challenges our collective resignation; speaks Life when tyrants in our world threaten death; and don’t we need a Love that promises to defeat rising hatred around us?

Perhaps we in this Church community would do well to re-affirm the power of our rituals that reconnect with the Source of Life. Rituals like Baptism. But, while we’re at it, maybe we would do well as a community to reclaim the power and symbolism as we *Confirm* our young people, and when adults covenant with us by *Profession of Faith*. Some churches attach the word commissioning to these rites, to acknowledge the significance and symbolism of these inaugural moments where people, young and old, answer a call to follow Jesus.

American preacher Rodger Nishioka tells the story of Kyle. Kyle’s family attended worship sporadically at best since Kyle was in the fifth grade. So the pastor was rather surprised when Kyle said “yes” to the invitation to participate in the confirmation process. Kyle committed to the process, met with his mentor, and ultimately participated in the Confirmation service. Kyle was not only Confirmed in that service, he was also Baptized.

Then, Kyle disappeared.

Nishioka visited Kyle’s family and quickly realized that Kyle and his family assumed that Confirmation was an ending in the journey of spiritual growth. I have heard various parents referring to Baptism and Confirmation as having their dear one “done.” Nishioka explained that, in fact, Kyle’s confirmation is in fact a beginning, a commissioning of his journey of faith. The family seemed relieved at the thought that this was not an end and they began attending worship again.

It’s time, friends in Christ, to embrace with fresh enthusiasm any opportunity to affirm the call of God to each of us – whether we are at the beginning of our Journey with Jesus, or, maybe we think that we are nearing the end. Maybe we long-timer Christians need *more than anyone* the reminder that God is calling us to new beginnings *all the time*. Some churches have a re-affirmation of faith rite for the whole congregation on Sundays when there are Baptisms.

Can we ever get too much of God’s disruptive grace, especially when we consider how frequently we see and hear things that seem so graceless? Let us celebrate today the disruptive grace of Jesus: that loves unconditionally even those that the world deems unlovable; demonstrates an irrepressible hope that never gives up; and affirms that every person is a “child of God”, and that all of us are called to make a difference in this world over and over and over again.

Like Nishioka, we need to pay attention to rituals like Baptism, Confirmation, and covenanting with those who are new to Christian faith. How can we see God’s disruptive grace in every new beginning in our journeys of faith – whether we are newer and not so new to faith. Amen.