



Betania at the Jordan River, considered to be the site of the Baptism of Jesus

BAPTISM

CULTURAL RESOURCES

Sunday, July 25, 2010

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Lection – John 3:1-10 (New Revised Standard Version)

I. Word Etymology

Origin: c.1300, bapteme, from Old French batesme, bapteme (11c., Modern French baptême), Latin baptismus, Greek baptismos, noun of action from baptizein (see baptize). The -s- restored in later 14c. Figurative sense is from late 14c. Phrase baptism of fire, “a soldier's first experience of battle” (1857) translates Fr. baptême de feu; the phrase originally was ecclesiastical Gk.

baptisma pyros and meant “the grace of the Holy Spirit as imparted through baptism.” Later it was used of martyrdom, especially by burning.¹

1250–1300; ME LL baptisma Gk bapt(ízein) to baptize + -isma -ism; r. ME bapteme OF LL, as above²

bap·tism – noun

1. Ecclesiastical: a ceremonial immersion in water, or application of water, as an initiatory rite or sacrament of the Christian church;
2. any similar ceremony or action of initiation, dedication, etc.; and
3. a trying or purifying experience or initiation;
4. Christian Science: purification of thought and character.³

II. Historical Information Related to the Moment

A. The Biblical Context

When Jesus burst on the scene in first-century Israel, one of his first actions was to mark his life and ministry with some real mud. Standing there in the notoriously muddy water of the Jordan River, John offered a “baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Mark 1:4). First-century Jews were used to ceremonial washings, but the only one that involved immersion was for those converting to Judaism. John called everyone, even ethnic Jews, to be baptized or “marked” as being in need of forgiveness and salvation---the mud and muck of human sin being washed away and replaced with a real mark of repentance and confession. John’s baptism was, in a real sense, a great equalizer, declaring that rich and poor, Jew and non-Jew all must turn toward God.

And herein is a paradox. You don’t wash dishes in dirty water. Yet John calls his disciples to be “washed,” marked, or cleansed in the dirty waters of the Jordan. When Jesus came to the edge of the water, John recognized that he was “the one” who “is more powerful than I...I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals” (Mark 1:7). Jesus is willing to step down into the muddied water to take on the same muddy mark as his people. When we’re baptized we take on the same mark. Jesus’ baptism speaks to persons of African descent who have a history of oppression and have been marked as “second class” citizens at best. The mark of Jesus supersedes all other marks that culture has stamped on us.

B. The African American Context

Since our African ancestors came to the shores of the Atlantic, they have been marked with the designation of being “less than human.” Baptism for many enslaved persons of African descent was an initiation rite for them to receive the mark of the Spirit that superseded the mark given to them by their masters as property. Although there have been many studies that negate the Christianization of those who were enslaved, there are those who saw the ritual of baptism as an empowerment tool that shaped the universal idea of sin, notwithstanding the derogatory mark whites attributed to skin color using Genesis 4:15 “there was a mark that God put on Cain after he killed his brother Abel.” In eighteenth-century America and Europe, whites commonly assumed that Cain’s “mark” was black skin. As we now know, the mark/curse (whatever it was)

was actually placed on one man rather than all of Canaan. With the corresponding curse that Cain received, the belief that the mark was black skin caused many to believe that all people of black skin were cursed. Many used the mark of Cain as an excuse for the slave trade and discrimination against people with black skin.

Some African Americans, subverting racism, used Baptism as a means to reverse the mark of oppression and viewed it as showing God's favor as found in the manifestation/mark of God's people by the Spirit. In verses 9-11 of John 3, Jesus comes to the Jordan River to be baptized by John and, for him, it is a form of anointing—not just with water but with the Spirit. For us, baptism is a sign of God's favor as well, but it is favor that is unmerited. We are baptized because we recognize that we cannot fool God and be something that we're not. So, we "come clean" through repentance and confession and gladly receive the love of God who created us and sees us as being "very good." With the reality of God's Spirit that comes to us in baptism, we can culturally express ourselves openly, unapologetically and fulfill the great Commission—going out into the world bringing good news. Once baptized with the Spirit, Christ's example motivates us to get our hands dirty changing the world. As persons of African descent we can follow Christ example even in the muddiness and murkiness of oppression, because we know with certainty we are stakeholders of the kingdom marked with the Spirit of Christ.

III. A Rebirth Testimony

Every year, my father took us down to the country to find Jesus. I know that sounds like a strange family vacation to some but, to us, it was normal. I don't think I would have the relationship with my God I have if it weren't for those trips. Before I started "accepting" those trips as a spiritual time, I will admit, I didn't have any faith. And I was tired of everyone jumping and shouting around me because they found God and I had not.

I cried at night, miserable, wanting to go home to the city. One night, I cried myself to sleep. The next morning, I remember awaking to my mother singing in another room close by: "Have a little talk with Jesus; Tell him all 'bout your troubles." For some reason, that song kept replaying in my mind.

At the next morning service, I decided I wasn't going to pray anymore. I was just going to talk to God. And in my head I asked, "God, if you're listening right now, open up a door." Immediately to the right, the pastor's door opened. But it was just the wind, I surmised. Skeptical, I asked, "Touch someone behind me." And an old woman immediately jumped up and started thanking Jesus. For some reason, my heart still did not believe.

That day, instead of driving me home, my father told me I'd have to walk the trail home. He had a look of displeasure on his face and I don't know why he singled me out to walk. Being the obedient daughter, I didn't ask. Plus, home was only a three mile walk from the church and my siblings and I often did so when my father had to take the car into town.

While walking the trail, I started singing my mother's song. Just two lines, "Have a little talk with Jesus. Tell him 'bout your troubles," over and over again. My eye caught a yellow flower in the brush and, ignoring the fact that there could be snakes or other creatures in the woods, I

stepped through to a clearing surrounded by southern trees and smelling like hot Alabama in the middle of summer.

The flowers surrounded a smooth stump. I was careful not to step on any red ant piles. Just as I plucked it, I heard my name as clear as day. Looking around, scared, I knew someone behind me had called me. I thought my father had come back. The voice was a male voice, I was sure of that. When I saw nothing, I looked down at the flower. There were ants inside and several crawled on my hand and bit me. I dropped the flower and began to rub off the ants.

“Sylvia!”

The voice spoke as clear as day and I looked around again, but didn't see anyone. I was too scared to even move. Soon the fear turned to terror because I felt a presence so powerful and warmer than the hot southern sun that beat upon me.

I closed my eyes because something was moving behind me. My thoughts raced with questions of: What to do? Where to run? And, most of all, will I die? And then I remembered, my mother used to tell me what to do whenever I got scared. So, I whispered so low that I could barely hear myself say, "In the name of Jesus, keep me safe." I repeated it over and over again despite the fact that I heard someone walking right behind me and the heat was getting hotter, but I wasn't burning up. It felt warm. A warmth that wasn't hot, that didn't scorch, that didn't burn.

A beautiful melodic voice whispered, "I will, Sylvia."

I heard the voice not in my head, not in my heart, but in my ears. Both of my ears! It was as if a person was standing on either side of me whispering in my ears, but their voices spoke as one. I was in God's presence, God's spirit filled me. I was baptized in love and joy all over. But I never opened my eyes. I reveled in the moment for as long as I could; wanting to scream in happiness, shout for joy. Yet I craved to stay still, quiet, and bask in the beauty of the moment. At that moment, I first believed. I was born anew, and I knew Christ's spirit and truth.

"Go home," the voice whispered.

The fear that had locked my body was completely gone and my eyes opened. Turning around, no one was there, but I had not expected to see anyone there. Yet, for a long while during our spiritual sabbatical that year, I could feel his presence whenever I wanted. All I had to do was have a little talk with Jesus. And I could feel God, loving me, keeping me safe, and keeping me warm.

- Sylvia Hubbard, Detroit Michigan

IV. Poems about Baptism

Baptism (Excerpt)

Desire destroys, consumes my mortal fears,
Transforming me into a shape of a flame.

I will come out, back to your world of tears,
A stronger soul within a finer frame.⁴

Baptized into Life

Born into the world, pure flesh
Bathed in the light of the sun
Wind tickled my skin
Joy curled my grin

Yet my life had not begun.
Books taught me the mysteries of the world
My talents brought me fame
I dwelled within the love of friends
Yet the universe didn't know my name

A void lived within my heart
That romantic love could not fill
Intelligence or eloquence
Could not change me into something real
It was not until I knew the mercy of God
The sacred gift of the Christ
When I invited the Holy Spirit to live within
And understood the holy sacrifice

Then my eyes opened for the very first time
My teeth bit into the fruit of life
I was born of water and spirit
Baptized in fire and ice
Now the kingdom of God awaits me
Salvation is mine for sure
Through God's tender mercies
I have been reborn, pure.⁵

V. Baptism Songs

Although I am a new-school preacher and love today's Church music, I also believe in keeping alive the old-school songs of the Church. So, the three songs that follow are those sung down through the years during baptism ceremonies. Although it's an old-school song, I selected the modern version of "Take Me to the Water," by Nina Simone. Next, "Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing," is a classic that is still loved for its wonderful melody. The third verse says, "Jesus sought me when a stranger, Wandering from the fold of God; He, to rescue me from danger, Interposed His precious blood; How His kindness yet pursues me, Mortal tongue can never tell, Clothed in flesh, till death shall loose me I cannot proclaim it well." Nuff said. The final song, "Shall we Gather at the River," reminds us of river-bank baptisms.

Take Me to the Water

Take me to the water
Take me to the water
Take me to the water
To be baptized

None but the righteous
None but the righteous
None but the righteous
Shall be saved

So take me to the water
Take me to the water
Take me to the water
To be, to be baptized

I'm going back home, going back home
Gonna stay here no longer
I'm going back home, going back home
To be baptized.⁶

Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing

Come, Thou Fount of every blessing,
Tune my heart to sing Thy grace;
Streams of mercy, never ceasing,
Call for songs of loudest praise.

Teach me some melodious sonnet,
Sung by flaming tongues above.
Praise the mount! I'm fixed upon it,
Mount of Thy redeeming love.

Sorrowing I shall be in spirit,
Till released from flesh and sin,
Yet from what I do inherit,
Here Thy praises I'll begin;

Here I raise my Ebenezer;
Here by Thy great help I've come;
And I hope, by Thy good pleasure,
Safely to arrive at home.

Jesus sought me when a stranger,
Wandering from the fold of God;
He, to rescue me from danger,
Interposed His precious blood;

How His kindness yet pursues me
Mortal tongue can never tell,
Clothed in flesh, till death shall loose me
I cannot proclaim it well.

O to grace how great a debtor
Daily I'm constrained to be!
Let Thy goodness, like a fetter,
Bind my wandering heart to Thee.

Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,
Prone to leave the God I love;
Here's my heart, O take and seal it,
Seal it for Thy courts above.

O that day when freed from sinning,
I shall see Thy lovely face;
Clothed then in blood washed linen
How I'll sing Thy sovereign grace;

Come, my Lord, no longer tarry,
Take my ransomed soul away;
Send thine angels now to carry
Me to realms of endless day.⁷

Shall We Gather at the River

Shall we gather at the river,
where bright angel feet have trod,
with its crystal tide forever
flowing by the throne of God?

Refrain:

Yes, we'll gather at the river,
the beautiful, the beautiful river;
gather with the saints at the river
that flows by the throne of God.

Verse 2

On the margin of the river,
washing up its silver spray,
we will walk and worship ever,
all the happy golden day.

(Refrain)

Verse 3

Ere we reach the shining river,
lay we every burden down;
grace our spirits will deliver,
and provide a robe and crown.
(Refrain)

Verse 4

Soon we'll reach the shining river,
soon our pilgrimage will cease;
soon our happy hearts will quiver
with the melody of peace.

(Refrain)⁸

VI. Books to Enhance Your Understanding of Baptism

1. Battle, Michael. The Black Church in America. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2006.
2. Blount, Brian K. True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007.
3. Coats, John R. Original Sinners: A New Interpretation of Genesis. New York, NY: Free Press, 2009.
4. Eyerman, Ron. Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
5. Kim, M. L. Toni Morrison's Beloved As African-American Scripture & Other Articles on History and Canon. Philadelphia, PA: Hermit Kingdom Press, 2009.
6. Mellinkoff, Ruth. The Mark of Cain. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1981.

Notes

1. "Baptism." Online Etymology Dictionary. Douglas Harper, Historian. Online location: Dictionary.com <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/baptism> accessed 3 February 2010
2. "Baptism." Dictionary.com Unabridged. Random House, Inc. Online location: <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/baptism> accessed 3 February 2010
3. "Baptism." Dictionary.com Unabridged. Random House, Inc. Online location: <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/baptism> accessed 3 February 2010
4. "Baptism." By Claude McKay
5. The poem, "Baptized into Life," by Violette Reid was written through collaboration for this submission and is used by permission. Other works by Violette Reid are available at online location: www.violetteid.com accessed 3 February 2010
6. "Take Me to the Water." Traditional. This version is by Nina Simone. Online location: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=If6i59NUfkk> accessed 3 February 2010
7. "Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing." By Robert Robinson. Music by Nettleton.
8. "Shall We Gather at the River." By Robert Lowry