

“To Be Baptized”

Mark begins his gospel story strangely. No manger, no shepherds, no angels, no Magi. Instead a man out in the fringes of the wilderness, dressed in rough camel's hair, leather belt, eating only locusts and wild honey, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

All my life I have understood baptism to be a metaphor for washing sins away, it is the change from being filthy dirty to clean. The saying 'cleanliness is next to godliness' is the Christian way. Or so I thought until I read Katherine Asheburg's book "The Dirt on Clean: an unsanitized history."

The story is told by an Arab gardener in "A Thousand and One Nights" to account for the fact that Christians were dirty. "They never wash, for, at their birth, ugly men in black garments pour water over their heads, and this ablution, accompanied by strange gestures, frees them from all obligation of washing for the rest of their lives." This reference to Christian baptism is perhaps meant as a joke, but it does indicate how medieval Muslims, who took cleanliness very seriously, viewed Christians.

Even in the twentieth century an Englishman in India was asked by a Hindu about Christian teaching on personal hygiene. He replied there was no such thing, the Hindu said that was impossible "for every religion has a code for the closet, how cleansing is to be performed, when and in what manner the hands shall be washed, also concerning baths and the cleaning of teeth. Nevertheless, I told him ... we have none such. How so, then, says he, have you no teachings at all in these matters? To which I replied that our priests taught theology, but let hygiene to the individual conscience."

So how did this happen? We will discover as we read Mark's story that Jesus was not all that concerned with ritual cleanliness – he let his disciples eat without washing their hands (by the way, fear not, this is not in our Sunday School lessons). Later Christians became

averse to bathing naked in the public Roman baths, it might lead to something. By the time of St. Francis of Assisi being dirty was seen as a form of piety. Legend has it that he appeared after his death to compliment friars on their grubby cells. The Rule of St. Benedict said that three baths a year were sufficient, just before Christmas, Easter and Pentecost.

Then there was a change. At the end of the eighteenth century John Wesley suggested "Slovenliness is no part of religion. ... 'Cleanliness is indeed next to godliness.'" However, for most ordinary folks, regular bathing did not happen in our culture until the beginning of the last century.

The phrase 'cleanliness is next to godliness' is not in the Bible, in fact it first occurs in the Jewish Talmud. Anyway, so much for cleanliness being the Christian way. Time to rethink our theology of baptism.

The word 'baptism' in Greek means "to dip, plunge or immerse" and can be used for dipping a cup in a wine bowl, sinking a ship, or plunging a sword into someone's body.

Now if you have gotten over the shock about how dirty Christians have been, I would like to suggest something more shocking—that the image of 'plunging a sword into someone's body' might be closer to the meaning of baptism than 'washing our sins way.'

The story Mark tells of the baptism of Jesus has illusions to the creation story in the first chapter of Genesis. For example, the dove alludes to the spirit hovering over the primeval waters at the beginning of creation. A number of the Biblical creation images have their roots in a Babylonian story.

The Babylonian creation epic tells the story of the hero Marduk, who defeats the water monster Tiamat. Marduk catches Tiamat in a net, drives an evil wind down

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her throat, shoots an arrow that bursts her distended belly and pierces her heart. He then splits her skull with a club and scatters her blood in out-of-the-way places. He stretches out her corpse full-length, and from it creates the cosmos. The holes in her belly become the stars, the water flowing out of her eyes becomes the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. And that is how the world came into being.

In Mark's story Jesus comes up out of the water and immediately he sees the heavens ripped open, almost as if a sword had rent them asunder. I think the allusions are clear, but the point of the story is different.

A voice comes from the heavens. "You are my beloved son, in you I have taken delight." The baptism of Jesus has nothing to do with the washing away of sins; it has everything to do with a new creation, a new way for us to be human in the world. It is a story of all those, who are baptized into Christ, who now see the world and those in it as he saw it. The world is a place for healing the sick, feeding the hungry, caring for the outcasts.

Sean, today you have been baptized into the body of Christ. This is no little thing, for it is the beginning of a whole different way of being in the world. I know you are now in your profession, trying to read and understand the implications of the book, "The Toyota Way." First principle, I am sure you have it memorized, "Base your management decisions on a long-term philosophy, even at the expense of short-term financial goals." Two through eight say that the right process will produce the right results; nine to eleven say that you bring value to the organization by valuing people; twelve to fourteen are about becoming a learning organization.

Sean, I don't have fourteen principles for you for the Christian life. But like learning the 'Toyota Way' the Christian Way is equally hard, for it is very different than the culture we live in. It is almost like killing the old self so that new life can begin—and that is the baptism image.

Baptism begins with a violent image and it ends there, for we follow one who lived the way of non-violence, one who not only respected his co-workers but loved his enemies, one who was the visible manifestation of God. And it doesn't matter if you are clean or dirty, he calls you by name and invites you to follow. Good to have you walking with us.