

# The Deep Mysteries of Baptism

## Meta

Location: Apostles Anglican Church

Date: January 7, 2024

## Readings

Isaiah 42.1-9

Psalm 89.20-29

Acts 10.34-38

Mark 1.7-11

## Opening

At the beginning of this new year, I would like to begin with baseball. Far superior writers and theologians than myself have noted the trinitarian shape of baseball, which objectively speaking, must be God's favorite game. It is a game based on threes—nine innings being three sets of threes. Three outs per inning, three strikes per at bat. Baseball is an odyssey, so saith Robert Benson, a story that begins at home plate with the aspired goal being a journey around the diamond that returns home. The ingredients for deep mystery are all there.

Being a baseball fan, I have also appreciated how the game clearly favors those players and teams who excel in first things. The pitcher who consistently throws first pitch strikes often gets quick outs and quick innings. Teams that put runs on the board in the first inning often win the game nine innings later. Get your first hitter on base each inning and you almost definitely will win. Making a good beginning, getting first things established, these things are rewarded in baseball.

We begin a new calendar year and we want to make a good beginning. Our cultural patterns turn our attention turns to lists, goals, habits to reform. And then you come to church on the first Sunday in the year of our Lord 2024, and the Church says, 'Turn your attention to Mystery.' This comes first. This is how we begin the year ahead. We begin by contemplating a great mystery—the mystery of Jesus baptized in the Jordan River.

By definition, a mystery is a reality—an event, a sacrament, a revelation—that we will never fully comprehend, never exhaust. And so every year, the Church says, 'Look *here* and look deeper.'

Being comes first, not doing. That is how we make a good beginning in our life or any given new year of life. **Mystery precedes action.**

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God.*

And *then* all things were made through Christ, the Word. This is the mystery we celebrate in Christmastide, and the pattern continues today. The mystery of God precedes the action of God. Before Christ begins his public ministry; before any miracle, teaching, exorcism, or healing; Jesus enters the waters, rises from the River Jordan, and we encounter the mystery of God in Three Persons –the Father proclaiming love over his Son, the Son receiving the anointing of the Holy Spirit in the figure of the dove.

At some point this year, you will have a moment, even if it's only a passing moment, when you pause and ask yourself, 'Wait a second, who am I?' Families may have that experience too, asking, 'Who are we?' I pray that moment will be brief; for some, it will last for a longer season. May God have mercy and shine the light of his wisdom when we endure seasons of confusion.

Whenever we encounter disorienting seasons, we look for reliable sources of self-understanding. And sadly, one of the last places we'll consider is the very sacrament that gives us our self-understanding—our baptism into the life of the Holy Trinity.

Yes, we have helpful tools to know ourselves more. The Enneagram can be a helpful tool, but I find that Christians meditate more on the Enneagram than we do the sacramental mystery that we have in Holy Baptism. Mystery and sacraments are much greater than any single temperament. Whether we're sorting through a confusing time or simply seeking to grow as human beings, we need God's mystery to take us into the depths of who we are, mystically united to him.

So let's look further into the mystery of Jesus' baptism. This mystery is inexhaustible, to be sure, more than we can explore in one Sunday. With that in mind, I want to offer three insights that might illumine the beauty of this mystery further; and all for the sake that we might gain deeper understanding of our baptism in Christ.

## The Descent of Humility

As we meditate on the mystery of Jesus' baptism, we contemplate this story from the Gospel of Mark. Mark is the featured Gospel for this lectionary year, so it bears exploring the beginning of Mark's story, too. Mark notoriously has no nativity story. Mark's Gospel begins with John the Baptist preaching repentance and baptizing at the River Jordan. But the first sentence of Mark's Gospel introduces a main theme for his entire story of Jesus, which also illuminates the mystery of Jesus' Baptism:

'The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.'<sup>1</sup>Sounds basic, right? But Mark wants us to connect events in Jesus' life with his identity as the Son of God.

And this brings us to the first insight into the mystery of his baptism. Mark introduces us to John the Baptist first preaching repentance and forgiveness. But then we hear John's meekness when he looks to the Lord who comes after him, 'After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.'<sup>2</sup>

Just as we heard John the Baptist speak with great humility in Advent, so we hear meekness from Mark's Gospel today. Remember John's words in Advent: 'He who comes after me is before me. He must increase and I must decrease.' In Mark's story, the Son of God is undoubtedly mightier than John. John confesses it to for everyone to hear. John was the greatest of the prophets and probably the humblest of the prophets. But the Son of God that John came to announce was yet more humble than he. Jesus, the Son of God, lowered himself beneath John's own humility. Our Lord submitted

---

<sup>1</sup> Mark 1.1

<sup>2</sup> Mark 1.7-8

himself to receive baptism from John, though Jesus had no need to be cleansed from any sin. Behold the mystery of our Lord's humility descending into the River Jordan with John the Baptist.

Humility is like mystery—there is not a single meaning, but numerous aspects and depths to the virtue of humility. Humility is not only the attitude of a servant, though it most certainly embraces servanthood. Humility means renouncing one's own will and way. Jesus doesn't renounce his will in the Garden of Gethsemane at the end when crucifixion awaits; he surrenders his own will to the Father's will in the beginning at the Jordan River.

Jesus understood himself to be the Son of God, but the Son of God does not insist on his own way. The Father's will for his Son was that Jesus would open the way to eternal life. The Father chose to make all things new through water. Just as God created the world when the Holy Spirit hovered over the waters; as the Lord re-created his sin-ridden world through the Great Flood; as he saved his covenant people Israel through the Red Sea, so the Son of God enters the waters to open the way of new creation. Christ had no need to be regenerated with eternal life, but in his great humility he entered the water for our sake.

Who am I? To whom do I belong? I belong to the one who descended in great humility, who renounced his own will for my sake. The way to eternal life goes through humility, goes through the renunciation of my will. This is who I am, who I was immersed to become.

## The Water, A Tomb

The second and third insights into this mystery go together. When Christ enters the water, it is a tomb; as he rises from the water, it becomes a womb. We need these images in the mystery of baptism when we begin life in Christ; we need them every time we need to make a new beginning.

The symbols of tomb and womb are so beloved in the early Church that we hear numerous church fathers speak of baptism in this way. St Cyril of Jerusalem said, "The saving water was your tomb and at the same time a womb."<sup>3</sup>

In the icons of Christ's nativity and his baptism, we see the body of Jesus surrounded by rock. In the nativity, he's placed against a dark background, the cave of his birth; in the baptism, as you see on the cover of your bulletin, his entire body is covered in the water. Both of these cave images represent Hades—the realm of Hell. 'Christ is born,' said Paul Evdokimov, 'in the shadow of death, and the Nativity bends down the heavens even to Hades.'<sup>4</sup> Christ descends into the water because he embraces his Father's will: to suffer and die on the cross, to descend into the depths of hell for us. The water becomes a sign of his destiny: not just a symbol of his death and burial in a tomb on earth, but a sign meaning 'I will descend into hell for you.'

My brother and sister, baptism is much more than a beginning—much more. Far too long have Christians neglected the deeper mysteries of baptism. Baptism is the essential beginning to life in Christ—it is entrance into the Body of Christ, an initiation to receive holy communion. But do not leave your baptism behind. When the shadow of death overwhelms you; when you cannot remember who you are; when you have suffered from a deluge of darkness for months and it has become a living hell—it is then you will need the mystery of your baptism in Christ most of all. Christ descends into

---

<sup>3</sup> St Cyril of Jerusalem, *Mystagogical Catechesis*, II.4

<sup>4</sup> Paul Evdokimov, *The Art of the Icon*, 279.

the tomb so that the tomb is never the end. He comes to end the chaos within, the death that always threatens and encloses around.

## The Water, A Womb

Christ does not descend into our suffering simply to sympathize with our pain so that we are not alone. That would be a sign of love and solidarity, yes, but it wouldn't have the power to defeat death and hell. No, Christ enters the water so that the tomb becomes a womb; that death would not prevail in your life. Because Christ rises from the water, because he rises from the deepest hell, he gives resurrection life for all who dwell in darkness and in the shadow of death.<sup>5</sup> Not just once in our conversion, but throughout our life.

Watch for this theme in the Gospel of Mark this year. It's here in the baptism story today and you'll see it recurring throughout—Mark wants us to see that Jesus, the Son of God, came to destroy the works of the devil, and there is no greater work of the Devil than Death itself.

Divine showdowns happen throughout the Gospel of Mark. It's why the early church gave Mark's Gospel the symbol of the lion. The Son of God is a Lion warring against the powers of Death and evil. And it begins right here. Your baptism in Christ is not only light, it is a weapon against darkness.

We'll actually read this same story on the first Sunday of Lent, so I don't want to get ahead of myself, but know that this is another dimension of the mystery of baptism. The grace of baptism is a weapon in your hands—to lead you again and again to new creation.

So when trials and suffering cast a shroud of darkness over your soul; when shame speaks so loudly in your mind that your heart cannot resist the lies, you have the grace of baptism still alive within you—the Holy Spirit alive within can make this tomb into a womb. Death and resurrection is the only way to make sense of things. When we are thrown into all sorts of confusion and despair, remember your baptism—the way to new life is by following the way of death and resurrection again and again and again.

Hear this powerful meditation from Olivier Clement about the grace of baptism working in our experiences of death:

*When everything seems lost, baptismal grace, if we pay heed to it, can convert a situation of death into one of resurrection, an apparent deadlock into a necessary breakthrough. We have to learn—and this is the whole meaning of (spiritual disciplines)—to get round obstacles, to tear away dead skin, to let the very life of Christ arise in us by the power of his resurrection. Every present moment has to become baptismal.<sup>6</sup>*

Who am I? To whom do I belong? I belong to the One who embraced his destiny to enter the deepest hell, so that every tomb that threatens me my life becomes a womb leading to eternal life.

---

<sup>6</sup> Olivier Clement,

## Closing

For the past month, the Daily Office has led us to read Revelation. At the end of John's Revelation, we hear Christ speaking from his throne, 'Behold, I am making all things new.' One day Christ will make all things in heaven and earth new forevermore. But before he makes all things new, he has begun making new creations through water and the Holy Spirit. He makes us new by the grace given at baptism. He gives us a new heart, new desires, a new will, a new hunger and thirst for holiness. But that is only the beginning. The grace given in baptism reaches much farther than conversion. The grace of the Spirit gives you courage to die to your old self; to choose the way of self-denial and surrender to Christ. The grace of the Spirit, alive because of your baptism, raises you up in a new confidence, new freedom, and new joy you could not achieve yourself.

One of the best spiritual practices I've heard to embrace the mystery of baptism comes from counsel given by a spiritual father to his spiritual son. To fight against the lies of self-doubt, shame, and insecurities, this spiritual father suggested that his son attach Galatians 2.20 to a mirror, so that this truth would shape his mind and heart anytime he sees a reflection of himself:

*I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.*

I cannot think of better words to embrace in this new year. Who am I? To whom do I belong? I belong to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit who raised me up to hear those words spoken over our Lord Jesus, 'In you I am well pleased.' He delights in me. I'm now hidden in Christ with God. And isn't that truth the greatest mystery? That's a mystery worth holding onto, a treasure above all treasures, the pearl of great price, to set forth your days this year and always; and all for the glory of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.