

Palisades Presbyterian Church

Baptism of Christ Sunday

January 7, 2007

Reflection:

In China we use the word baptism a lot; it's a very revolutionary word.

Joan Chen



Readings: Isaiah 43: 1 - 7

The Gospel According to Luke 3:15 – 17, 21 – 22

Hymns: #391 Take My Life

92 An Upper Room Did Our Lord Prepare

#540 God be With You Till We Meet Again

Rough Draft of Sermon Delivered

The Revolution of Baptism

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When I came across the quote on the front of this morning's bulletin, "In China we use the word baptism a lot; it's a very revolutionary word" it made me think of the sacrament of baptism in a way that is more of a spiritual passage. A passage that leads us through ancient and modern traditions into becoming a fully committed, integrated person – body and soul, heart and mind, prayer and action – even when it seeds a revolution!

I began some research, relying on Theissen and Metz's The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide. From their and many other's perspectives baptism took on great meaning as part of the developing renewal movements begun around the death of Herod in

4 BCE (which is why this is 2011, rather than 2007 – but that’s a story for another time!). These movements began the great suppression and oppression Herod used to keep the country under control as client King of the Romans unraveled following his death.

In some way, a parallel might be the downfall of Saddam Hussein who kept Iraq under control, only to have it fall into civil war as factions sought to re-exert their own long-lost authority and influence.

So, for a moment, let’s go back to Palestine in that period following Herod’s death and the birth of Jesus. Think of Jesus as a child growing up under the might of the Romans, watching, listening, maybe even participating in some of the activities of others seeking to push back. I have no idea of whether he participated or not, but it is certain he lived in the midst of the turmoil and was surely influenced by it all.

The first wave of insurgencies is a series of uncoordinated revolts – motivated by the Jewish peoples’ longings for their king, a messianic king to return and set them free, once again. The expectations for a messianic king are always present, maybe tomorrow...

And there are those who do, for a while, accede to such status: Simon, for example, a former slave of Herod; another named Athronges, a shepherd; and Judas, son of Hezekiah. It is believed that all of these first wave radicals repudiate any rule but the rule of

God, a direct confrontation to the Romans -- and they are – as we might imagine, put down forcefully – Herodian and Roma style.

A second wave of resistance against the Romans comes along in the teachings of Judas of Galilee around 6 CE. Imagine that you and Jesus are now ten years old. Following the deposition of Archelaus in the same year, Judea and Samaria come under direct Roman administration. Taxes from that point onward had to be paid directly to Rome. Judas of Galilee, a teacher, takes on the polemic the dogmatic controversy by teaching two things: (1) the sole rule of God and (2) how humans should collaborate in the sole rule of God. In other words, he is all for marginalizing the government to establish this collaboration. According to Act 5:37, Judas of Galilee dies by violence, “and all who followed him were dispersed.”

It is important, I think, to notice that Jesus rejected the approach of the Zealots, as the followers of Judas of Galilee and his sons were called. You may remember one of the questions asked of Jesus about the payment of taxes, the “test” of the Pharisees and the Herodians who asked him: “Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?” And after calling for a coin, he presumably had none of his own, and pointing to the image of Caesar on the coin, Jesus tells them to pay unto Caesar what is Caesar’s and unto God what is God.” The text says, “And they were amazed at him.” Mark 12:17.

A political dodge of the trouble being stirred up by Judas of Galilee. Maybe, maybe not – especially considering that in Matthew 6:24 and

Luke 16:13 Jesus clearly states that one cannot serve two masters at the same time. That there is an abrupt either/or in Jesus' teachings relative to God and Mammon (a personification of wealth and avarice as an evil spirit). But all this comes a bit later.

It is now the 20's and the third wave of resistance, opposition, is emerging. This time it is not directed against the Romans, but against their client princes – the Herodians. And, it is in the preaching of John the Baptist that the criticism takes on an intense life. We all know of the tension between John and Herod for a variety of reasons, and it is here that baptism – John's call for baptism as a witness to turn away from Mammon and the ruling opposition -- brings with it the clear supposition that there is a threat from the uncleanness of the Herodians and the mounting pressures of Hellenic or Greek assimilation – and it must be washed away!

Are you still there in Palestine? Fast forward a bit, now. You are traveling with a Jesus in his late 20's, having all the experience of growing up in a war-torn land, for all intents and purposes. The tension is mounting ever higher. John the Baptist's prophecy is known throughout the area – to some as a madman to others as a messenger. There is One he says that is coming. One who will baptize with the Holy Spirit... and with fire...

Many agree that John's baptismal practice is an eschatological sacrament, preparing the willing and faithful for the end and from the wrathful judgment of God. Repent! Judgment Day is Near!

In its historical variations, the eschatological model is well worn. So much so that biblical scholars and historians say it is hard to know if the Baptizer is speaking of the One as God returning or an intermediary of God. It is perhaps true that even John is unsure of how things will unfold. In this time travel, maybe you were there when he asked Jesus the question: “Are you the One?”

There are volumes of texts on the historical Jesus and the historical John which take apart the original Greek texts and the different writings of the synoptics, John, and Josephus (who actually has a lot to say about John) – trying to determine just how much of John the Baptist’s teachings and prophecy and actions are *Christianized*. From the early decades on. Writings abound about whether Jesus and those gathered at his baptism actually hear, “This is my son in whom I am well pleased,” or if it is more of the Holy Spirit speaking to each one in their hearts, who together can see, can tell from Jesus’ presence who he is; or whether this is all overlaid on him at a later time, in a strong attempt to cosmologically link Jesus and God in a such a way that God breaks through the seen world to reveal God’s self in voice on behalf of Jesus of Nazareth as a witness – linking the Messiah without question to the God who sends him, the God he calls Abba.

All this is for a later time. This morning, though, with the time we have left, I want to return to what is quoted on the front of the bulletin from Joan Chen: “In China we use the word baptism a lot; it’s a very revolutionary word.”

In this Ancient Eastern Civilization of Jesus, captured in the midst of the wave of resistance to the Romans and Herod, the messianic longings and would-be messiahs, the hunger of the people for their own king to protect them, the mounting eschatological sense that the end is near (the destruction of the temple is only about thirty years off) –in the middle of all of this oppression, violence, and chaos – the act of baptism, of being baptized was, is in fact, a clear and revolutionary act – a statement of washing away of Mammon and the governments that marginalized the Jews and a rededication to a way of life and faithfulness to God that transcended any lasting governmental control. Stand there on the hillside as Jesus approaches John and is baptized. It is a stunning, faithful, defiant, and prescriptive act and you and those there are energized people and rush to the water, saying, “Yes! Yes! Yes!” You have just been baptized – by the Holy Spirit and by fire. John was tight. You have now made your own commitment and statement. You are one with the others. And the work has just begun.

Today, on this Baptism of Jesus Sunday, having just sped from his birth to the beginning of his ministry -- I still see this baptism, our baptism, as a revolutionary act and symbol to the world and all who know us. An indication that we see things differently than the secular world. That, in a true way, we are the next wave fighting injustice and oppression, practicing the teachings of this one in the water on the day we remember.

Baptism as a sacrament means that whether through prayer and action and the Holy Spirit - we have been positioned against the threat of uncleanness – the uncleanness of injustice, marginalization, oppression, dehumanization, violence, and all the collateral diseases of client kings and their benefactors – as they and their influences affect our church and our lives.

But then, it seems, here – in this place – we already know that.

So, as we have said before, welcome on this and every day to the revolution of our baptism and the wave of change -- the new thing God has in mind for us and this world.

Amen.