

The Raging Waters of Baptism

R.G. Wilson-Lyons

Luke 3: 3, 15-22: He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah,^[d] ¹⁶ John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with^[e] the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷ His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

¹⁸ So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people. ¹⁹ But Herod the ruler,^[f] who had been rebuked by him because of Herodias, his brother's wife, and because of all the evil things that Herod had done, ²⁰ added to them all by shutting up John in prison. ²¹ Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, ²² and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved;^[g] with you I am well pleased."

"In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters."

Our faith story begins not in order but in chaos.

The earth was formless and void and darkness covered the face of the deep.

And God was in the chaos.

A wind from God swept over the face of the waters.

It seems that the imagery that most resonated with the creation story poet is not that God created from nothing, but rather that God brought order out of chaos.

I'm finding that imagery profound good news right now because it sure feels to me like we are living in a time of chaos. We are setting daily records for the number of COVID cases. Schools are trying to figure out how they can possibly educate our kids when so many faculty and staff are in quarantine. Healthcare workers are overwhelmed. And we wonder when or if this will all be over.

This week was also the one year anniversary of the insurrection at our Capitol where a free election was attempted to be overturned and members of Congress were minutes (or maybe even seconds away) from being killed. Several days after the insurrection last year, I remember thinking that nearly 15,000 Americans died of COVID that week and it was only the second worst crisis of the week.

Think back to a year ago. Do you remember what you were feeling as you watched the news footage of the mob breaking the windows of the Capitol, attacking police officers, and taking over the chamber where the presidential election was to be certified? I remember first feeling numb – almost like I was watching a movie, something that wasn't real. Then I felt tremendous sadness. It felt like we were losing something that we could never get back. Even as the insurrection proved unsuccessful, I could never again believe that "it couldn't happen here." Then I remember feeling anger – anger at those who would storm the Capitol, anger at those who had incited them, anger at those who voted differently than me. I remember that anger lasting for a while – days and weeks after the whole thing happened. I remember constantly wanting someone to blame, even entire groups of people to blame.

And what I discovered is that once I started down the path of blame, I kept finding more and more people to become the objects of my anger – not only about the insurrection but also about the pandemic, about all the chaos that was going on around me.

I started blaming those who wouldn't wear a mask.

Later after the vaccines were available, I wanted to blame those who wouldn't be vaccinated.

I blamed all those I felt were in some way, even marginally so, responsible for the insurrection.

I started blaming a lot.

Let me pause for a moment and invite us all to take a breath. I imagine my words may have brought up some hard emotions for you. Like me, you may also have found yourself angry and blaming others. You may have a different take than I do and may feel anger at me for talking about these things right now. My guess is that, like me, you too felt and are feeling a range of emotions. Please give yourself permission to feel what you feel. If you need to rage, rage. If you need to weep, weep. If you're mad at me, I understand. If you are numb, that's ok too...don't make yourself feel guilty if you don't feel what you think you should feel. I've said before that we are living through at least three generational crises at the same time – the pandemic, the erosion of democracy and the rise of white supremacy, and the existential threat of climate change. We are living through really, really hard times and the last thing any of us need is to feel guilt about whatever else we are feeling.

But today I feel something that actually resembles hope. It's not a naïve hope. It's not even a confident hope. It's more like a glimmer. I am well aware that things could get worse, that we

might in fact not recover, that our democracy may not survive next time, or that we may not come out of this pandemic ok. I know that things are bad and that things could get worse. But, in spite of all of that, I am feeling a glimmer that we might be able to not only make it through this, but that we might come out better on the other side.

But for that to happen, I've realized that I have to move beyond blame. Don't get me wrong. I don't mean there shouldn't be accountability. I don't mean we should speak out and speak up for what we believe is right. I don't mean we should just sweep under the rug what happened a year ago. But what I do mean is that I have to be very careful about how I understand myself and how I think of those who I want to blame.

Blaming tends to create identity categories. What I mean is that I've found myself (and I think many others) trying to group people into things like:

Vaccinated or unvaccinated

Liberal or Conservative

Pro-democracy or fascist

And it's so easy to then decide that the group with which I identify with are the good guys and the other group is the bad guys...without nuance.

This Sunday is Baptism of the Lord Sunday. In reading the Scripture in Luke, something struck me that I've never really thought of before. John was offering a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And Jesus came to be baptized by John. Think about that for a minute. John was inviting people to repent and be baptized, and that's exactly what Jesus did. Jesus, the one who Christian theology tells us was sinless, came to John to repent.

Why?

Maybe one reason is because Jesus understood that sin is not just individual but corporate. There is simply no way to live a sinless life in a world with so many sinful structures. We are all implicated. We are all complicit. Even Jesus. So before Jesus performed any miracle, before he proclaimed the realm of God, he repented.

And I want to invite us to do the same. We live in a time when it is so easy to think all of the sin belongs to the other group of people – you know the ones that I like to blame. And again, there is real blame to go around. There is real accountability that must happen if we are to heal from what happened a year ago. But what I also have to remember is that I am not blameless either – none of us are. As a white person, I am complicit in systems of white supremacy. I don't always live in such a way that can help mitigate the effects of a changing climate. I have at times been impatient with those who have the hardest jobs in this pandemic – with teachers, with healthcare workers. Before I start blaming others, I must first examine myself and when I

do I find that there's little room for self-righteousness. Before Jesus taught anybody anything, before he performed any miracle, and especially before he called out the rich and the powerful, he came to John for a baptism of repentance. Perhaps, that too is where we would do well to start.

This kind of baptism is scary. We fear what we may lose. We're afraid of what we might find when instead of looking at the things the other group of people does wrong, we start to look at ourselves. We know that our neat categories of good and bad, of people to blame might start to crumble a little. I'm wondering if the tame way we baptize by putting a little water on our heads is symbolically insufficient. So too is a tub of still water where you can be dunked. Instead I wonder if the appropriate symbol for baptism is what we see in the creation story. Water that is wild and chaotic. I wonder if we should be baptized in a raging river where we have to hang on for dear life to keep from being swept away. We must pass from death to life, from sin to repentance, from the altar of white supremacy to the altar of the liberator God. And there is no tame, safe way to take that journey. But Luke tells us where that journey ends: "When Jesus came out of the water, the heavens tore open and the voice of God boomed, "You are my Son, the Beloved. With you, I am well pleased."

In this kind of baptism, we learn the truth about who we really are. Our identities are not caught up in all the ways we separate ourselves from each other – good/bad, liberal/conservative, and so on. Our identity – who we are at our core -- is child of God. But that's not just my identity; it's everyone's. And that means that whoever I want to point the finger at, whoever I want to blame, that they too are a child of God.

And so any call for accountability, any call for repentance must be done not out of animosity, not out of a desire for punishment, but rather out of love, out of a desire to restore and heal that which is broken. The people who stormed the Capitol a year ago, they too are children of God. The people who refuse to be vaccinated, they too are children of God.

Just like me. Just like you.

And so today as we remember Jesus' baptism, let's remember that, like Jesus, we too are invited to find our identity in that which is more profound, more present than every other identity – that we all belong to God, that we are all children of God and let that reality guide the way we respond to the chaos that is raging all around us.