

NO BABIES AT THIS BAPTISM

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Grace Church in New York
Epiphany 1 + The Baptism of our Lord Jesus Christ
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But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so for now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." (Matthew 3:15)

Some time ago my family and I took a trip to Lake Placid, NY – a picturesque little town that hosted the Winter Olympics in 1932 and 1980. The highlight of the 1980 games was unquestionably the US men's hockey team. But 1932 also had its memorable athletes whose stories are told in the local Winter Olympics Museum. One of these was Sonja Henie, a Norwegian figure skater who won three gold medals in a row: 1928, 1932, and 1936. On the ice she was mesmerizing. She transformed women's skating and holds records still today. Off the ice she was beautiful and ambitious, and parlayed her Olympic triumphs into Hollywood stardom. She was a media sensation, and in 1940 became a US citizen.

Sonja Henie loved the wealth and fame. She could not get enough of it. Nevertheless, she had a problem. Even though to become an American citizen she had renounced allegiance to all foreign princes and potentates, one troubling association seemed to linger. During her long skating career she performed often in Germany. At some point along the way she became acquainted with Adolf Hitler and other Nazi leaders. When Germany hosted the 1936 Winter Olympics, witnesses claim that Henie honored Hitler with a Nazi salute – though she herself denied it. What she could not deny, though, was her acceptance of a luncheon invitation at Hitler's home. There the German dictator presented her with a signed, framed portrait of himself.

In 1940 the Germans invaded Norway, Henie's native country where she maintained her family home and other properties. Strangely, none of her buildings or belongings were confiscated or even damaged. Why were they untouched? Henie had directed that her personal portrait of Hitler be displayed atop the grand piano in the living room of her family estate. There it remained throughout the war, an outward and visible sign that Sonja Henie had not sufficiently renounced the evil powers of this world. She had not fully and finally said "farewell" to her former allegiances and acquaintances.

In today's reading from the Gospel of Matthew (3:13-17), we find John the Baptist exactly where he was just five weeks ago: on the banks of the Jordan River, baptizing the multitudes who came out to him in the wilderness. John preached to them that something big was about to happen: the kingdom of heaven was at hand; the Messiah of God was soon to appear. The Jews had long held to the promise that God would send a ruler who would be the true King of Israel. The Messiah would unite the people and lead them along the right pathways of truth and mercy. It would be a new age. What did the people need to do to be ready? Two things. The first was to repent. To repent is to turn. Turning toward the coming kingdom of heaven and embracing it would necessarily mean turning away from their old allegiances. It would entail renouncing Satan, turning their backs on the evil powers of the world, and refusing to relent to their own sinful desires. The second thing the people would need to do in order to be ready for the kingdom was baptism. Baptism would be the outward and visible sign of their inward and spiritual turning. John would take them down into the water to be cleansed of their sins, to be washed free of their former ways.

All four Gospels tell us that in those days Jesus of Nazareth came to John and presented himself for baptism. Frankly, it's an event that has puzzled, even baffled Christians from the earliest days of the church. We can see evidence of the confusion in Matthew's version of Jesus' baptism

that we heard today. Matthew records that John didn't want to baptize Jesus. John thought Jesus should baptize him. The question that Matthew places on the lips of John himself goes something like this: If Jesus were truly God's chosen, anointed, beloved Son – the Messiah without sin – why would he submit to John's baptism? John's baptism was for the forgiveness of sins, for turning away from the old life. Presumably, nothing about John's baptism would apply to Jesus. So why did he do it? Over the centuries countless scholars and faithful Christians have proposed their theories, many of which have much merit. By going down into the water Jesus was identifying with the sinful humanity he came to save. By submitting to baptism Jesus was coming aware of his unique identity as God's beloved Son. So go the theories. Dare we take another crack at it? Perhaps we should.

Today, as we celebrate this feast we call the Baptism of our Lord Jesus Christ, a strange thing has occurred. We have no baptisms, not a one all day. We have no cute babies to distract us from what may be a real, grown-up, adult meaning of baptism. Jesus was not a baby when John baptized him. So what did baptism mean for him? I see a clue in what Jesus said when presenting himself to John for baptism: "*Let it be so for now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.*" The key concept here is the righteousness of God. The righteousness of God is the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is the love of God. In Jesus the kingdom had come. The love of God became flesh, a person whose mission was and is to advance God's power of love on earth. When Jesus said to John that his baptism was to fulfill all righteousness, he might otherwise have said that his vocation was to continue the forward momentum of the kingdom. In order to advance the kingdom, Jesus had to move forward with his life. Indeed, he had to leave behind one chapter of his life in order to embrace the next. He had to turn away from the old to move into the new. So one way to think about Jesus' baptism is not a renouncing, but a launching from one phase to the next.

Consider, at his baptism Jesus was leaving behind his daily life in Nazareth. The Gospel of Luke tells us that Jesus was about thirty years old at the time. What we know about those thirty years is very little. He was the carpenter's son, his mother was Mary, he had brothers and sisters, and he lived in the town of Nazareth. We can assume that the rhythms and rituals of 1st century Judaism governed his life. These were years of formation and study of the Scriptures, particularly the prophets. Life was probably familiar, predictable, comfortable. But for the kingdom to advance Jesus would have to turn from Nazareth. His baptism was the launch. He saw the heavens opened, and the Spirit of God descending on him. Then he heard the voice of the Lord declare, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." It was a clear sign to turn from what was to what would be. It was farewell, Nazareth; hello whatever comes next.

What came next for Jesus? After a period of deep reflection in the wilderness, his ministry in the surrounding region of Galilee would follow. To fulfill God's righteousness, to advance the kingdom, Jesus would spend the next three years gathering his disciples. He would teach them, preach to the multitudes, and perform miracles to demonstrate that the kingdom of God was at hand. But if the kingdom were to continue its forward momentum, the phase of ministry and miracles in Galilee would need to end. Once again, Jesus would have to turn. Farewell, Galilee; hello whatever comes next. Interestingly, another vivid experience would serve as the launching point to the next phase. We call it the Transfiguration (Matthew 17:1-13), when Jesus took with him Peter, James, and John to the top of a mountain. There they had a vision of Moses and Elijah, and they heard the voice of the Lord speak familiar words: "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

So it is that the Baptism of Jesus meant turning from life in Nazareth to ministry in Galilee. Then the Transfiguration was the launch from Galilee to the next phase: Jerusalem. Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem, where he would confront the ruling powers who would stop at nothing to thwart the forward momentum of the kingdom. So much would happen during one week in Jerusalem that it's hard to isolate which moment truly launched the full glory of God's love. In any case, on the night before he died, Jesus said farewell to his disciples. Farewell to this earthly phase of ministry. Where he was going, they could not follow – at least not immediately. Where was he going? What

came next? The cross and resurrection. Even then the pattern would continue. Matthew (28:19) reports that the final words the risen Jesus spoke to his disciples was the Great Commission: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” Imagine, the forward momentum of the kingdom would continue through the disciples and their successors. The fulfilling of all righteousness would launch from the Great Commission and go on from generation to generation.

So how about you? Are you ready to embrace a theology of baptism for grown-ups? Or is baptism just something we do to babies? What we see in the life of Jesus, the adult, is an ongoing pattern of turning from one phase of his mission to the next. For him, the turning didn’t necessarily involve renouncing. For him it was progressing from one good thing to the great thing the Spirit of the Lord would compel him to do. For you and me, I would suggest that unlike Jesus, we have some renouncing to do. Mind you, now, I am not accusing anyone of being like Sonja Henie. My guess is that if I were to search every one of our homes from top to bottom, I would not find a single portrait of Hitler on piano or anywhere else. Nevertheless, our lives tend to accumulate the weight of sin that clings closely to us, and prevents us from running the race God sets before us. Realizing as much can serve as a reminder that baptism for us – as it was for Jesus – is an ongoing dying and rising. It happens not by our own strength, but by the power of God’s Spirit, given to us.

This week I’ve searched my memory for people I’ve known whose lives reflected Jesus’ baptismal pattern of dying and rising. Many came to mind but one in particular was a parishioner in the first church I served in Michigan. His name was Alonzo McDonald, otherwise known as Al. By the time I came to know him, Al had long before achieved great success in life. He had been a Marine, a journalist, a business leader, and an academician. At one point he was the White House Chief of Staff under President Jimmy Carter. He had climbed the rungs of many ladders, and when he ascended to their heights and peered over the walls they were leaning against, he didn’t like what he saw. He confessed that his gods were money, recognition, and power. He saw that he could spend his life chasing after more and more of these, still never to be satisfied. He needed to repent, even to renounce these counterfeit gods. He needed to say farewell to the life of pursuing them, but what would come next? He began asking questions about God and eventually, in his fifties, recommitted himself to Christ. He realized his calling was to embark on a new phase of discipleship. He turned from his former attitudes and embraced a new passion for Christian philanthropy. He started a foundation that endows theological professorships at major universities – Oxford and Harvard among them.¹

One Lent, as part of our parish program, we had a series of dinners during which invited guests spoke about the difference faith made in their lives. Al was to speak on the first night, and he did not disappoint. During the question period someone pressed him on what change, if any, his renewed Christian faith had on his character. Apart from his outward deeds, what about his inner self was different. Al paused for a minute, and admitted it was hard to describe the inward and spiritual grace. Then he said that it used to be, when he did business deals, he enjoyed watching the other guy lose. “When I renewed my commitment to Christ, I no longer enjoyed seeing people lose. I still enjoy doing deals, but now I do them for Christ. I want to see people win.”

To me, Alonzo McDonald exemplified the ongoing baptismal pattern of dying and rising with Christ. Indeed, baptism isn’t just for babies. It is for all of us fully grown people who want to follow Jesus, and go from strength to strength in his kingdom, from this time forth, even forever.

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¹ Information about Alonzo McDonald is based on many personal conversations with him in the early 1990s, and this reflection on his life: <https://providencemag.com/2020/02/let-us-start-building-sermon-memory-al-mcdonald/>