



He Became Like One of Us; May our Baptism Make Us Like Him
January 10, 2021: Baptism of Our Lord Jesus Christ
The Rev. Nicholas M. Morris-Kliment
Christ Episcopal Church, Needham, MA

Oh Lord, to whom the dark and the light are both alike: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be always acceptable in your sight, our rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

I'll start with an excellent, feel-good movie.

The other day, Jamie and I caught the last half of a wonderful film called "Chocolat." It's the story of a single mother who moves into a small French village seeking to build a new life. Scandalously, she opens a chocolate shop just before Lent. The narrative plays out among a collection of oddball village characters. The chocolate shop attracts all sorts, including members of the nomadic Roma community, living temporarily in a boat camp down on the river. The mayor, a follower of rigid self-righteous pieties, though not a bad man, fancies himself the arbiter of town morality. Together with the village priest, he seeks to pressure the woman to close her shop, to shame villagers away from shopping there, and to lead them in conformity to a lifeless code of joyless community life.

One of the mayor's humble followers is a laborer in the village who gets carried away with the mayor's vision. In a moment of madness, he sneaks down one night to the river, where the Roma are hosting a festive community feast with music and dancing. After the party has settled down, and the revelers make ready for sleep, the laborer pours gasoline on the boats, and sets them on fire. No one is hurt, but the barges are decimated, and the community terrified.

When the mayor finds out, he also is shocked, but imagines it "an act of God."

A short time later, the laborer, suffering under the weight of a guilty conscience, comes to the mayor's house, under the cover of night, to confess his deed. The Mayor, not believing his ears, horrified that people might have been killed, shames the laborer, and banishes him from the village. Though continuing his campaign of anti-chocolate repression, the mayor is mortified that the village may believe that he was responsible for the arson.

Destruction of property. Fear and misunderstanding. Displays of guilt. Feelings of shame. A penalty for destructive action. A smattering of a sense of responsibility. A continued, if somewhat warped, commitment to holding a community together. (The movie does have a happy ending...)

How utterly different from what transpired this past week in Washington DC. No shame. No admission of guilt. No sense of responsibility. No repentance. No desire to keep community together. The attack on the Capitol was not a single act by a solitary and pathetic little man, but rather the to-be-expected, crowd-sourced result of the tsunami of years of lies, toxic masculinity, racism, and misogyny; and not only from the President, but from a whole toxic ecosystem of fellow citizens who relished, or perhaps even worse, simply tolerated his hateful venom in a Faustian bargain for economic, political or cultural gain.

Perhaps like you, I find myself cycling through feelings of rage, disgust, fear, hope, determination, resignation and resolution. As I consume print and television media, I discover at various time that have



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a dry mouth, a racing heart, a tight chest, clenched fists, hunched shoulders, Also, I confess: a sheepish awareness of my enjoyment of the addictive pleasure of self-righteous anger.

I'm trying to wrangle all these emotions into some kind of perspective (realizing that all of us are in different places with all of this) that includes loving my neighbor, praying for my enemies, seeking and serving Christ in all persons, loving my neighbor as myself, striving for justice and peace among all people, and respecting the dignity of *every* human being—even a human being who wears horns and a fur hat. My words will certainly be imperfect, and necessarily incomplete.

But lest I get too overheated just yet, let's move for a moment into the cooling and cleansing, fortifying and empowering waters of Baptism. Today we mark the occasion of Jesus's baptism by John in the River Jordan. The story is part of the arc of the Epiphany season, when we trace the movement of Jesus and his message and his power and his love and his Spirit out into the world.

What was this baptism?

It was unique but it didn't appear out of nowhere. Many religions in the ancient world practiced some sort of ritual washing. It signaled either a rite of passage (from girlhood to womanhood, for example) or a rite of initiation (membership into the cult of Isis, for example) or the movement from a profane to a sacred place (say, in the Hebrew Bible, the High priest preparing to serve in the Temple.) By the first century in the Common Era, there is some evidence in Judaism of proselyte baptism—that is, a ritual which signified the conversion of a non-Jew to Judaism.

John's baptism departs in one way or another from these antecedents. It was received passively; it was done only once; it assumed a pre-existing moral change of heart; it was available for all; it didn't presume entrance into a new community to be formed with John at the center. (The Anchor Bible, vol 1)

And so, in those days, as Mark says, people came from all over. We can imagine laborers, brick makers, shepherds, small shop keepers, furloughed soldiers, grave diggers, pita makers, carpenters, masons, prostitutes, tax collectors, mercenaries, flax farmers, olive growers, midwives, fisherman, boatbuilders, potters, tanners.... According to Mark's Gospel, "everyone from Jerusalem and the Judean countryside" came to stand in the Jordan River, to have water poured over their heads signifying a new start, a clean slate, a different direction.... even Jesus was there.

Can you imagine Jesus standing in line for what those around him hungered for, like waiting in line for a precious vaccine?

As we read and hear the story, we know who Jesus is. In listening to the Gospels year after year, we have received the precious and life-giving stories of witnesses to the life and ministry of Jesus woven into the powerful sacred texts of the Church. We've inherited the Creeds which teach us that Jesus is mysteriously, fully, and uniquely Divine, and mysteriously, fully, and uniquely human.



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But that day at the Jordan, it seems clear that nobody was quite sure of any of this, at least until after the Baptism. Even John. He knows he's looking for someone, but he doesn't know who it is just yet, exactly. Many have wondered if even Jesus himself up to that point had a clear sense of what his identity and destiny were. Perhaps as far as he knew, he was just a carpenter on his day off, waiting in line for the promise of new life.

It's like the early Church had to come to grips with Jesus' humility. If Jesus is who the tradition has proclaimed him—fully God, fully Man, without sin!—the text tells us that people came to John confessing their sins!—how were our forebears supposed to depict his baptism at the hands of John? Mark spends very little time on it. There's no conversation between them. Jesus hasn't even pulled his towel around himself, when he sees the heavens ripped open and the Holy Spirit dive-bombing him. In Matthew, there's a terse kind of Chip and Dale, "After you, no after you, no after you!" exchange between Jesus and John, before John finally says, "OK, I'll do it, because it's you." And in the Fourth Gospel, John and Jesus are not even shown meeting at the river.

The humility of this man we call God. He didn't use his privilege to get to the head of the line. He's just waiting his turn like the rest of us. And, like the rest of us, I imagine as he made his rounds this past week, among all of us imperfect creatures, all of us made in God's own image, he was angry and sad, like us, heartbroken to see his name flying on flags over a hateful, shameful display of violence, bile, and anarchy.

He becomes like us, so we can become like him. Because Jesus was baptized, so are we. We want to be like Jesus. So, we do what Jesus does.

Not in a slavish, imitative kind of way that is not who we are. For example, probably none of us was baptized in the Jordan river. We may have been baptized in a river, or lake, or a tank behind an altar if you were raised Baptist, or maybe you were standing in an inflatable kiddie pool like the guy in my "My Big Fat Greek Wedding." If you're watching now, there's a good chance you were baptized as an infant at a bird bath-like font.

He's one of us. He waited in line so we could become like him. How do we become like him? Well, especially in a time like this, we recommit ourselves to citizenship in a different land. For sure, we are citizens of Needham (or Newton or Dedham or Westwood or Wellesley), of the Commonwealth, of the United States. If we are born here, we don't even have to make that decision.

But we also make a decision to live in a different country. We are dual citizens with responsibilities in each of our homelands. One home is the place where we pledge our allegiance. We say with gusto the Pledge of Allegiance: "I pledge allegiance, to the flag, of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands: one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice, for all." But the other, primary home, is a place where we pledge our *lives* and our *obedience*. We say with gusto: "I believe



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in one God, a God of love and justice; I trust in Jesus, to lead the Way; and in the Spirit, to give us strength for the journey.”

Baptism makes us citizens of the Kingdom of God. In the Collect earlier this morning we prayed: “Grant that all who are baptized into his Name may keep the covenant they have made, and boldly confess him as Lord and Savior.”

Our Baptismal Covenant is the Constitution that guides our true citizenship.

It describes the way we become more like Jesus and grow in citizenship in God’s Kingdom on earth, and work for the building of *that* Kingdom on earth. Not some Christian Nationalist thing, but the Kingdom of God for *all* people.

We order our steps by its words as animated by the Holy Spirit. It’s how we proclaim in word and deed that *Jesus* is Lord (not the President) and Savior (Not a political party).

We’re going to recite the Covenant in a moment and receive a bit of Holy Water as a reminder of that Covenant (I’m not sure how that will work over the Internet, but we’re going to give it a try.) But here’s a preview of few of the outward-looking citizenship requirements for members of the Body of Christ in the Kingdom of Heaven on earth:

Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord? Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ? Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself? Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?

When confronted with the kinds of lies, hatred, and malice that culminated not only in the desecration of the Capitol by vandals, the death of at least 5, and the injury of dozens of law enforcement officers, but which threatens to overwhelm our political system and our civic life.....We covenant ourselves to the way of Jesus.

In our Baptisms, we make a decision. And we now remember our Baptism.

And we keep living into it. We make a decision to be like the One who became like us, so that we can become like him.

Amen.