

Beginning with Beloved: A Blessing by the Rev. Jan Richardson:

Begin here:

aching to be new.

Beloved.

Comes healing

to the soul

wanting to begin

again.

*Is there any other word
needs saying,
any other blessing
could compare
with this name,
this knowing?*

Beloved.

Beloved.

*Keep saying it
and though it may
sound strange at first,
watch how it becomes
part of you,*

*Comes like a mercy
to the ear that has never
heard it.
Comes like a river
to the body that has never
seen such grace.*

*how it becomes you,
as if you never
could have known yourself
anything else,
as if you could ever
have been other
than this:*

Beloved.

Beloved.

*Comes holy
to the heart*

In the Christian Liturgical Tradition, the Sunday following Epiphany and the remembering of the Magi, who sought the Christ Child and defied the tyrant Herod, is known as the Baptism of Jesus or the Baptism of the Lord, or in Greek, the Theophany.

It's an opportunity for some profound reflection.

But there's an awkward element to it, especially in a community like the United Church of Canada which tends, like many mainline, liberal, inclusive traditions, becomes a landing spot for folks from many different streams of the Christian way...and of course those from none.

What this means then, is when we speak of things like Baptism we may very well come with many ideas and issues laden upon us, connected to this ritual act.

I think that acknowledging this helps us seek to reflect on this moment in the liturgical story, allowing it to be connected to the modern day ritual of baptism but not bound up in it, not limited by it.

There are many in the community of Knox-Metropolitan United Church who have participated in the ritual of baptism, for themselves, and perhaps for children.

And there are many who, for any number of reason haven't.

My own religious background began in the United Church of Canada, and I was baptised at Westdale United Church in Hamilton, ON in 1980.

But my religious path, eventually lead me into communities wherein infant baptism was not recognized, and so, 21-year-old me felt the need to be re-baptized (although 21-year-old me was a bit of fundamentalist and probably would have argued with me that the first one didn't count) at the Peterborough Christian Fellowship on a chilly Wednesday Evening in December of 2000.

Cheryl grew up in a tradition wherein infants were dedicated not baptised, and then each individual made their own decision about being baptised, which she did at the age 12.

So as a recovering charismatic fundamentalist and a former evangelical Baptist, when Lily was born, we weren't yet sure how we wanted to engage with this idea, and to this day, all 3 of our children have not been baptised – we'll talk with them about it, and play whatever role they want us to in their decision making.

And probably, if we'd been a few more years away from our former religious associations when we became parents, we likely would have done it differently.

Yet performing baptisms and walking with families in the preparation thereof are some of the most meaningful moments in my job. I've baptised plenty of infants. I've baptised teens and adults.

Some will remember Mel Ulmer who used to sit in the backmost pew on the North Side of the Sanctuary, always sporting his Winnipeg Bombers jersey.

Mel asked to be baptised at 84 years old, always asking me *does this have me covered?*

To which I kept trying to insist, Mel, baptism doesn't make us any more in/out/covered/belonging than we are otherwise.

He would thoughtfully pause, and then ask again, *but this has me covered right?*

To which I'd just say, *yup Mel, it sure does!*

Now I say all of this, not be cavalier or out of a lack of belief in the power of sacrament.

I believe that part of loving a tradition, part of engaging deeply and whole-heartedly with it, is to wrestle, and grapple.

Can we honour and take seriously the ritual of baptism while at the same time, holding an idea of it, and a practice of remembering in this moment of our Liturgical journey through the year that is not limited, and makes space for those who have been baptised, and have chosen baptism for those they love, and also making space for those for whom this has not been part of their path?

I believe the answer is yes, I believe our rituals, especially our sacraments, are most rightly understood as open invitations, and not gateways.

And as we dwell in a moment wherein Christianity expresses itself in decidedly exclusive ways, part of the vocational call of a liberal community is to embody an articulation that is robust in generosity (which albeit may look to some like simply wishy-washy and lacking conviction).

I think that it is important, as we read baptism in our text to recognize how thoroughly Jewish this moment is.

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

Baptizo in the Greek dialect in which the Christian Scriptures are written, simply means immerse.

So, John is proclaiming a ritual act of immersion in the River Jordan as a sign of forgiveness of sin.

Sin, of course, is another baggage laden term.

In this moment, the community of Israel is profoundly divided, those who are in collusion with the Roman imperial structure and the elite with great suffering in the communities themselves.

Jesus is sometimes understood in this context as calling the people away from their religious heritage into something new, and John then, in this moment becomes a precursor.

I would humbly suggest that as we understand how deeply Jewish are the Gospel writings, that we find something very different.

This text itself is immersed, saturated, soaked in symbolism.

The River Jordan plays an extremely important role in the mythic history of the Hebrew people.

In the books of Moses, the people are called out of slavery into the wilderness of Egypt, and to get there, they need to pass through the Red Sea. In the wilderness they are given Torah, teachings to embody beloved community.

But before they can begin this project of loving God and neighbour, they must come into the land of Canaan, from the desert of the Sinai Peninsula, which means crossing through the River Jordan.

On one side, symbolically, the people are a collective of former slaves.

On the other, they are the people of Israel.

Abraham's children.

So when the narrative sets John's baptism at that same river it is drawing a parallel.

John is therefore not calling the people to abandon their Jewish faith or society, but inviting them to return to that formative moment and find therein the capacity to find communal healing in the midst of this crisis.

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.

And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him.

And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my child, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

The Dove is connected to another important water laden moment in the Books of Moses, the story of Noah and the flood.

It's a trick and awkward story, one with many more things to unpack than we have time for today.

But after the Ark has floated, carrying a new expression of humanity from one moment to another, it is a dove who comes, holding an olive branch proclaiming that it is time to begin the project of rebuilding human existence – this time marked by shalom/peace rather than violent domination.

And the voice!

The framers of the Lectionary offer us an obvious parallel from the first book of Moses, Genesis.

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.

Then God said,

In Jewish eyes, Jesus' baptism, which comes in Mark's Gospel as the first action of the story, is a story of creation echoing the most important moments of Hebrew mythology.

And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my child, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'