

Love and power Jesus' baptism and ours

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None of the baptisms I have attended lately replicated the drama of Jesus' baptism. I heard no voice from heaven calling out anything. A few robins scuttled around, but I saw no sign of a descending dove. Nor did any of those baptized set out to camp for forty days—though I grant you, it's at least a day's journey from northern Indiana to anything resembling wilderness. We did enjoy communal warmth and verbal assurances of the Spirit's presence. Those baptized spoke words of commitment and ruminated about vocational direction. And the next day, all of us—baptizers,

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baptized, and witnesses—returned to ordinary time and ordinary work and ordinary relationships, almost but not quite the same people who had entered into this ritual.

Quotidian graces are not graces to be dismissed, and I am grateful for the regularity and predictability with which the church practices baptism. Still, I have wondered from time to time why Jesus' baptism and his struggles in the wilderness are not more broadly appropriated by the church for our own understandings of baptism and vocational discernment. These are Bible stories we not infrequently hear read from the pulpit. They are Bible stories we teach and learn in Christian education curricula. They are stories we read in private devotions and around which we engage in Bible study. But they seem far removed from our experiences of baptism and our calls to ministry.

We have our reasons for not holding these stories as close as we could. We may think their relevance is limited to those called to what we used to label "full-time Christian service" rather than to the Christian ministry into which we are all initiated in baptism. I

will leave untangling that one to other writers in this issue. What I want to address here is the notion that that these stories have little to do with us because Jesus, after all, was divine and we are only human.¹

I think Jesus' humanity gives us more trouble than his divinity. It's not comfortable territory, partly because it brings us more closely into relationship with him as a fellow human being, and partly because it opens our hearts to the essential paradox at the heart of the Incarnation. This is liminal space, not neatly defined or easily managed. Entering this space invites us to broaden and deepen our notions of baptism and vocational discernment. These stories have potential to orient us toward something central and vital to faith: a life-changing, lifelong, direction-setting, course-correcting, fire-lighting, fire-tending vision quest.

In Luke 3 and 4, the evangelist records Jesus' baptism and the beginning of his ministry. We hear about Jesus' struggle in the wilderness before he preaches his inaugural sermon at Nazareth and faces down the first attempt on his life—by his own townspeople. These vignettes, more than any other passages in the Luke's Gospel, define who Jesus is, and even more importantly, how he is going to go about being who he is. What sort of Messiah will Jesus become? How will he use his unique personality and power? Will he be Messiah in expected or unexpected ways?²

Baptism

Jesus' baptism was not a coming-of-age rite. By the time of his baptism he had been an adult for about eighteen years. We wonder why he needed to be baptized, and especially to undergo a baptism of repentance. It helps to remember that the word for repentance means not only contrition for and turning from sin but more broadly a change of mind, heart, and direction. For Jesus, his baptism and wandering in the wilderness led by the Spirit signal a decisive turn toward his ministry as the Son of God. This event marks the end of his primary identity as the son of Joseph and Mary, as a citizen of Nazareth, as a carpenter—and whatever else has identified him up to this moment. Now what he is about, clearly and conclusively, is the mission of God in the world.

In contrast to Matthew and Mark, Luke plays down the role of John in Jesus' baptism. In fact, Luke describes Jesus' baptism after

he tells us that Herod put John in prison. Luke does not identify John as the agent of Jesus' baptism; he uses the passive voice:

"Jesus also had been baptized." In all of Luke-Acts, the agency of

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disciples is secondary. Yes, they baptize, make other disciples, heal, and perform miracles, but behind all these actions is the power of God as the primary agent.

That the power of God is at the center of Jesus' baptism, that his baptism is essentially an empowerment by the Spirit, becomes even clearer after the baptism. But perhaps what we have not noticed adequately is that the heart of the Spirit's empowerment is nothing less than the love of God. As Jesus is praying, the heavens open. The Spirit descends like a

dove, and a voice tells Jesus that he is loved, that he is the Son of God, and that he fills the Father with joy. The power of the dove is the mantle of love descending and holding Jesus now and forever. At the beginning of his ministry it is a forceful statement that God is present in and empowering this most dearly treasured human life.

Wilderness

It may be simplistic to say that Jesus' baptism and his struggles in the wilderness are all about power and love. But in some ways, that statement is true. The empowerment of Jesus by the love of God in his baptism is exactly the point. That this empowerment and this love are immediately and forcefully challenged by forces representing other kinds of power and other kinds of love is also exactly the point. Luke Timothy Johnson argues that "against the backdrop of first-century Palestinian political upheaval and popular messianic expectation . . . Jesus eschewed the option of a violent, military, zealot vision of God's kingdom in Israel."³ The central question for Jesus is how to understand and use the love and power he has received. Only when he has dealt with that question is he free to proclaim the kingdom. What Jesus says and does here will determine much of the rest of his course.

Jesus' forty-day sojourn in the wilderness recalls the Exodus and Israel's forty years of wandering in the wilderness. Jesus enters into

his struggle in a similar state of vulnerability and debilitation. It's hardly surprising that the first temptation Jesus faces is to turn stones into bread, a move that would mimic God's provision of manna for Israel in the wilderness. We have sometimes explained the problem with the devil's suggestion as self-interest: Jesus refuses to use his power in this way because it would benefit himself. The implication is that fulfilling one's own needs is somehow wrong for Jesus, but the Gospel makes it clear that seeking the fulfillment of one's own needs is not a moral failure;⁴ God loved Jesus and God loves us. But the way a disciple seeks to meet these needs is carefully prescribed: it is to God that the faithful disciple takes these needs, in simple trust.

The temptation here, as it has been for disciples through the ages, is for the Son of God to take God's role in the fulfillment of human needs. Foundational to the kingdom offered by the devil is the understanding that one seeks the fulfillment of human need by human power to provide for oneself and one's own. Love can be so defined, and it often is. In a weary world, this temptation is a powerful one. Jesus' response comes from his reading of Deuteronomy 8:1–6, which recalls Israel's experience of hungering and being fed in the wilderness. There the lesson is that Israel does not live by bread alone but by the power of God who provides both the word and the bread by which human life is sustained.⁵

Here, in the wilderness that is reminiscent of the wilderness on the other side of the Jordan, Jesus chooses the kingdom represented by the God of Israel rather than the devil's shadow-kingdom, which parodies the true kingdom of God.⁶ Ironically, Jesus proves that he is the Son of God not by transforming stones into bread, as the devil proposes, but by *not* transforming stones into bread. Human need is not to be brokered by the powers of the world. Human need is the arena where God loves and works in the world. Recognizing God's providential sphere does not, of course, mean that human beings are not to be involved in meeting human need in the world. It does mean that we come to these important and holy tasks in an attitude of trust rather than in the illusion that we are in control of making the world right.

In the second test, the devil shows Jesus all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time (4:5). The devil promises to transfer the authority and the glory of all these kingdoms to Jesus,

if Jesus will only transfer his allegiance to the devil. A divided love is a perennial issue for the children of Israel and for the followers of Jesus. Deuteronomy 6:10–15 is poignant. Moses is warning a convention of the Israelites that when they get into the land they will face the temptation to follow after other gods, even though their loving God has provided for them beyond their imaginings. When they enjoy prosperity, when they are surrounded by vineyards and olive groves, when they are filled with good things, will they remember the God who brought them up out of slavery?

This temptation and Jesus' victory over it will have an enormous impact on his ministry. When he decides to maintain his allegiance to the God of Israel, to love God alone, Jesus is limiting himself and his actions as well as freeing himself and his actions. In both of these first temptations, Jesus is determining that the love around which he orients his ministry and the power he uses to minister will not be his own or that of the worldly kingdoms. The love he offers will be the love of God—and it will be noncoercive. The power he uses will be the power of God—and it will be nonviolent. How things will all work out will emerge

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in the Gospel narrative, but the course is set here in the wilderness. Jesus will not seek to meet human need by human power, and he will not seek to implement the mission of God using the means of contemporary political and social systems.

In the third temptation, the devil tests most directly Jesus' own trust in God. This test seems to us the least rational. We see the devil asking Jesus to trust God to triumph over gravity, and given our scientific worldview, we find it puzzling. But for Jesus, this temptation may have been the most difficult of the three, because it is a test of how much he loves God. The devil takes Jesus up to the top of the temple and tempts him to throw himself down from it. If you trust God enough, trust that the angels of God will keep you. Doesn't God love you? Since Jesus has shown himself as yielding to God's providence in the first temptation, and as unswerving in his allegiance to God in the second temptation, in this third

attempt the devil uses the distortion of a twisted heart to try to sway Jesus. Jesus' identity as God's Son and his loyalty to God alone have proven true. But this temptation, for all its twisted logic, is a question of the heart. And Jesus responds, also from the heart, that it is not the nature of God to demand such tests of love and loyalty. There will be tests, to be sure, including the ones that come in the night as Jesus prays on Olivet before he is arrested, but these tests are not just for the sake of being tested.

Sight to the blind

Jesus' ministry only really begins when he has settled in his own mind a basic direction about how he will love and how he will use the power he has been given. The struggles are not over, but he has enough vision to begin. He chooses to begin in his hometown, to make a stand there that will not be popular. The center of his mission, as he develops it, is release to the captives/sight to the blind/freedom to the oppressed.⁷ That mission plays in Peoria—or Nazareth, in this case. God loves Nazareth, after all.

But Jesus goes on to insist that this love is not only for Israel; it's also for the nations. Love limited by national boundaries is not God's love but one of those parodies of love so dear to the devil's heart. And that word does not play so well: the inauguration of Jesus' ministry ends in a near lynching, portent of so much yet to come. But the heart and mind of Jesus are securely anchored in the power and love of God, and without returning the hostility of the crowd, Jesus walks on. The devil's tempting parodies have not won the day.

Remembering our baptism

A Roman Catholic friend uses one of her tradition's practices to remind her that she serves a countercultural Christ who shows the way through nonviolence and suffering love: each time she enters the sanctuary, she touches her hand to the water in the baptismal font and makes the sign of the cross. I envy her this regular way to remember her baptism.

Baptism is the place where we learn how loved we are. It is the place where the Spirit's power fills us. It is the place where we take strength for the tough and essential choices we must make about how to live out of that love and power. Jesus' baptism and the

tests in the wilderness have significant implications not only for how we practice baptism and vocational discernment in congregations but also for how we remember and appropriate our baptism and vocation.

Baptism is a singular event, but it cannot be contained in a single event. We need to return to it. Vocational discernment is

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more intense at certain junctures, but it is never completed. Our struggle to discern and reject the false kingdoms we find on every side, with their parodies of love and power, is ongoing. Our vocation as servants of the unconventional Messiah needs to be renewed and repeatedly reoriented to the truth.

I am convinced that our maturation as Christian disciples involves integrating the love of God into our lives, following the wounded and resurrected Messiah, and being enlivened and emboldened by the Spirit.

Baptism and vocational discernment are focal points for that maturation—an orientation at the beginning of our Christian life that stays with us until we lay down our lives at the throne of grace. Let us find ways to remember our baptism.

Notes

¹ The relevance of Jesus' temptations to our own vocational discernment has been dismissed not only by some pastors and congregants but also by some scholars. In an otherwise wonderful book, *A Community Called Atonement*, Scott McKnight contends that the suggestion that Jesus is an example in the wilderness scene is "preposterous," because we are not tempted to jump from high buildings, etc. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 57). It is an especially disappointing conclusion because McKnight, more than most scholars, makes a powerful argument for the practical and ethical implications of the cross. Not many of us are being crucified these days, either, but the cross has distinct ethical dimensions. The cross as Jesus' last temptation is intrinsically related to the wilderness temptations in Luke 4. Both events have significance for how we live.

² The title of Messiah, or Christ, is not used in the baptism and wilderness texts, but the idea is a live issue in them. The angels announce Jesus as Messiah in 2:11. Luke notes in 2:26 that Simeon had been promised that he would see the Messiah before death. In 3:15, John protests that he is not the Messiah, but the one coming after him is. Then in 4:41, Jesus does not allow the demons to speak because he knows that they know that he is the Messiah. Messiah is a fraught term in first-century Palestine, a term filled with nationalistic and militaristic expectations. Those expectations are the very good reason Jesus is reticent to claim this title for himself. When Peter comes up

with the designation in 9:20, Jesus is still not ready to go public with it. Finally, in 20:41, we come as close to Jesus' own thinking about the term as we can get—in an ironic and enigmatic reference to David. Jesus wonders how the Messiah, or Christ, can be David's son and also the one David calls "Lord." The aspect of David that Jesus mentions specifically is David's military prowess. By this time in the narrative, though, it is becoming clear that Jesus is on his way to becoming a very different kind of king than David. He is not meeting conventional hopes for the Messiah—a point Luke reinforces several times in the passion narrative (22:67; 23:2, 35, 39).

³ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, Sacra Pagina series, vol. 3, edited by Daniel J. Harrington (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), 77.

⁴ The Lord's Prayer includes the request for daily bread (11:3). Children asking parents for food is a basic human behavior that Jesus uses as a norm for disciples in approaching God (11:11–13). The widow who hounds the judge to grant her justice (18:1–8) becomes an example of faithful prayer.

⁵ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I–IX*, Anchor Bible 28 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981), 1:511.

⁶ Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, 75.

⁷ For those who care about such things, the story of Jesus reading Isaiah at Nazareth is a lovely and compelling chiasm, a model of the form. The standing up/sitting down, opening the book/shutting the book all lead into that powerful Isaianic vision of release, sight, freedom.

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