

WGUMC January 20, 2019 The Baptism of John
Luke 3:7-17; 21-22

John the Baptist came preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, and Christians have always wondered why Jesus would need forgiveness. Apparently, the earliest Christians had the same question. So, in the Gospel of Matthew we read about how Jesus comes to the Jordan River and John says, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” And Jesus answers, “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” [Mt 3:14-15]

That answer just raises more questions. What does he mean: “fulfill all righteousness?” I can’t say for sure, but one thing I know is that another way to translate the word for “righteousness” is “justice.” So every time you see the word “righteousness” in the Bible, don’t just think piety or purity; think about justice. I don’t believe that I am going too far out on a limb to say that Jesus was baptized to fulfill God’s justice.

It is not obvious what baptism has to do with justice, until we

take a closer look at John's baptism. Chapter 3 begins with, "In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of God has come near." Repent means literally "turn around," "turn back." That's why I paraphrased our baptismal liturgy this morning. Where the hymnal says, "Do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and repent of your sin?" I said, "Do you turn away and pledge to keep away from all the evil, hurtful things in this world?" I like to use that paraphrase because I think it's more understandable and also because it gets us back to the true meaning of repentance.

We're going down the wrong road and we turn around. We turn back to God. But this is not a warm, fuzzy coming home, like when you come home from college and mom cooks for you and does your dirty laundry. No, the turning around that is ritualized in baptism is about leaving the comfort of home and heading out for the kingdom of God. As John would put it, our home—the world most of us live

in—is where we may have two coats but a lot of folks have none; we may stuff ourselves but others starve; where some have power and the rest are oppressed. This is not a place we want to turn back to. So what do we do?

That’s what the people who were being baptized by John kept asking him, “What then should we do?” Apparently, they came up out of the river realizing that turning back to God means taking responsibility for God’s world. And John answered them, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” He told the tax collectors not to steal from the taxpayers. He told the soldiers not to abuse civilians. For John, getting baptized meant you were on your way to the kingdom of God and you better start acting like it.

Perhaps that is what Jesus meant when he said that he was being baptized to fulfill all justice. He was seeking out John’s baptism and accepting all that it was going to require of him. From that point on, everything he said and did was an embodiment of

God's justice.

Parents, beware. When we baptize babies in our church, we are baptizing them into the same responsibility. Baptism isn't a certificate; it's a summons. It isn't a proof of membership in some spiritual country club; it's a passport to the kingdom of God, and that's a kingdom of justice.

I grant you that that's not usually how we think of baptism. We talk about it as a gift, and it surely is. In fact, baptism is a whole sack of gifts. The first gift is the forgiveness of sins. We get a clean slate. The Bible says that the sins of the parents are visited upon the children to the third and fourth generation and psychiatrists would agree with that. All kinds of pathologies run in families. But whatever our parents or grandparents did, whatever legacy of wrong they left to us, whatever pain or destructive pattern we perpetuate, in baptism, we are washed clean of all that. None of it has to cling to us anymore. We've already been forgiven for it, so it doesn't have to hold any power over us. That is a huge gift, if we can accept it.

Baptism is also the gift of new life, or at least the possibility of one. Now that we have a clean slate, we can start again. Baptism gives us the power to let a different spirit live inside us, a different reality, a different set of rules to guide us. Many of us are moving to a more plant-based diet these days. A new report out says that we have to cut way back on meat consumption by 2050 or the world will not be able to feed itself. If you think about it, that's going to change our whole way of life on just about every level. But if you really want to preserve the environment and save humanity, we should consider living a Jesus-based life. That would be even more radical and more transformative than giving up red meat.

Another gift of baptism is a new family. When we are baptized, we are adopted into the family of God. Now, we often say that everyone is a son or daughter of God because God made them. But when we are baptized, we also become sisters and brothers of Jesus Christ. He's the firstborn in the family, the oldest brother we all look up to even though none of us can live up to. So we know that, like a

good older brother, Jesus goes ahead of us and makes sure none of us fall too far behind.

A fourth gift of baptism is the gift of a new country, and boy could we use one. The country I'm talking about is not the U.S. or the United Kingdom. I'm talking about God's kingdom of peace, joy and justice. [Rom 14:6?] We can live in that kingdom right now, but few of us manage to. So what then should we do? The answer to this question is the final gift of baptism, though sometimes it won't feel like one.

Baptism is an initiation into the struggle. Anyone who has ever tried to live in the direction of God's kingdom knows what a struggle that is. Martin Luther King, Jr. was a Baptist who perhaps more than anyone in recent memory understood both the spiritual and moral implications of John's baptism. It was his gift, his calling to invite others into the struggle for the kingdom. He even had the name for it.

Not until this week did I know that Martin Luther wasn't King's

original name. When he was born, he was named after his dad, Michael. But in 1934, the Rev. Michael King, Sr., went on a trip to Rome, Tunisia, Egypt, the Holy Land and ended up in Berlin to attend a World Baptist Alliance convention. Adolf Hitler had just become Chancellor of Germany, and the Baptists who gathered in the homeland of Martin Luther responded by issuing a declaration, denouncing “all racial animosity, and every form of oppression or unfair discrimination toward the Jews, toward coloured people, or toward subject races in any part of the world.” Michael King, Sr. came home a changed man and so he changed his name to Martin Luther King and gave that name to his son as well. [Deneen L. Brown for *The Washington Post*, Jan. 15, 2019]

In the Bible, big life changes are marked by name changes. Abram becomes Abraham, Jacob becomes Israel, and Saul becomes Paul. Michael King became Martin Luther King in preparation for a struggle not unlike that of the Protestant Reformation, a struggle for the kingdom, for justice and for freedom.

Many years later, after the younger, now famous, King delivered his “I Have a Dream” speech in Washington, he took his dream on the road. He came to the Cow Palace the next year, and in the crowd of thousands who flocked to hear him was a man and his young daughter, Pat Fitzmaurice, whom we know as Pat Farrow.

Pat died this week, after a valiant struggle with some unknown and untreatable lung disease. You could say that Pat struggled her whole life, and I’m not talking about her many health problems. Like Martin, she struggled for the kingdom of justice and freedom. She was baptized Catholic, but she found a home in the Methodist Church where she could speak her truth, pursue her passion, and advocate for the poor and for all victims of oppression. How fitting it is that Pat died on what would have been Martin Luther King, Jr.’s 90th birthday.

Pat was named by her mother and father but she was claimed by God. She really lived her baptism and calls each of us to do the same. What then should we do? How can we embrace our baptism?

In Pat's honor, I went to the Women's March yesterday because she would have wanted to be there. I wore my clerical collar to say that Jesus has claimed me. But you don't need a uniform. If you are baptized, you have put on the Lord Jesus Christ [Rom 13:14] and every time you act with kindness and with justice, other people see Jesus. Every time you give someone your love, the heavens open just a bit, the Holy Spirit descends, an inner voice says, "You are my son, my daughter; with you I am well pleased." And the rest of us get a glimpse of God's kingdom. Whenever you remember your baptism, we are thankful. Amen.