

Epiphany 3  
Church of the Good Shepherd, Silver City, NM

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Rev. Paul Moore

Walter Brueggeman in his little book, The Prophetic Imagination, brings out an idea about the Kingdom that gives a way to explain baptism that will rock your boat. Many people have asked the question "Why did Jesus have to be baptized, since he did no sin?" Here would be Brueggeman's answer: *Jesus' baptism was a sign of the death of an old dispensation and the birth of the Kingdom of God.*

He starts with Moses. When Moses takes the people of Israel out of Egypt something cataclysmic happened. The Israelites had been under the rule and oppression of the Egyptians for 400 years. They had cried out to the Lord. They seemed to have no power against their Egyptian overlords. Just when it got unbearable God stepped in. In the plagues God dealt a deathblow to each of the Egyptian gods. In the crossing of the Red Sea the Israelites were freed from oppression, and released to live a new kind of living. The Egyptian gods no longer had any sway over the Israelites. They were free to worship the God of their ancestor, Abraham. In a sense there was a death and resurrection for the Israelite people.

Brueggeman continues with the story. The people move into the Promised Land and go through the time of the judges. Then they ask for a king. Remember, they had been freed from a king already—the Pharaoh of Egypt. Samuel warns them, but they want a king anyway, so they get Saul, and then David, the greatest king of Israel. Solomon was raised in David's shadow. When he took over as king there are telltale signs. In spite of his wisdom, he began to control the people just as tightly as Pharaoh had so many years before. There was forced labor, there were high taxes. Pretty soon the whole thing had to do with the throne and not the wellbeing of the common people. His sons were worse, until it got unbearable. The common people cried out to God, and the prophets warned the king, all to no avail. They were once more oppressed, but now by their own king.

So a foreign king comes and conquers them, the king of Babylon. He takes the cream of the crop off to Babylon for at least 70 years. During that time the Prophet Jeremiah writes his wonderful, tragic and sad book of prophecies. He describes beautifully the irony of the condition of the Israelites being dragged off into captivity. But then something happens. Cyrus, king of Persia, who has now conquered Babylon, lets the people return. Whereas until the Exile there is evidence that the Canaanite gods were never really eradicated from Israel, much to the consternation of the prophets. There seems to be no evidence after the exile that the Israelites were ever again tempted with the gods of the Canaanites whom they conquered to take over the Promised Land. It's

like a death and resurrection.

Fast forward again. Israel has never had its political independence since. After the Persians the Romans conquer the Holy Land and Judea becomes a province of the Roman Empire. They are, however, an occupied people. Foreign soldiers police their streets, and they aren't known for their fairness or their kindness. The power gets concentrated in the Temple. Temple worship, and its derivative, the Synagogue system, begins to dominate the life of the average Jew. Pretty soon the Temple and those who control the Temple control the people. The Temple begins to take on a stabilizing force in the society of an occupied people. It keeps peace with Rome—but at a cost.

John the Baptist comes along preaching repentance and baptizing people for the forgiveness of their sins. John is not endorsed by the leaders of the Temple. He is a free agent, and his popularity strikes a blow at the control the Temple had on people. The authorities are miffed, “This is dangerous. There's no telling what he will tell the people. They're gullible. They'll believe anything he says!”

They send an official delegation on a fact-finding tour. “Why do you baptize?” They demand. “Are you the Messiah?” (Which being interpreted means, “Are you going to admit right off that you're a cracker short of a box?”)

He quotes Scripture at them: “I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, make straight the way of the Lord.” Then he makes it worse. “I baptize you with water, but the one who comes after me will baptize you with Holy Spirit and with Fire.” In other words, if you think this is dangerous, wait until the Real Dude shows up! Jesus' baptism anticipates the end of a corrupted and power-driven Temple system.

On a deeper level his baptism foreshadows his own death and resurrection, which is the final and culminating event from which Moses, the Exile, and Jesus' birth and earthly ministry, begun at this baptism all draw their meaning. In his descent into the water the old system dies, and in his rising again out of the water a new thing comes into being. That new thing is the Kingdom of God. It breaks the power of not just this system, but of every oppressive system, and sets us free—free to live in honest, open relationship with God. He was not baptized for his own sins, but for ours, and not just for our sins, but for all that works against the purposes of God in the earth.

This morning we baptize. If this is what baptism is, and I believe it is, then what does it mean for these candidates for baptism and for us? First of all, it constitutes a breaking free for these little ones. We pronounce them freed from Egypt's tyranny. They are declared free from all that oppresses, diminishes or defaces the image of God in them.

They are now considered members of the Kingdom of God.

Secondly, it is a recommitment to our own baptism. We reaffirm our own baptismal covenant as these candidates make their first confession of it. It makes of baptism a reminder that we are constantly called to a life of dying and rising again. Our baptism calls us to live with our eyes wide open. In what ways does the world we live in tempt us to go back to Egypt? In what ways do we inadvertently become accomplice to the forces of injustice, oppression and evil within and around us? To what do we need to die that we might be liberated?

It might be a personal habit that mitigates against your spiritual vitality. It might be a life situation that is no longer compatible with your commitment to God. It might be social structures in which you are no longer willing to participate. It might be a call to start something that makes your world more closely aligned with your image of the Kingdom of God.

It demands the hard questions of our common life and a commitment to practices that honor God, the earth and one another, like revisiting the reasons why we recycle, or considering serving only free-trade coffee in spite of the cost, or thinking about what kinds of outreach really should command our energy and resources., and how do we best take care of our own as siblings in the Family of God. It might mean stepping out and taking up a cause that promotes justice and the dignity of all God's children. We need not be afraid of the Cross, for we know that Easter awaits.

Finally, it commits us as a community of faith to the vitality and potential of these candidates. If we are going to do these things for ourselves, and if we truly believe in them, then we commit ourselves to bringing these children up in such a way that they, too, live on the edge of their baptism. They, too, will learn to live with their eyes wide open.

This is dangerous stuff. Good people have been thrown to the lions, burned at the stake and beheaded for this. It carries within it an inherently counter-cultural, subversively revolutionary element that just won't go away. Whenever we baptize we put the world's unjust systems on notice. We will die to its influence within that it might have no power over us, and we will struggle to lovingly, tenderly and tenaciously change what is without.