

“Crossing the Bar”

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Matthew 3:13-17, Acts 10:34-48

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Why do we like to laugh at baptism? Jokes often grow from very serious areas of our lives fraught with mystery. Baptism was a favorite source of laughs on the “Hee-Haw” TV show for the Prime Minister of Humor, the late Grady Nutt. I recall one show where his whole routine centered on river baptism. He noted that the minister needed to be careful to face the candidate downstream to avoid the river running up the candidate’s nose. He had an album of baptismal stories that was recorded at a Methodist picnic. Dean of Wake Forest Divinity School Bill Leonard told of his first experience with baptism in the dignified Crescent Hill Baptist Church of Louisville. His candidate was a young man about a foot taller than Bill, and both of them went under together and emerged to the sound of applause from the congregation. A Baptist minister friend who grew up Presbyterian once commented that immersion is hard to pull off without a laugh. My friend Bill Unger grew up in Goshen, Indiana. He told me a family story of his father’s baptism in a local river. The young teen wiggled loose from the pastor and swam under water to the other bank where he slipped out and walked home to greet his grieving parents on the front porch. I had a few close calls of my own over the years, but learned from my sprinkling friends in ministry that immersion does not get all the laughs. I think of Martin Marty’s list of often quoted bulletin blunders: “Baptism will be conducted following the service in the sanctuary. Children will be baptized at both ends.”

Confusion about Baptism creates discomfort. One of my teachers Dale Moody wrote a book by the title *Baptism: Foundation for Christian Unity*. The title played on the oxymoron. Baptism throughout Christian history has been a source of major theological controversy and a line of division between the denominations. Even the baptism of Jesus in the Gospels comes across as a subject of mystery and discomfort. Jerome recites a story from a gospel according to the Hebrews. Mary suggests that she and her son be baptized, and Jesus challenged, “In what have I sinned that I should go and be baptized by him?” That seems to be the issue.

John preached, and the people came—not just the righteous Sadducees and Pharisees, but the outcasts, the hated tax collectors, and, according to Luke, soldiers. I am sure that some of the righteous kept their distance from the water lest someone think that they might also need to repent. John was a popular evangelist. His threatening message was just what “those sinners” needed. I have always found that people who press for more damnation and less comfort from the pulpit seldom include themselves among the sinners. The appearance of Jesus was somewhat ludicrous. The Gospel of John manages to avoid saying that Jesus actually submitted to baptism. Mark and Luke address a past event. Matthew offers an apology from John, “I need to be baptized by you,” and the only explanation from Jesus, “it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.”

Jesus may have been out of place, but he was not inconsistent. Throughout his entire ministry, Jesus was criticized for associating with the wrong people. He seemed to prefer the company of religious and social outcasts. Most interpreters explain his baptism as an act of inclusion. At the calling of Levi, the tax collector, Jesus says, “I have come to call, not the righteous, but sinners.” (9:13)

We should not be surprised to find Jesus at the Jordan, although his baptism by John proved to be something of an embarrassment for his followers. Why should Jesus stoop to be baptized by someone less than he? Why should he gather with the sinners of Israel to symbolize repentance from an evil past which he had not lived? The vague comment in Matthew that Jesus came to John to be baptized in the Jordan to fulfill all righteousness sounds a lot like the stock answer we learned as children—“Because.”

Baptism is a picture of transition. To be sure, Jesus came to be identified with the sinful people being baptized by John, but he also came to the place which had long been known as the boundary for the covenant with God. For Jesus, this was the beginning of a journey out into the mission to which he was called. From this day forward, Jesus would live marginally on the boundary between the world and the Kingdom. He would become the door of transition between the hope and the fulfillment of his people. The Jordan formed the eastern border of the Old Testament nation of Israel. Why didn’t John meet the people on the beach at the Mediterranean Sea on the western boundary of Israel where water was abundant and definitely more accessible? The Jordan flowed through a godforsaken wilderness, the place of the Temptation of Jesus that would follow associated in the Jewish mind with demons. The wilderness was probably the location of John’s home with the Essenes, a desert people who believed in the radical holiness of life that meant total separation from the rest of the world. Today we know the Qum-ran community best for the Dead Sea Scrolls. In addition to the legacy of ancient scriptures, they may have provided the key ideas for John’s moment in history. Some believe that Jesus may have spent time with this austere community, possibly the source of the temptation story. The Essene communal baths of purification were a known symbol for the repentance. John just extended the message.

If you want to ignore history, you can view the Jordan as nothing more than a convenient source of water; but this place had long been remembered as the boundary to the Promised Land. It stood between the wilderness wandering of the escaped slaves from Egypt and an established nation. The Jordan was always more than geography. Like many rivers, the Jordan served as a natural boundary. It separated rootless wandering from

established hope, slavery from freedom, and total poverty from the abundant land flowing with milk and honey. When Joshua sang his swan song to Israel on the eve of his death, he gathered the tribes of Israel at Shechem to review the terms of their covenant with God and reminded them of the major boundaries which they had crossed in the Exodus. God had led them through the Red Sea into the wilderness of Sinai. Some forty years later, with great pomp and ceremony, this rag-tag mob of nomads crossed another body of water, the Jordan River, the gateway to Canaan. The Jordan was the place for “therefore,” the place of radical transition. Crossing Jordan had become a symbol, not only for entrance into a new home, but the boundary where people reclaimed the promise and responsibility of their covenant with God. Long before John, the waters of Jordan babbled a message of radical transition from death into life with God.

Life turns on the choices we make. We choose our destiny. We are not the passive victims of the winds of time and circumstance. We choose our ruts and our commitments. For Israel, the primary issue was, “which god is God?” They were perpetually drawn away from the covenant which had brought them to the Land. The choice was symbolic at Jordan, but the symbol was lived out in daily existence. Every morning the word of commitment had to become flesh and blood. Promises made had to become either promises fulfilled or broken. The Jordan was always the Great Divide of Israel. It still is. Baptism is about identity. As Jesus was identified with us in the baptism of John, we are identified with Christ in the baptism of Jesus. Here we set the most important landmark in our personal biographies. Depending on the commitments we make or refuse here, the choices and directions we take, nothing else in life matters.

Believed to have been written in 1889 after a serious illness on board ship, Tennyson’s personal reflection on death pictures a ship’s journey across the sandbar at the entrance of the harbor into the open sea. “Crossing the Bar” is a metaphor for the final journey from the harbor of life into the sea of death. At the author’s request, it is always placed at the end of his published poetry. It is perhaps Tennyson’s best known poem, often read at funerals. The figure of death as the boundary of life crossing into an endless sea captures the imagination and projects both courage and hope in the face of the unknown.

Sunset and evening star,
And one clear call for me!
And may there be no moaning of the bar,
When I put out to sea,

But such a tide as moving seems asleep,
Too full for sound and foam,
When that which drew from out the boundless deep
Turns again home.

Twilight and evening bell,
And after that the dark!
And may there be no sadness of farewell,
When I embark;

For tho’ from out our bourne of Time and Place
The flood may bear me far,
I hope to see my Pilot face to face
When I have crossed the bar.

Paul was later to write, “We have been buried with him by baptism into death.”