

First Rites

sermon digest

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Isaiah 43:1-3a, 16-21; Luke 3:15-17,21-22

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Growing up in the Baptist, free church tradition, I inherited a dim view of ritual and formality in the conduct of worship. At the extreme, Primitive Baptists were opposed to prepared sermons and ministerial education lest the dynamic movement of the Spirit be impaired by human intervention. As I matured in faith and pastoral experience, I discovered that we weren't as original and dynamic as we claimed. While we criticized other churches for written prayers, our extemporaneous prayers tended to repeat and rearrange the same phrases. While we looked down on churches that followed liturgies set by their denomination, we tended to sing the same hymns, to repeat the same order of service, and to hear sermons on the same subjects and texts Sunday after Sunday. The Billy Graham Crusade services always moved toward an altar call with the invitation hymn "Just As I Am" and the same order of movement and the same or similar words of appeal to "come forward to accept Jesus as your Savior." This is ritual.

At a ministerial lunch in Louisville in the 1970's, I sat across the table from a Catholic priest in our community. He noted that after early Mass on Sunday morning he often turned on the TV to watch the Walnut Street Baptist Church worship service. He expressed amusement with the Baptist claim to be free of ritual, noting that Pastor Dehoney used exactly the same words every Sunday morning to announce the offering.

We are creatures of habit. Most of what we mean by being conservative in politics and religion is *opposition to change*. Some of us get irritated every year by government intrusion into our ordered lives with Daylight Savings Time that upsets the daily timing of sleep, meals, and activities. The time change is one among many intrusive changes in life routines that demand adjustment and effort. We tend to live by repetition of same acts at the same times, requiring little or no effort in planning or forethought. Like riding a bike or driving a car, we do not think and decide every move and act of the day. Learning and developing habits helps to take some of the effort out of life. When we moved in 1988, I found that my whole world had been turned upside down. I had to find my way to new places and develop new routines. Every day was demanding new decisions that caused me to wonder why I thought I wanted to move.

Truth be told, all of us are creatures of habit. In my hometown, the Galbraith family lived across the street from our church. The extended family included several dogs that freely roamed the neighborhood. The Galbraiths were active members who filled places of leadership in church, so they routinely crossed the street at the same time every Sunday morning; and their dogs learned to follow the family and to wander around the churchyard until services were over. On the occasional Sunday when the family happened to be on vacation, the dogs crossed the street and hung out at the church all morning as usual. The animals had learned the routine. They had a sense of the day of the week and the time of the day that set them in motion every Sunday morning at 9:00 AM. One Sunday the pastor praised the dogs for being better Christians than the inactive members. He called them "faithful." But in reality, the dogs were creatures of habit. The Russian physiologist Ivan Pavlov would call them "conditioned."

What about it? Are our Christian rituals little more than conditioned reflexes to memorized stimuli? Do we come here routinely, habitually, thoughtlessly to act out our religion, to go through motions that mean nothing and change nothing in our lives? Wayne Oates (*The Psychology of Religion*, p. 183ff) observed that our habit and ritual in religion complement our spontaneity and freedom to form a rhythm like the play between law and grace. Oates noted that the most spontaneous, free religious expressions tend to morph into rituals. If the rituals meet real needs in the lives of the people, they continue. If not, they die. Some rites of the church have proven to be vital and have been continued through the ages. When we pray the Lord's Prayer together, I always have a sense of connection with the Christians who have preceded me here. This has been the model prayer of the church from earliest Christian history. For me, it is always more than ritual; it is prayer.

One of the mysteries of the Christian faith is the baptism of Jesus by John. If Jesus is Savior and Lord, why should he submit to the baptism of John? Baptism was not an ancient practice established in Jewish memory; it was the opposite. John introduced a new ritual to symbolize a major transition in life. It was the First Rite of commitment to the God of history. Throughout his ministry in the Gospels, Jesus was involved in the existing rituals and festivals of the Jewish calendar as a participant who had been affected by the drama and meaning of these events. He also was identified with the establishment of ritual events in the Christian faith, primarily Baptism and the Table. If we take Jesus as an example, we cannot dismiss ritual as meaningless routine.

Rituals are boundaries for the big transitions of life. The Jordan River drops 590 feet from the Sea of Galilee to the Dead Sea as it flows for more than 200 miles over an 80 mile course through some of the most desolate land in the globe. The Jordan flowed through a godforsaken wilderness. It was probably the place of the Temptation of Jesus and was 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 Qumran community best through 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 repentance. John's baptism could have been an extension of the Essene message.

The Jordan 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.

Fred Craddock (*Interpretation, Luke*, p. 51ff) calls the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan a "revelatory drama" in three parts. First the heavens were opened as in the promised transformation of Isaiah 64:1-4, the beginning of a new age. Second, the Holy Spirit comes upon Jesus in the form of a dove, marking and enabling the ministry which is to follow. Finally, witnesses report a voice from heaven declaring, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Although there were witnesses, the affirmation addressed the man Jesus. Here baptism symbolized the crossing of a boundary into mission, the mission of the Christ.

Following the death and resurrection of Jesus, Baptism became a rite of passage into the life of discipleship, the Jordan River of the Christian life. It was the act by which one chose to be a follower of Christ. Baptism is the ritual where we choose our identity with Christ. Baptism is a statement of faith through which one acts out in the drama of death, burial, and resurrection the work of Christ as the promised hope, our Canaan. Baptism meets the Table of the Lord's Supper in the event of the cross. Both of the central rites of Christian faith are dramas of re-enactment of the suffering love of God in Christ.

In his first Corinthian letter, Paul gives the earliest account of the rite of the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11:23-26) and an account of the meaning of the act as it was lived out in the experience of Christ and repeated in the life of the church:

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.