

BAPTISM
Randall Tremba
November 13, 2016
33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

* * *

Two weeks or so ago with Election Day on the horizon, I decided to depart from the scheduled lectionary readings for last Sunday and this. I knew what Tuesday portended. I suspected that no matter the outcome of this far from normal contest we would be left with a fiercely divided nation and a large swath of dismayed, angry and terrified citizens.

I thought nothing would serve us better than to be reminded of—on both ends of that ominous week—to be reminded of the two greatest gifts the church offers us—the Eucharist and Baptism. Last Sunday we reconnected with the Eucharist. This Sunday baptism.

I'll get to both but first listen to this ancient promise from our great ancestors, a promise that resonates in the waters of baptism. Four thousand years later it still informs and shapes our vocation as disciples of Christ.

Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country, your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, I will bless you, so that you will be a blessing and in you all families of the earth shall be blessed." (Genesis 12:1-3)

That's our vocation inherited from our great ancestors through Jesus, a calling to be a blessing to others, *all others*. We share that vocation not only with our Jewish and Muslim cousins; but with every soul ever born. For every one is born out of and into, not original sin, but an original blessing.

And now the gospel. But first let me say: Jesus could not have said, as you're about to hear: "in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit." That phrase did not exist then. It was inserted in the gospel fifty some years later in keeping with the spirit of things Jesus actually said.

Furthermore, his instruction to "baptize" could not refer to what eventually became a sacramental rite of the institutional church. Jesus launched a movement; he did not create an institution.

So something else is going on in this gospel lesson. Long before it was a sacrament, baptism or "to baptize" simply meant "immersion," an immersion into an overwhelming experience that transforms lives. It could be a baptism of fire, tears or a flood of immeasurable love.

Jesus said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me—which is to defiantly claim that supreme authority is not held by any empire, political leader or political system. Wherever you go make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them—and I would add, by example—teaching them by example everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:18-20)

And finally this from Rev. William J. Barber II, leader of Moral Mondays in Charlotte, NC. These are words spoken in the wake of the cold-blooded murders at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina:

As we cry today, let our tears be a fresh baptism and a commitment to walk together and refuse to get weary. As you can see, baptism is way more than a ritual of the church.

This past Monday I was preparing two sermons, each depending on Tuesday's outcome. But I soon realized the sermons would be the same no matter the outcome, no matter the victor.

Please don't gloat. Please don't despair.

Yes, everything has changed. And yet nothing has. Our work as the baptized servants of Christ has not change. If anything, it's become more urgent.

It's easy to say cheerfully: *Well, the sun came up on Wednesday. Let's sing kumbaya. Don't worry; be happy.* Yes, the sun came up on Wednesday. But it is foolish and dangerous to ignore the dark clouds on the horizon.

No matter the outcome, no matter the victor, the campaigns exposed vast and ugly divisions. Those divisions were not created by the candidates or campaigns; they were exposed. As someone said, at last we can face the "shadow" that's been lurking in our nation for a long, long time.

Elections are about choices. Tuesday we had two. Today we have three. We can elect to gloat; or, we can elect to despair; or we can elect to live into hope for the healing of our nation.

I knew this past week would be excruciating in one way or another. And that's why last Sunday I drew your attention to the Eucharist as the real Presence of Christ.

And that's why today I draw your attention to Baptism—the other great gift of the church. Both Eucharist and Baptism gird our hearts in hard times.

Last Sunday some expected me to preach about the high stakes and social distress provoked by this election. I considered it; it was a preacher's dream.

But my pastoral instincts overtook my preaching instincts. As a pastor I thought what we needed most was not more words about *that* but rather a strong reconnection to the Eucharist, not just to the ritual itself but to a Eucharistic life beyond this Table, beyond one ritualistic moment. By the way, Eucharist is not a Christian monopoly; it is a universal possibility.

And so I spoke about Christ's Real Presence in the Eucharist. As we prepared for the communion meal, I offered a prayer for Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton and their partisans.

May their wounds be healed. May they be cleansed of hatred, bitterness, fear and a spirit of vengeance. And may our nation be healed of its brokenness and polarization.

The Eucharist does not isolate us from or spare us the pain, tears and fears of the world. The Eucharist connects us with such pain. That morning I was counting on the power of the Eucharist, the Real Presence of Christ to strengthen us no matter what happened on Tuesday.

I will be with you always, in every crumb of bread, in every sip of wine, in every step and breath you take. When your life is broken or crushed, I will rise up in you.

Last Sunday I drew us close to the Eucharist.

Today I want to draw you close to Baptism.

Baptism isn't what many think. It is not the washing away of original sin, or saving a soul for heaven. It's not a quaint and charming family party for cooing over a beautiful baby. Baptism is rather a singular, traditional initiation into a movement, the living breathing, worldwide community of the Beloved, by whatever name or none. Baptism at the Font prepares us for many "baptisms" yet to come.

Baptism is not a monopoly of the church. It, too, is a universal possibility of immersion into Love in one way or another. Today the baptized community must rise up more than ever.

Arise, all women whether your baptism be that of water or of tears! Arise. (Julia Ward Howe, May, 1872)

And if you listen you can hear that cry today all across our land: *Arise, all women whether your baptism be that of water or of tears. Arise.*

Baptism initiates us into a movement of resistance and hope.

So how do we get to that from “in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit?”

“In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit” is more than a magical incantation to utter over wet heads. “Name” in that culture meant more than a tag or label. “Name” meant “being,” the whole reality of a person. Unfortunately, the traditional formula is couched in patriarchal language but it certainly doesn’t have to be. It could be Mother, Child, Wisdom and many other expressions. The words are not magical.

The name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit—and as I like to add at Baptisms: *Mother of us all*—is a traditional symbol for “love-in-community,” love from all of eternity and for all of eternity. It is an unending love.

And so we are called by our baptism to be bathed and soaked in such love and to bathe and soak the world and its people in love time and time again. Today the baptized community must rise up more than ever.

Nothing about this election has changed our calling to be servants of Christ’s love. Whether you were strongly for or strongly against one or the other candidates, we now are all strongly FOR each other and strongly AGAINST any further damage to our nation or any of its people. There are too many ugly divisions in our nation to allow partisanship to be one.

This election opened our eyes to hordes of desperate people living lives of quiet despair. We must now devote ourselves again to abolish bigotry, violence, misogyny, sexism, greed, racism, poverty, addiction, inequality, and elitism. We must live into hope.

The President-elect is a winner. Obviously, he knows how to win. He likes a challenge, the bigger the better. He now faces the biggest challenge of his life.

And so I pray that President-elect Trump will be blessed with a heart and mind devoted to winning, winning back the many he has wounded and terrified. It can be done. But he alone cannot fix it.

Whether he tries or not, whether he succeeds or not, we are called by our baptism to be light. We are called to walk and work confidently, knowing the Beloved is with us to the end of the age, including the end of a world many thought unshakeable.

O Beloved, raise up in us a great love,
to meet despair with hope and healing,
to meet injustice with courage and mercy,
to meet the future with strength and tenderness
born of your mighty resurrection in us.
Fill us with your peace and raise us up,
we, your broken people—raise us up.

Steve Garnaas-Holmes

* * *

HYMN
Come, Live in the Light