

## BAPTISM OF OUR LORD | JANUARY 8, 2023

ISAIAH 42:1-9 | PSALM 29 | ACTS 10:34-43 | MATTHEW 3:13-17

Sometimes the readings we hear during worship are really exciting. The walls of Jericho tumbling down. The parting of the Red Sea. The gift of the Spirit at Pentecost. If you made them into a movie, you would want Michael Bay as the director. Some readings we hear during worship seem really boring. Less *Fast and the Furious* and more *My Dinner with Andre*. Today's reading from Acts seems like one of the boring ones. It's just these two guys sitting in a room talking. But if you know what to look for, it actually becomes a really dramatic tale. But the drama is mostly in the subtext.

In the world that the New Testament was written in, there were clearly defined social hierarchies. There were hierarchies of income and wealth. Better to be wealthy than not. Hierarchies of education. The more education the better. There were Roman citizens and non-citizens. And it was better to be a citizen. There was a class of people who were enslaved, which was the least powerful group of all. And you have hierarchies of sex, gender, ability, and a whole bunch of other identities.

And you didn't just have one identity. To use our contemporary language, people's identities were intersectional. So someone like St. Paul would be a Jew, a citizen, not particularly wealthy, pretty well educated, and a free person. And these hierarchies all cut across each other. You could be a poor citizen or a wealthy non-citizen. You could be a poorly educated free person or a well-educated enslaved person.

The upshot of all this is that whenever you encounter someone in the world of the New Testament, you are always negotiating where you are in the hierarchy. How am I supposed to relate to this person? Is this someone whose interests I need to take seriously? Or is this someone whose interests I can more or less ignore? And which identities do I take into account when I make that decision?

You can see some resonances with our own context. Do we have hierarchies of power and privilege? Yea. Of course we do. If you don't think we do, you can borrow my clerical collar some day and see how people treat you. It's different. Most of people have enough tact not to be explicit about those social hierarchies, but they come out in coded language. An easy coded one that people use all the is "normal people." When we describe someone as "normal," what identities does that include? In my experience, what we consider "normal" is rarely about what's statistically common and much more about who we like interacting with. There's an implicit hierarchy that structures society.

And you could even imagine taking some of those hierarchies and bringing them into church to help us order our relationships. If you've been around here a long time, that bumps you up the hierarchy. If you pledge a lot, that bumps you up the hierarchy. If you grew up in the Lutheran church, that bumps you up the hierarchy. If you laugh at the jokes in the homily, that bumps you up the hierarchy.

In fact, you could imagine the early church just copying the hierarchies of the world around it to order their community. And yet, what's remarkable about their community is that they are given—or at least aspire to—a different way of organizing their community.

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And the key lies in how people enter this community. How do they enter? They don't apply. They don't get sponsors to vouch for them. They don't buy a membership plan after a seven-day trial. They enter the community through baptism.

That makes all the difference. When you are baptized, you are joined to the body of Christ. And in the body of Christ, there is no hierarchy. Everyone who is there has integrity. They are there not because of how much money they earn or how desirable their life seems or how religious they come across or how good they make us feel, but simply because the Holy Spirit has adopted them as children of God.<sup>1</sup>

And this is what makes today's reading from Acts is so interesting. This is a speech that Peter gives to a Roman centurion named Cornelius. Peter is in his home when this happens. And remember what I just said about all those social hierarchies in the world of the New Testament. When these men meet, it's not just them. It's all of that social baggage. The weight of those hierarchies. Who's better educated? Who's a citizen? Who makes more money? Who has the right religious background? We expect that when these two men meet, they're going to enter into a negotiation.

But look at how Peter begins his speech. "I truly understand that God shows no partiality." Instead of a negotiation, Peter preaches the gospel. If you want a super literal translation here, it would be something like, "God is no judge of appearances." When God sees, God doesn't see any of the arbitrary markers that we come up with to define value. God sees us through the body of Christ.

So Peter and Cornelius don't need to figure out who has more power or status or influence here. They don't need to figure out how to relate to one another on the hierarchy because the way they relate to one another is through Jesus. That's why this story is so dramatic. Because Peter and Cornelius get a new, counter-cultural, world-upending way to relate to each other. Not as people in competition with one another, but as fellow members of the body of Christ.

And it's the same way with us. You know this. I know you know this. Three or four years ago, you wrote a welcome statement to invite people into participation in our community. And you could have begun by saying, "We're friendly..." or, "We're mainline Protestants, so tend to be pretty open-minded..." But that's not what you said. You said, "Through Christ..." You get it. That's the key. We relate to one another through our baptisms.

The most important thing about us is what God says about us in our baptisms. It's the same thing God the Father says about Jesus in his baptism, "You are my child, my beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

So remember your baptism. Remember what God says about you. Every day, we get bombarded with messages that tell us that life is a hierarchy, and we're losing our spot. We're not wealthy enough. We're not thin enough. We're not working hard enough. We're not smart enough. For one reason or another, we're not the right kind of people. But just

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<sup>1</sup> Principle 14 of *The Use and Means of Grace*: "In Holy Baptism the Triune God delivers us from the forces of evil, puts our sinful self to death, gives us new birth, adopts us as children, and makes us members of the body of Christ, the Church. Holy Baptism is received by faith alone."

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because you hear something a lot, it doesn't mean it's true. And the truest thing about you is what God says about you once and for all in your baptism. You are loved.

But don't just remember your baptism. Remember your neighbor's baptism. And remember that's what God says about them. The people we don't like, the people we wish would just go away and be someone else's problem, and the people we are indifferent toward, these are people that are loved by God. And they are loved by God whether we think it's a good idea or not.

Like Peter, our job is not to decide who should or shouldn't be a part of the body of Christ. The Holy Spirit isn't waiting for us to sign off. Our calling is simply to witness to the extravagant mercy of God that is poured out for all God's people in Jesus Christ. Love given even to people like them. And love given even to people like us.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor