

Here is my servant, whom I uphold,  
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;  
I have put my spirit upon him;  
he will bring forth justice to the nations.

During Advent, I read two lines from a Native elder I have not been able to get out of my mind: “Unity cannot exist when exclusion is allowed to occur....What brings us together cannot exist in the same time and place as what keeps us apart.”

Nothing, I think, expresses the tragedy we find ourselves in more succinctly. I seek unity in a world that wants only to tear me to pieces. I see the Bible as full of seemingly unresolvable contradictions. Is being chosen by God my ticket to an easy life or is it the promise of something far more difficult, and ultimately far more beautiful? And what does the Feast of the Baptism of Jesus have to do with all this?

Two thousand years ago, John the Baptist emerged from the wilderness, a place beyond human civilization and human hegemony, to cleanse a chosen people alienated and traumatized by both. He listened to their laments and washed away their ignorance and their pain. He also refused to baptize those who thought they had all the answers.

And now, on the First Sunday After Epiphany, Jesus, the one who really does have all the answers, comes to John to be baptized. John resists him, too.

But Jesus answered him, ‘Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.’”

Have you ever wondered about this? What is all righteousness? Why did Jesus who was without sin submit to a ritual designed to cleanse him of sin? Was his baptism a foretaste of what baptism would ultimately become, a rite of initiation into the Church? How do I know who really has the answers and who is just making it all up? Was Jesus' baptism for him, for us, or both?

If baptism had been only about washing away individual sins, Jesus might not have chosen it as the initiation into his ministry. But if baptism recognizes that I live in a sinful world which demands my allegiance and obedience and deceives me about truth itself, then it has a great deal to do with Jesus. By accepting baptism from John, Jesus is opening his eyes to all the pain in the world. He is choosing loyalty to God over engagement with earthly rulers. He is joining himself with innocent suffering. He is saying I will show you the way, the truth, and the life which can flourish even in the face of a regime whose currency is death. By entering the River Jordan as our ancestors did, Jesus announces that he can show me the way back out.

Jesus' baptism washes away the power of evil to reveal the shining light of God. Or as St. Athanasius was later to say, "God became human so that humans might become God."

Thus, Jesus' baptism is an act of inclusion. He tells us we can pay taxes to Caesar without becoming Caesar. Everyone has a part to play in God's story. It may not be easy when times get dark, but with the help of God and fellow friends and disciples it can be done.

It may be one of the great ironies of our spiritual tradition that baptism, which began as a universal sacrament of forgiveness and renewal became the mark of Christian exclusivity. In the early days of the Church, people received baptism as adults, accepting a way of life that they had carefully studied, which promised to lead them beyond conflict and fear. By the Middle Ages, when Christianity became less about Jesus and more about allegiance to kings and building the empire of “Christendom,” people would baptize sinless infants because the church taught them that these babies would go to Hell if they died unbaptized. The moment you threaten innocent babies with Hell, you risk seeing the faith as more focused on death than life, turning the gift of eternal life into a contest about the afterlife rather than a way of living with grace and integrity no matter who you are or where you happen to be, whether in this world or some other.

The ones who find it hardest to understand God are those who wield earthly power. Earthly power comes with having the answers, and it is at this point that I hesitate. I’ve enjoyed enough privilege and handed out a sufficient number of answers that I might qualify for that “brood of vipers” John refused to baptize, people who were so invested in running things that they were impervious to any ideas but their own. I know I can be that way sometimes.

God can’t change me if I refuse to be changed.

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That said, I wish there might be less conflict in the world. There are days when I read the Bible that I think that its most common prayer is to “protect me from my enemies.” Or crush them. Or let me plunder them.

Then Jesus comes along and tells me that the only way I can deal with enemies is by loving them. I do not have the ability to do that on my own. I cannot learn love without a community. I cannot do that without trusting God. Which again raises the question, is the God I see the God of Jesus or a projection of my own interests?

“I am the way and the truth and the life,” Jesus taught his disciples at the Last Supper. “No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.”

There are two ways to read that passage. Both are true, but one truth leads to a way of exclusion, the other to a way of unity. “No one comes to the Father except through me” has been used as a way of saying if you aren’t Christian you will go to Hell. But the statement that comes directly before that says something very different. “I am the way and the truth and the life.” I AM is the name of God. God is fully present in Jesus of Nazareth, but God is also fully present everywhere else. Including Hell.

Every life, while connected to every other life, is absolutely unique. Every life, every stone, every atom and molecule is part of the same creation. Which is to say, every one of us is an only child of God. To Jesus was given the grace to understand what being a child of God truly entailed. A moral being, he went to his death willingly.

Even though he was afraid, and the face of imperial power was both heartless and terrifying, he trusted completely that life can survive death. He also knew that there can be no life without suffering. Seen in retrospect, suffering may be the darkness that gives birth to light, the winter that melts into spring, but at the time it is very difficult. All of us, without exception, suffer. Jesus suffered. But what Jesus, the inclusive one, knew is that suffering does not have to distort, desecrate, deform, or destroy. Suffering can be a teacher. Suffering can render me more compassionate and show me the way of love more truly.

Exclusionists justify oppressing others and owning everything in sight on the basis of their being the chosen ones, entitled to outsource whatever makes them uncomfortable, the only ones deserving of power and salvation, while inclusionists know that whenever the least of us is consigned to misery, we are all injured. That may be why Jesus' most important acts were healing those who hurt and feeding those who hungered.

Which brings us back to the baptism to which Jesus submitted "to fulfill all righteousness."

By letting John immerse him in the same waters as everyone else, Jesus was showing us that it was not all about him. He was only the teller of a story much larger than he was, the story of all life and all nature, the story of God. And we, too, can be like him, not because, as Paul likes to say, we have proved ourselves worthy of adoption," but because as God's creations we are born with God within.

And then here's this real kicker to Jesus' exclusive power, also in John's gospel. "When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew to the mountain by himself." (Jn 6:15) What Jesus knew well and the rest of us know less well is that every royal crown is in fact a crown of thorns because every earthly crown is a crown of force.

In baptism, Jesus, God's chosen son, rejects his own exclusivity and enters our story. He comes to John, to give himself to us, to affirm that he is fully one of us, washing off every image of power, all pretense that power is force, and emerging naked and clean from the Jordan River. And God confirms him with the words "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

And since Jesus lives fully in our story, so do we have the chance to live fully in Jesus' story.

Are you beginning to see why Jesus was both blessed by the Holy Spirit and sent into the desert to be tempted? Are not our lives like this as well?

Jesus doesn't want me to make him a king. He wants much more. He wants me to make him my friend. Welcome to that time of year when Jesus' ministry begins: when we all meet Jesus again for the very first time.

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my chosen, in whom my soul delights;  
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he will bring forth justice to the nations. Amen.