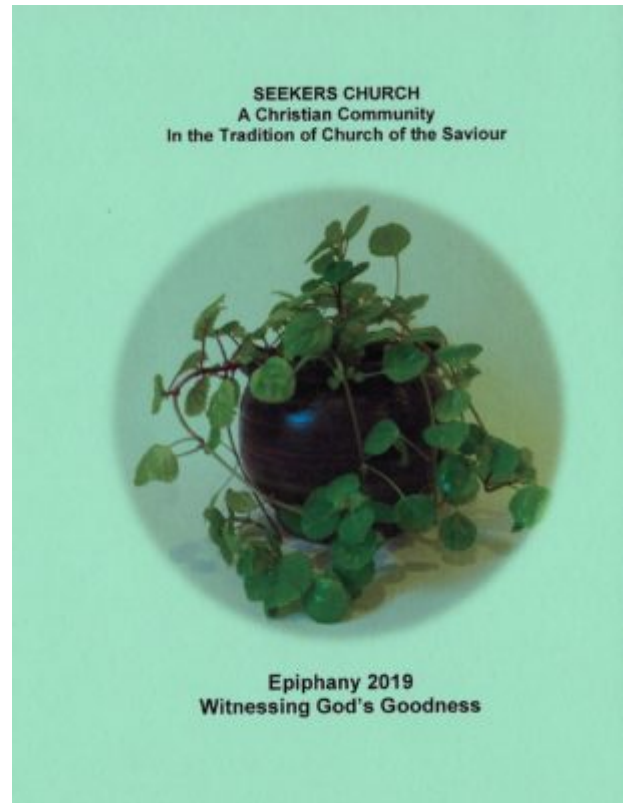


A Sermon on Baptism by Cynthia Dahlin

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The Baptism of Jesus

Good Morning. Today, our gospel reading is from Luke, who describes the scene when Jesus went to the Jordan River to be baptized by John, his cousin. When the ceremony was over, the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus embodied in a dove.

We have completed the Christmas season, and skipped to Jesus' adulthood—this is his christening—his transition from acting as the son of God to his full ministry; it is his anointing. But what did that baptism really mean?

QUESTIONS TO THE CONGREGATION:

How many of you have been baptized?

How many were baptized as children?

How many as adults?

How many of you had a formal Christian education process before baptism?

How many were baptized by full immersion of your body?

How many by sprinkling or anointing of your head?

Would a couple of you tell me what your baptism meant to you?

Which of your stories matches the Seekers doctrine of Baptism as a sacrament?

MEANING OF BAPTISM AT SEEKERS

That was a trick question—Seekers does not have official doctrines of baptism, communion or confirmation. And as for the other sacraments, we rely on stewards to define their time and feeling of ordination, the determine the limits of what is allowed for marriage ceremonies, thanksgiving and memorial services, and for all members to define what they need for confession or healing. We rely on mission groups and community to keep our practices within the definition of seeking justice, loving kindness and walking humbly with our God. So in general, we all look to baptism as a sign that we have accepted Jesus as our savior—and spend lots of nights in the School for Christian Growth discussing and defining what that means in our lives and becoming accountable for acting that out in our daily lives. And as a Protestant community, we also see baptism as a promise of the whole community to try to support each member in their spiritual journey—it is a corporate sealing of the individual into the whole body of Christianity. Many denominations have a doctrine printed in their hymnals and in their Books of Worship, which chaplains tend to carry around—in the New Century Hymnal, the baptism service is on page 31. But now, you can search the internet and find creative ways to baptize, just as there are so many creative weddings—but as long-time members know, Seekers has

many creative baptisms in our own history, from immersion at the Lake of the Saints, to a baby pool here in the sanctuary.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF JESUS' BAPTISM

But Jesus was not baptized into Christianity as Christianity did not yet exist. He was a Jew, and he was baptized by John, his slightly older cousin. Scholars think that John's baptism ministry was one to offer repentance and cleansing—which was required before a Jew could enter the temple—in such a way that it was open to all. The other mode of ritual cleansing was offering livestock or first fruits of the field—and this was expensive. A baptism could be seen as a form of mikvah—the ritual baths that women still use in Jewish culture and it did not require the death of a bird or livestock. The descent of the dove after the baptism is an important sign included in the gospels of Matthew and Mark, as well as in Luke, to show that Jesus did not need repentance—he was being anointed to begin his ministry. After his baptism, Jesus went into the desert for 40 days of silence and meditation, resisted temptation by Satan, and returned to Galilee, and began preaching and performing miracles. So the baptism was a critical starting point, a turning from preacher into leader.

BAPTISM IN OUR OWN LIVES

So how does this affect us as Seekers? Over time, I have absorbed the Quaker way of describing that there is a bit of God in each of us. So as we accept our own baptism, I believe we also should see that we are given the chance to be cleansed and re-energized in our own ways of being the body of Christ, the hands and feet to act to bring a better world and to love our neighbors into creation. Our baptism was not given just to make us feel better, although confession and redemption always does make us feel lighter and more virtuous, but baptism is also to empower us, to make us want to seek justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God.

When Ron and I went to Israel 4 years ago, I was struck by how many very fervent Christians were in line to be rebaptized in one of the three places which are ritually preserved as the historical site where Jesus was baptized. (The places are close together, as also are the three possible places in Bethlehem of the birth, but different denominations have built different structures and have access—and my feeling is it doesn't matter, the water of the Jordan flows by all of them within minutes.) When I saw these groups in line and shuffling forward into the Jordan, I realized I had strongly internalized the teaching of my confirmation that you can only be baptized once. To get rebaptized, I had been taught, is to idolize the person you think is more holy and will upgrade your baptism—and that is not the point. Once baptized, I learned, you have been named as Christian and part of the community and that is that. But to see all these people, mostly African and Asian and American evangelical Christians, all in busloads with their pastors, all these people wading into cold winter waters, my hope was that each one would be reenergized to serve their community, to do good and seek justice.

During my first years at Virginia Theological Seminary, I had occasional contact with Benedictine spiritual directors (I didn't have regular sessions as I was not Episcopalian, so it was perhaps viewed as a waste of their resources) and I found that the more the supposedly conservative brothers had studied, the more lenient they were about doctrine. The Benedictines wanted us to do good and try to love members of the congregations or groups we served—they were more liberal about rules, what we looked like—and in those days when women were not ordained in the Episcopal diocese of Virginia—what gender we were. I realized that opening some of these definitions and practices can give people breathing room, an ability to come to a Christian community, even if they do not agree with every letter of the doctrine or every practice. We have, at Seekers used the wording of “reaffirming” a baptism

rather than rebaptizing in some cases, but we see that sometimes a person has felt they have fallen away enough to want to start over—cleanse themselves and join the community.

What I'm hoping is that you will think about Jesus' baptism and think about your own. If you need a ritual cleansing and repentance, consider this next time you take a bath or shower. Think about feeling cleansed in the spirit and waiting for the holy spirit to come and visit. I miss Jacqui's stories of talking to Jesus in her hot tub—clearly this was a warmer type of rebaptism! And if the ritual of confession and worship together each week keeps you topped up, and you don't need to think about periodic renewal of your baptism, that is fine, too—that's what Celebration Circle is trying to do—renew your spirit to send you out to seek justice and love kindness. Finally, if you were too young to feel the dove alight on your shoulder at your baptism, perhaps if you were baptized as a baby or young child, I pray that you are open to feeling her peck at your cheek to get your attention sometime soon. I think sometimes when we are worn down, and not taking any steps to renew our spirits, the dove comes, and we wave it away, thinking it is only a pigeon.

Peace be with you.