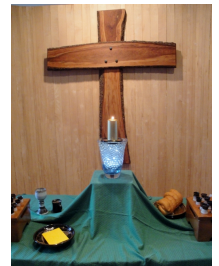


“The Subversive Spirit of Jesus’ Baptism” by Ian Carr McPherson

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The First Sunday After the Epiphany

Out of sheer curiosity, I decided to review the liturgy outlined for this Sunday. When Peter informed me that today was a reflection on the Baptism of the Lord, my first thought was, *Not the best week to invite the [Unitarian Universalist](#) to speak.* I was elated that he had given me an out by telling me to just talk about my experiences at [FLOC](#) and [Discipleship Year](#). But soon the beauty of the selections from the lectionary overwhelmed my initial trepidation. So, perhaps foolishly, I will try to hold both these Biblical passages and my experiences in DC together—and still get us out of here in time for lunch.

In case you were wondering, the passages for this week are Genesis 1:1-5, Psalm 29, Mark 1: 4-11, and Acts 19:1-7. Upon first glance, the only thing tying these four selections together is water imagery. In the first verses of Genesis, we find the *“Spirit of God hovering over the waters.”* In Psalm 29, David discusses the power and glory of God using the metaphor of a storm, noting in three different places that the *“the voice of the Lord is over the waters,”* *“the Lord thunders over the mighty waters,”* and that *“the Lord sits enthroned over the flood.”* The New Testament scriptures reference water as part of the sacrament of baptism. It is within these early verses of the gospel of Mark we find John the Baptist’s famous saying, *“I baptize you with water, but he [Jesus] will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”* While the last

selection from the 19th chapter of Acts makes no explicit reference to water, Paul does echo the sentiments expressed in Mark's gospel, drawing a distinction between John's baptism of repentance and the baptism of the Spirit.

You may have noticed that I skipped the really important part, the focus of today's liturgy. Let's return to Mark 4: 9-11: *At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."* This moment is considered to be a particularly significant theophany—or clear, visible manifestation of God to man—recorded in the gospels. Naturally, it has always been an important part of the Christian tradition, but the Baptism of the Lord is a relatively new addition to the liturgical calendar. It was only one of three stories included in Epiphany Sunday before the mid-twentieth century, when Pope Pius XII instituted it as an independent liturgical celebration and other traditions followed suit.

In my view, Jesus' baptism was significant—and liturgically distinct from Epiphany—because it revealed more than Jesus' identity as the Son of God; **the act itself revealed the character of the God Jesus came to represent.**

This realization struck me when, upon my second reading, I rediscovered these texts as commentaries on God's power. In Genesis, preceding the act of creation, God hovered above the waters. Then, in a show of creative power, God spoke to separate light (which she saw to be good) from darkness, fashioning day and night from nothing. In his Psalm, David similarly envisions God above the waters. He sees God's sovereignty as destructive rather than creative—God thunders, her voice powerful and majestic, breaking cedar, startling nations, shaking deserts, twisting oaks, and leveling forests. These images move David to call upon all beings to glorify God in her magnificent power. For this God, David wrote, sits not only above the water, but over all nations and all of nature as the supreme ruler. There is a sense of awe in this text, a deep and fearful reverence for an omnipotent God. However, not unlike couplets found at the end of the modern sonnet, the last two lines of the psalm introduce a new perspective on the theme of God's

power. The 11th and final verse reads, “*The LORD gives strength to his people; the LORD blesses his people with peace.*” The psalmist ends with a somewhat startling and benevolent image of this awe-inspiring and omnipotent God, one who sits far above and yet remains deeply invested in the fate of her people.

But this is nothing compared to what comes next. For, as we know well, the vertical relationship celebrated in the Old Testament (in which the Lord looks down to give strength and bless the people) would soon be completely transformed in the New. The first chapter of Mark (thought by many to be the first Gospel to be written) shows us a very different—and, dare I say, more accurate—image of God. The account doesn’t go into much detail, but I imagine Jesus’ baptism to have occurred something like this: After baptizing the masses, John goes off on a long self-deprecating rant (“*After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie.*”) and before he can even finish describing how unworthy and weak he is compared to God in all her glory and power, Jesus shows up, interrupts the whole thing, and asks if John could baptise *him*.

What a scandalous image. For the first time, we do not see God hovering above the water in power (even benevolent power), but held beneath it by a crazed, bug-eating prophet from the wilderness—a mortal man. Think for just a moment beyond the trite ritual or even the sincere symbolism behind the baptism most of us grew up with and consider the sheer vulnerability of offering to be held under water by another. It is notable that only after Jesus allows himself to be submerged by John does God break open the heavens, identify Jesus as the Son of God, and send the Spirit to descend upon him. To demonstrate her particular—even peculiar—vision of power, God no longer sat above the water *in* power but below it, *empowering* us.

I believe the God of Jesus is a subversive God (which is among my favorite descriptions of the divine). I believe this is so because the power that Jesus revealed did not come from the top down; it rose from the bottom up and emerged from within the relationships between his followers. This subversive work was continued by the Holy Spirit, which broke the boundary between heaven and earth at Jesus’ baptism and remained behind to empower the early church. In fact, because Mark’s account of this story includes the voice of

God, the descending of the Spirit, and the person of Jesus, for many in the Christian tradition it is also celebrated as the revealing of the Trinity—the fullness of God’s communal nature.

At this point, you’re probably wondering what any of this has to do with FLOC or Discipleship Year, and why a Unitarian Universalist is celebrating the Trinity or harping on the importance of Jesus’ baptism within the Christian tradition. The answer lies within what I believe to be the political theology set forth in Jesus’ baptism—carried forth by the work of the Spirit—and the nature of God as revealed through the Trinity. [St. Augustine](#) once proposed a beautiful image of God as lover, Jesus is the beloved (or the object of that love), and the Spirit as the love shared between them. This was brought to my attention by a theologian named Mark Lewis Taylor, who similarly proposed that the personhood of the Spirit within the Trinity was actually *interpersonal* and discussed the Spirit’s “mystical communal interpersonalism” and its “liberating focus.”

Because its inspiration is not tied to institutional power or oversight, and its personhood is difficult to pin down, the Spirit tends to show up within the more communalistic, democratizing, and liberationist forms of Christian thought. Within the Christian tradition, it has long been the member of the Trinity most difficult for any orthodox pen to circumscribe. As scholar of religion [Linda Woodhead](#) has noted, the Holy Spirit “remains the rogue element in Christianity,” which challenges “the Christian preference for higher power” and qualifies its “preference for stability and changlessness.” Since the inception of the intuitional church, she continued, predilection for the Holy Spirit within the mystical and democratizing impulses of the faith has stood in direct opposition to the more hierarchical and authoritarian elements of Christianity.

A quote attributed to Lilla Watson, an indigenous Australian activist, sits above my desk at FLOC: “If you have come here to help me, you are wasting our time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.” As we celebrate our 50th anniversary this year

at FLOC, we are preparing for some big changes outlined in our strategic plan. The part I am most directly involved with is the conversation around changing the curriculum from a youth development to youth empowerment model. Beyond the academic benchmarks it takes to gain postsecondary access and success, we will now foster a sense of civic engagement with our students. We are already tackling big issues this semester, including police violence, gentrification, bullying, and the implicit messages within media consumed by young people of color. This is exciting work, but it is all too easy to be swept up in the glory of it all, the power of sitting above these large issues where the individuals involved seem to be ants at this scale. The temptation from this perspective might be to offer one's help, which is to miss the underbelly of truth—that you are part of these systems of power, that in many cases you are a willing participant and that you are blinder to your privilege than you will ever recognize on your own. Your “help” may very well be as destructive as a storm.

But if you start from the position that *you* need liberation from this position of privilege—from the psychic harm it has inflicted upon you and the material harm it has inflicted upon your world and your neighbors—and if you recognize that this liberation comes from the Spirit whose work is always communal, interpersonal—only then will you see the veil between heaven and earth rip open. Only then will you confirm your identity as a child of God.

I recently wrote an article in [Callings](#) about my experience at FLOC. I worried that it sounded pretentious, and maybe it does, but within the context of this discussion, I think it is even more relevant. I wrote:

“[At FLOC] We host a kind of controlled chaos, but it is often within the commotion that I find those ‘thin places’ where the ostensible division between heaven and earth melts away. If I look closely, I can see the divine move within each silent smile, each impromptu dance, and each celebration of success. Providing my students with the resources they need to access quality postsecondary opportunities and career success is my small contribution to the move for educational justice in D.C., but it is truly the laughter I share with them that keeps me going to work each day.”

I see the Spirit move within and in between those with whom I have the

privilege of engaging in community.

The transformative power of community was made all too real to me just a few months before I finished my graduate work in St. Louis. I received word that one of my closest friends through high school and college had committed suicide. Having struggled with my own depression and anxiety, I suddenly felt as if I couldn't breathe—as if I were underwater. But I had a rare sense of clarity, a need to bask in the loving support of my community at home. So, I returned to North Carolina. There I received healing sufficient enough to carry me through my graduate work, which I completed several months later.

I hadn't been in DC a week when tragedy struck again. My best friend's mother took her own life in response to her daughter's suicide—a strike to the heart from which she never recovered. This time I was unable to make it home. I knew that it was financially, logistically, and emotionally impossible for me to do so. The only thing I knew from my previous experience with this kind of loss was the power of community. I stepped out, knocked on the door nearest to mine, and asked my housemate Emily to sit with me as I mourned. She held my hand as I cried. She offered no trite words of comfort—just the healing power of her presence.

There was something there with us in that moment—shared between us but not quite of us either. I believe it was that transgressive, subversive Spirit of God—that disruptive love which shatters the binaries of heaven and earth, life and death, holy and profane, slave and free, male and female, gay and straight, white and black. It broke open the gates of heaven and continues to move, shattering the ostensible divisions between each one of us. The good news of Jesus' baptism is that God is no longer above the water but both beneath it and *between* the temporal and eternal, tearing the veil between them. Like Jesus, may we continue to be pulled up out of the depths of the troubled waters in our own lives. May we be able to breathe again and open our eyes only to be greeted by the loving power of community and the affirmation that we, too, are children of God in whom she is well pleased.