

## Baptism of our Lord 2017

I remember, as a bigger child, helping my dad as an acolyte on the Sundays he baptized children at our church in Tennessee.

The font was in a transept area of the church, and baptisms took place after the main service, with the family of the child and the child's godparents gathered around.

The rest of the congregation had departed and was settling into their Sunday midday routines.

These baptisms were brief affairs, and the family and godparents and child would soon enough themselves be on their way to luncheon somewhere,

all delighted with their little one,

he or she welcomed into their family by the ritual,

and perhaps giving thanks for the child's new life in Christ as well.

Those baptisms, I think, were experienced more as a private good thing than a public or cosmic one,

as a comforting rite of passage,

rather than as the beginning of a vigorous discipleship,

an active following of Christ in the world.

It had been that way for a long time.

A friend of mine researched and wrote a book about the practice of baptism among the rich Anglicans of the Virginia tidewater in the colonial period.

Their baptisms were almost always at home, usually in a large silver bowl that was used for baptizing from generation to generation,

the dotting grandmother watching her grandchild be baptized in the bowl in which her own mother had been.

Sometimes, the bowl was whisked away by a servant, the baptismal water poured out the in garden and the whiskey punch for the ensuing party was made in it.

Perhaps there was no harm in that, but the family and domestic meaning of baptism was underlined as the punch took the place of the baptismal water.

There are a few steps in the process of secularization from that to the letter *Dear Abby* answered on Monday in our newspaper.

An older lady was concerned that her great-niece was not to be baptized.

The child's parents saw no reason to, having no intention to raise the child toward Christian faith.

But the grandmother and her sister, the letter writer, were troubled and wanted to run a plan past Abby, that they would secretly baptize the child, telling no one, doing it themselves,

because, they said, they had no need of an officiant "from any particular religion."

They clearly didn't imagine that this baptism would make the quality of the child's life all that different, that there would be any formative follow up to it, if it could be kept a total secret.

When Jesus was baptized, it was not in a dark corner of the synagogue after everyone was gone,

not in the courtyard outside his parents' home.

It was in the River Jordan, across which God had led Israel into the promised land, the river Elijah had parted, the river which called to mind the Red Sea, where God had set Israel free from Pharaoh's powers of sin and death.

This baptism was in the bright sunshine of the public eye,  
with others who were being baptized.

It was a moment of revelation, of epiphany, for everyone who was there.

And if its public nature was lost on some, there came a voice from heaven,  
announcing the beloved-ness of this man, and God's pleasure in him.

The voice announced that this was the end of an old life and an old world,  
that a new life and a new world were beginning in this beloved son,  
who would speak with the authority and wisdom of God.

Something that would change everything had happened.

I like the old saying that Christian faith is always personal, but it is never private.

It may be one of our greatest temptations,

to render the life-changing, universe-altering good news of Christ a more mundane reality,  
something comforting but not transforming,

something helpful but not revolutionary.

The good news of Christ burst from the heavens when he was baptized;

it could not be contained, could not be a secret, would not fit in the dining room.

Our proclamation of the good news of Christ and our following of him are meant to have a  
similarly expansive, life-changing power.

We do our baptizing here in a elegant old church building  
but for a world being made new in Christ.

Indeed, all that we do when we gather, the worship, the nourishment, the love of one another, is meant to make you a scene and location of the ongoing revelation of God, wherever you may go.