

I'll be honest, I expected more from my baptism. I was baptized at seven years old at First Christian Church in Petoskey, Michigan, by my father, after weeks of sitting through his pastor's class. In that class, I was taught about the Bible as a guide and witness to God's love for the world. I was taught about this thing called sin that showed up somehow and had worked its way into the world like a virus. I was taught about God's love for me and God's love for all of us. I learned that because God loved us, God sent Jesus, God's son so we could experience salvation and overcome whatever damage sin had done to our hearts and minds. And I learned about the gift of the Holy Spirit for every baptized Christian.

You know I really wanted this life-transforming change to take place. I wanted to feel this rush of energy coursing through my body when I came out of those waters. I wanted to be possessed by God's spirit. I hoped that I would see a dove descend upon me, a concentrated beam of light shine through the windows, illuminating me, as the organ began to play and angels sang the Hallelujah chorus. I wanted to feel like a brand new person, but I didn't. I was and still am, physically, the same me I was before.

There was an early church father named Epiphanius who claimed that when Jesus was baptized and the heavens opened up, a bright light came upon the water. And the church historian Jerome claimed that fire spread across the Jordan. Now that is how you mark the moment significant. Lights and fires, that is how you know God is with you.

But Luke doesn't mention any of that stuff when he tells of Jesus' baptism. In fact, Luke is pretty short and sweet when it comes to Jesus' baptism.

Imagine a long line. In that line are all kinds of people - a truly diverse group. Three types of people are recognizable. There is the largest group of poor everyday people. Then you have the tax collectors who look like they're doing quite well for themselves, probably because they were known for charging way more money than was required by the tax laws. Then you have the soldiers; more likely than not, these were Jewish soldiers in Herod's army. Like the tax collectors, they were collaborators with Roman rule and seen by the people as traitors. All of these people had come out to the river to hear this wacky guy named John preach and baptize.

Jesus is just one of the people in the crowd. His baptism is nothing to write home about. It's over in the space of a comma. "When the people were being baptized and Jesus had been baptized too"... that's all it is, all it says. Jesus is treated as just another guy in line to be baptized by John. Nothing immediately special. But we want it to be so badly. Maybe that's why we tell stories of beams from Heaven shining down on Jesus, or fire spreading across the waters. Why didn't Luke tell the story like that?

Perhaps it is Luke's intention that Jesus' baptism is so simple because our baptisms are often so simple.

When we were placed under the water in a symbolic gesture that we had died to sin and been raised to newness of life in Christ, unless you were baptized in a different tradition with a special effects department, your baptism was simple too.

Meaningful, so very meaningful, but simple.

I wonder if Luke is less interested in making a big statement on Jesus' baptism and instead places a larger emphasis on the preaching of John. You know John was kind of a wild man - he loved the desert, survived on locusts and wild honey, but despite his eccentric behavior, he

was a man of deep faith in God. But he sets the stage for Jesus - he makes the paths straight as the prophet Isaiah said.

When he preached, people came to listen. All kinds of people - regular people, tax collectors, soldiers, even Jesus. What was it he was preaching on that stirred their hearts?

He was preaching about baptism for the forgiveness of sins.

His message sounds harsh. After all, it is a message of accountability. He is telling the people that it isn't good enough to rely on their connection to Abraham. You can't just say, "oh well, you know, I'm a Jew, so I'm good." Which is similar to saying something like, "It isn't good enough to just call yourself a Christian because you go to church. Being in church doesn't make me any more a Christian than standing in a garage makes me a car!"

He's saying that our lives need to bear good fruit as evidence that we have been transformed by God's love. John isn't out here like many street preachers today trying to reduce people to puddles of grief, guilt, and fear. He's looked around the city. He has seen the way people are being taken advantage of, harassed, exploited, how they use God in ways that are not good. His message is one of social responsibility, communal well-being, mutuality, and support.

"Ok," the crowds say to him, "what more should we do then?" Listen to his response to these questions.

If you have two coats, go find your neighbor who has none and give them one of yours. Likewise, if you have lots of food to eat, go find your neighbor and share your food with them. In essence, he tells them that when they know they have an excess of something, they should share it with those who do not. This is a threatening message, isn't it, especially in our age of vast disparity between stockpiles of wealth and the 140 million poor and low-income people in our nation.

Then the tax collectors come up to him, what about us, John? Oh, this is a simple one, don't cheat the poor out of their money. Just take what you have to by law. In other words, stop being greedy!

Then the soldiers come up to him, what about us? Stop harassing people. Don't exploit anyone.

Don't exploit, harass, or cheat anyone, and be generous with what you have. That is what baptism means to John.

These themes, as we know, will show up again and again in Luke's gospel. Jesus will take up the cause of the poor and marginalized in his three years of public ministry. But not till after he is baptized.

Baptism is the beginning of our faith journey. After Jesus was baptized, he prayed, and it was as he's praying that the heavens open up, the dove descends, and a voice is heard saying. Jesus, you are my son, and in you, I am well pleased, which is actually a quote from Psalm 2, which was a psalm used whenever Israel would anoint a new king.

And from that moment on, everything Jesus will do is focused on one thing and one thing only, and that is proclaiming the realm of God is at hand. God is breaking through this old age of sin and death and ushering in a new age of love, peace, justice, hope, and redemption.

Baptism is the beginning of our faith journey because it is when we publicly proclaim that we are stepping into this Jesus thing. In the act of baptism we claim our identity in Christ, and choose to become his disciples, allowing his example to lead us in all things: how we live, how we treat others, what our values are and how we express those values through acts of love and service. In this way, our baptism is about both our inner and outer lives.

Our traditional baptismal liturgy asks each person to renounce evil, repent from sin, and turn to Christ. To profess that Jesus is Lord of your life.

When we talk about baptism, it isn't uncommon to hear of it spoken as the removal of sin. In this respect, our baptism is about our inner life. It has to do with us as human beings, as individuals, us, and our own sins - our own pride, our insistence on our own way, our capacity to act in ways contrary to the gospel. In this way, baptism is about our inner life.

But baptism is also about our outer-life too. Which is to say it is about all those things John was talking about. How we treat and respond to the needs of our neighbors, our ethics, what kind of world we want to build, and about how we help bring the realm of God to earth as it is in Heaven.

It was disheartening to see this week, the attack on our nation's capitol building by white supremacists, political extremists, and conspiracy theorists. If you watched any of the footage of it, you were likely to see people carrying Bibles, waving Jesus Saves flags, and even bearing the Christian flag, effectively storming the capitol building in the name of Jesus.

My friends, that is not Jesus. That is not what Jesus stood for, and in my opinion, as someone who has undergraduate and graduate degrees in religious studies, it is not what the Kingdom of Heaven is about.

It is 100% a symptom of Christian nationalism, white supremacy, and fear of the changing demographics in our nation. And we, as people of faith, have a responsibility to reject such toxic ideology. To those who carried religious symbols with them in the riot, and to those who support such actions in God's name, I can only ask, What happened to your baptismal vows? Where did they go?

You may carry the cross, you may lift up your bibles, you may even wave the Christian flag, but those are just symbols of our faith, a faith that you are at the moment flunking.

It adds nothing to the beauty of the world. It adds nothing to the humanity of our brothers and sisters. It does not bring the Realm of God closer to earth as it is in Heaven. It is not in keeping with the fruits of the Spirit or anything Jesus ever stood for. It is not in keeping with our baptism.

But love is. When we love our neighbor as ourselves and do whatever we can to serve them; then, we do live into our baptism and into our calling as Christians. When we love our neighbor enough to desire good for them even when they drive us nuts; then, we live into our baptism.

After the dust had settled on Wednesday. Between images of the violence circulating on social media. Photos were released of New Jersey Rep Andy Kim on his hands and knees, picking up trash left by the angry mob. I don't know his religious story, but what an act of Christ-like love!

Christians must reject white supremacy, we must reject toxic forms of nationalism, we must reject that which harms or dehumanizes our fellow humans, we must reject unfounded conspiracy theories like Qanon, and we must reject violence, for we were baptized in the name of the Prince of Peace.

The people come to John just as they will also come to Jesus, and they say what more should we do? John says, repent, change your heart and minds, be baptized, and become a new creation. Become a new creation.

Our baptism is more than having our sins washed away. Baptism is a commitment to be a Christian - to follow Jesus, to turn from that which is not of him. It is about acknowledging God's claim on our lives. And this means we must hold one another accountable for our actions. There can be no reconciliation, no healing until there is accountability. We must be advocates of truth.

I don't have the answers for what we saw go down on Wednesday. Like many of you, I watched on my computer, uncertain of what all was happening. You, too, do not have to have the answers. Sadly, we were not guaranteed them in our baptism. That is why we pray.

But I do know that our baptisms, as unremarkable as they were, calls us to live a life of Christ-like love. To tell the truth. To be kind to others. To serve our fellow human beings. There is so much more to being a Christian, but I know it starts with those things.

I often end sermons about baptism with a quote attributed to Martin Luther, the church reformer. He said, whenever you wash your face, remember your baptism. Remember your baptism whenever we wash our hands or wash our face.

Remember that you took that step into Christian life. That you took that step claiming Christ as your Lord and that Christ claims you as well. This is a decision I think that we have to remind ourselves of every day. Every single day. That our identity is rooted in our baptism into Christ's life, death, and resurrection. Friends, let us walk in the light of our baptismal vows to renounce evil, repent from sin, and to step deeper into relationship with Christ Jesus, our Lord and savior.