
Are you afraid of a little water?
Wesley Mimico United Church
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by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Matthew 3:13-17

Today is the day that - according to church tradition - we celebrate the baptism of Jesus. It seems like just last week we were talking about Jesus's birth, and already he is being baptized. And Jesus was baptized as an adult none the less. But the church year is an annual cycle, and we squeeze the *life of Jesus* part into roughly four months - the time between Jesus's birth and Jesus's death and resurrection. We commemorate Jesus's life from Christmas to Easter. So, on that compressed time scale, we are celebrating Jesus's baptism today.

Besides, very little if anything is known about Jesus between his birth and the beginning of his public ministry. And his public ministry begins at his baptism. Sorry - not quite. After his baptism Jesus wanders in the wilderness for awhile, clarifying his vision for his future. And right after *that* he begins his public ministry. In any case, Jesus's baptism seems to be the spark that gets his ministry going. So, we celebrate Jesus's baptism as we would celebrate our own.

And that seems appropriate to me. Baptism is something to celebrate. Do we celebrate baptisms in this congregation? I mean, do we really celebrate? Can you remember the baptism of your children? I remember the baptisms of my children, and they were definitely celebrations!

I still enjoy the movie version of *Godspell*. Do you remember the baptism scene in *Godspell*? It happened in a fountain in a public park. The disciples came to John the Baptizer, and John put water on them, but that description pales in comparison to the real action. The disciples all jumped into the large fountain, and they sang and danced together around in the fountain, and shared in community by sharing the water. And they did it all to some fairly up-beat music.

Now I'm not suggesting that United Church baptisms should be done that way. But

every time I watch that scene, the word “celebration” certainly comes to mind. There is no doubt that the participants are filled with delight - with joy - with God’s grace.

The story of the baptism of Jesus we find in Matthew is a bit more like what we expect at a baptism. Of course, John is in a river, presumably up to his waist, and I have an image of Jesus being immersed completely in the river when the actual moment of baptism happens. That’s a little bit different from baptisms that we do here. But the story of Jesus’s baptism is still quite familiar to us. There is a presider - John - who in our terms would be the minister, who performs the baptism. We have others who are watching from the side - like a congregation. The baptism is performed on people one-by-one. The baptism is a symbolic event. It is intentional. People gather. People participate. Words are spoken. The spirit moves. Someone gets wet.

[share your own stories of baptism - family - “effects”]

[pouring of water ... again and again ... what is needed for a baptism?]

Do you read the Observer? I remember in particular one volume from a few years ago. On the cover, we had our then current Moderator, Mardi Tindal, wearing her broad smile as she traveled by train across Canada speaking with people. On page 18 is an article simply titled, “church”. But I notice that the article is highlighted on the cover. The description of the article on the cover says, “Church in decline - facing the test of secularism”. The description strikes me as odd, however, because when I read the article, I thought it was about baptism. Do the words “decline” and “baptism” even belong together in the same sentence?

The article itself is about declining membership in the United Church, and what that means for us. Of course, it is not just the United Church that is experiencing membership decline - most mainline churches in North America and elsewhere are experiencing the same trend. The article speaks about rising secularism as the main factor leading to this decline. That in itself was not news, of course.

What did surprise me in the article is the link that is made between decline and identity. In the article there is a quote from the book, *The Death of Christian Britain*, that says “What emerges is a story not merely of church decline, but of the end of Christianity as a means by which men and women, as individuals, construct their identities and their sense of self.” In other words, people simply don’t identify themselves as “Christian” in the way that people used to, and that has a great impact on our church membership.

But membership decline is a term that simply means that there are not as many members as we would like. We don’t have enough insiders. Or even more simply - that there are not enough people inside the church. The “test of secularism” could be seen as an over-abundance of outsiders. Too many people outside the church, who choose to never come inside.

The article does shed some hope too. The subtitle of the article “facing the test of secularism” suggests we are facing the challenge, not just caving in or going away, or dying. But beyond that, the article talks about the need to embrace new ways of being church. New ways of imagining church. The article speak of the transformation of the church.

So, the church is in decline and that is *leading to transformation* and a re-imagining of the church. Now, that sounds like baptism to me! There - I finally remembered why I thought the article about church decline was also about baptism.

Baptism is about dying to one way of life and embracing a new way of life. Baptism is about one life ending, and another life beginning. Baptism is about finding something new. Baptism is about imagining a different and a better future. Baptism is about finding our true selves. Baptism is about finding God. Baptism is about our true selves finding God.

So perhaps if the church is transforming, we do not need to fear what we will find - perhaps we are being invited into something new and wonderful.

Are we transforming here at Wesley Mimico? The project to transform the building is a good start. But are we are a congregation open to a transformation of ourselves and our identity? Are we looking for new ways to be church, or are we just

looking for a new building so that we can keep doing church the way we have done it for years?

Are we prepared to spend time as Jesus did - “wandering in the wilderness” - allowing ourselves to be lost and perhaps a bit confused while we open ourselves to a new sense of self and identity? Or are we just rushing ahead assuming that our current plan is the only faithful path forward?

What is the biggest dream you can imagine for this church? What transformation would you welcome with open arms and an open heart? What transformation would you resist? Are we truly open to the outsiders in this community? And if we let more outsiders become insiders, what would that do to us? What would that do to our identity? Just how big are we prepared to dream? What can you imagine? What can we imagine? Are we ready for a baptism?

Baptism involves transformation. Baptism therefore *always* involves risk. Baptism involves getting wet. But it’s only water. Baptismal water won’t kill us. We will survive. We will grow. In his day, John the Baptist said, “Prepare ye the way of the Lord.” Perhaps today he would say, “Prepare ye for the coming baptism of the church”.

Amen.