
Baptism: The Straight Scoop!

**A sermon by the Rev. Canon George Maxwell
The Sunday after All Saints' Day**

When he had done this, [Jesus] cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out! The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "unbind him, and let him go." (Jn. 11:43-44)

The raising of Lazarus is the last of seven signs in John's Gospel that are designed to show us who God is and how God works.

You can imagine that the people who heard Jesus' words remembered the story of Ezekiel prophesying to the valley of dry bones. (Ez. 37:1-14)

They would have remembered that Ezekiel told the bones that God intended to restore them to life and when he heard the rattling of the bones joining one to another, Ezekiel preached to the spirit, calling it to enter the waiting lifeless bodies.

They would have remembered that the bones did not give life to themselves. They were given a future that they had not earned and could not have imagined. The memory must have evoked a sense of gratitude to God and to Ezekiel, who made life with God possible again.

In raising Lazarus from the dead, Jesus did the same thing that Ezekiel did. He made life with God possible again for Lazarus. Lazarus was given a future that he had not earned and could not have imagined. Those standing around Jesus must have felt a sense of gratitude to God and to Jesus, who made life with God possible again.

We can see this same pattern of God overcoming death and giving his people new life in the sacrament of baptism that we are about to celebrate.

After pouring water into the baptismal font, the celebrant will say:

We thank you, Father, for the water of Baptism. In it we are buried with Christ in his death. By it we share in his resurrection. Through it we are reborn by the Holy Spirit. (BCP, 306)

Then, after touching the water, the celebrant will say:

Now sanctify this water, we pray you, by the power of your Holy Spirit, that those who here are cleansed from sin and born again may continue forever in the risen life of Jesus Christ our Savior. (BCP, 307)

When we hear these words, we should remember Ezekiel prophesying to the valley of dry bones and preaching to the spirit to give those bones life, and we should remember Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. Those stories from the past help us understand what it means for us today to say that we are buried with Christ in his death, cleansed from sin by the power of the Holy Spirit, and share in Christ's resurrected life.

There are two fundamental ways that Christians in the West have come to understand these words. The one that will make the most sense to you depends on who you think God is and how you think God works. More

specifically, your choice depends on how you understand the concept of the Kingdom of the Heavens (or of God).

The first way, which I will call the “Way of Compliance,” assumes that the Kingdom of the Heavens is a place that you may go to after you die. The key to getting into the Kingdom is compliance. If you,

- accept that Jesus as the only Son of God;
- believe that Jesus has persuaded God to forgive you for your sins by dying on the cross; and
- comply with a moral code that the church has derived from its reading of the Bible.

then your sins will be forgiven, and you will be allowed to enter the Kingdom of the Heavens. If you don't do these things, then you will go to hell, where you will lie in torment forever.

There is another way. It doesn't picture God as so angry. It doesn't assume that Jesus had to be crucified to get God to forgive us for our sins. It doesn't define sin as a moral failure, and it doesn't condition salvation on your affirming a core set of statements about God to be true.

The second way, which I will call the “Way of Transformation,” assumes that the Kingdom of the Heavens is a way of life that is available to you now and will change, but not end, when your body dies. The key to living this way of life is to trust and follow Jesus, not because God will punish you if you don't, but because we need God's help to stay on the path. This is usually called becoming a disciple of Jesus. I think a better word for it is becoming an apprentice of Jesus.

The goal is for you to learn from Jesus how to live your life as he would live it if he were you. In this way, you don't just learn about Jesus, you learn to live into the life of Jesus. It's not magic. It doesn't happen the moment water is poured over your head and the sacred words are spoken. It's a journey that takes a lifetime. Baptism is just the beginning. As you travel along on this journey, you learn to be more alert and responsive to the movements of God and less attentive to your own agenda and ego.

This growth is called transformation. Transformation sounds like something reserved for the spiritual elite, but it's not. It is something that we all can do. The good news is that it is a process filled with joy. Even while mired in the inevitable suffering of life, drawing close to Jesus can give us a deep-seated sense of well-being and safety. As one of my favorite theologians, Dallas Willard, put it, “God's got your back.”

In contrast to the Way of Compliance, the Way of Transformation pictures God as good, loving, and joyful. Christ's death is not something God demanded; it's something that we did to Jesus, and he used it to defeat the dark powers of death. As Brother David Steindl-Rast says, sin is about alienation, an uprootedness from our true selves, from others, and from God. An action is sinful to the degree to which it causes alienation. Salvation is belonging.

When this way of life fails to work, it is always because we have not given ourselves to it in a way that allows our lives to be taken over by it. Getting into heaven is not a judgment God makes. God will let anyone into heaven who can stand it. It's up to you. Are you willing to give up the sense of control that you think you have over yourself and others? The freedom and joy of seeing God face-to-face has its price.

So, the question for you today is which way will you choose for your life: the Way of Compliance or the Way of Transformation?

Your answer is more important than you may realize.

Parents and Godparents, you are promising to be responsible for seeing that the children you present are brought up in the Christian faith and life.

The rest of us are promising to do all in our power to support you and these children in their life in Christ.

All of us are renewing our own baptismal covenant.

It seems clear to me that the good news of the Gospel is that Jesus came to give us life, here and now. He came to bring us joy, even in our suffering. He came to teach us how to love God and to love others, not for our own sake but for theirs.

These are the marks of the Way of Transformation. This way of life is more easily caught than taught. If we are going to support these children in their life in Christ, we are going to have to participate in it ourselves. They will learn more from watching how we do things than they will from what we tell them to do!

Don't worry, though.

Jesus will show us the way.

Oh, and you don't need to worry so much about hell.

There is no need to go there unless that's what you want.

Amen.

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