

At times during the recent political campaigns,
 I thought about Jesus and wondered
 how he would campaign.
 Would he stage a voice-from-heaven
 as a good opening strategy in his ministry?
 That would get public attention
 and jump-start his popularity.
 But he doesn't.
 Today's politicians stand in stark contrast with
 Jesus' public appearance at the Jordan River.
 Coming with the crowds seeking baptism,
 Jesus announces no plan for ministry,
 no agenda, no campaign slogan.
 He makes no speech, lines up no backers.
 Unlike today's politicians,
 he says nothing about himself –
 In fact, he says nothing at all.
 He submits to the ritual like everyone else.
 The Baptizer, John, bears all the trappings
 of a prophet of old.
 John's presence places the scene in the past,
 the present, and the future of God's plan.
 Long before Jesus comes on the scene,
 there is God's voice through the prophets.
 They are part of God's planned world order.
 The Creation Poem of Genesis,
 from which we heard the first five verses,
 tells us that the nature of our God
 is order and structure.
 "In the beginning, God . . ."
 Order is the very first thing we learn
 about the Lord of the Universe.
 In the beginning of the beginning,
 it is the creation of Light
 which brings order out of chaos.
 God surveys what God does and calls it good.
 Skies and oceans, humans and animals
 do not earn a right to be called good.
 They are good because God makes them so.

As a painting is good if painted by a good hand,
 creation is good by virtue of the hand behind it.
 The Creation Poem is paired
 with our Gospel lesson because both celebrate
 the reordering of the world as a New Creation.
 The waters of baptism are a significant connection
 with the deep, formless waters of creation.
 Along the water boundary between
 the wilderness and the Promised Land,
 John is drawing throngs of people
 to a baptism for the repentance of sins.
 He is adapting a Jewish ritual of cleansing
 prescribed for converts.
 It enacts submersion in the primordial waters.
 In John's prophetic hands,
 baptism is a personal cleansing of sins.
 Believers wash themselves to show
 how committed they are to repent of sin.
 John is firing up the people to take a stand.
 But Jesus comes along quietly, without notice,
 taking a place among sinners and broken people.
 Without any fuss, Jesus submits himself
 to John's baptism of repentance.
 Jesus' baptism by immersion in the Jordan
 pre-figures his death and rising again.
 The cosmic response to his baptism,
 visible only to him,
 is the tearing open of the heavens,
 sending the spirit upon him in the form of a dove,
 and a voice from heaven
 declaring love and approval.
 (Question: Does the dove descend gently?
 (Or, as birds sometimes do to protect their nests,
 does it dive-bomb?
 (That would match my impression
 of the heavens being torn apart.)
 Though it occurs in a remote wilderness,
 far removed from the center of Jewish power,

the baptism of Jesus is as significant an event as the creation of the world itself.

Ripped apart, the sky opens a permanent hole in the boundary between heaven and earth.

As Roger Gench writes in an article this week, "The hole in the cosmic map of the universe means that God is on the loose in this world . . . God's transforming power is on the loose.

God's own spirit claims us and anoints us for service."

The mystery of God, normally veiled, is made visible and audible, at least to Jesus.

God's words fulfill the prophecy that the Messiah is God's unique Son.

"You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Mark's gospel will imprint this Sonship on every scene, right up to the cross on Calvary. Sonship involves obedience and suffering.

Karl Barth discerns the whole Gospel message in this one private, celestial event:

God does not wish to remain hidden in the heights of heaven

but descends to earthly existence, to be seen, heard, and touched by humanity.

At the moment of Jesus' baptism, heaven and earth are transparent to one another.

Jesus witnesses an act of creation: Heaven and earth are re-formed.

Anointed the Christ, Jesus is God's new covenant.

But Christ doesn't negate the old covenants – the ones with Noah, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Jacob, Moses and Miriam, Elijah, David, Isaiah, and Jeremiah.

The voice of *God* calls out in love of the *Son*, while the *Holy Spirit* descends, depicting the Trinity we invoke in our sacraments.

What of our own baptisms?

In our baptisms we find our true identity,

sealed with a watery cross on the forehead.

God assures us in baptism

that we not too small to matter to God, that we are not too indistinguishable to notice.

Baptism is the "genesis" of the Christian life.

In our personal baptisms, yours and mine, God's creative power enacts our second birth.

For the institutional church,

baptism is the one crucial mark of membership.

It is a rite of initiation into the circle of faith.

God owns the life being admitted to the circle.

The very definition of a Christian means one who believes and is baptized.

A few Protestant churches have placed their baptismal font at the entrance to the sanctuary, so that everyone passes by it on the way in.

In order to get "into the church,"

one must "pass through" the water of baptism.

Wherever it's located, the font is a visible reminder of our own baptisms.

Infant baptism is no mere "magic spell," or "insurance policy" on little children.

It is the start of their new life, their vocation, and the power of the spirit to fulfill it.

Some denominations interpret baptism as the context of a believer's public profession of faith.

All Christian churches interpret baptism as a shared responsibility to shape an identity as God's child, whether infant or adult.

In the sacrament, a congregation takes hold of its calling to nurture its members.

Baptismatus sum, Luther said.

"Being baptized, I exist."

"God's Child" is the title we never need to earn, win, work for, or convince ourselves of.

In a world filled with voices

telling us we are less than adequate,

or that we have to prove ourselves,

or that we have to earn acceptance,
 we hear this text saying to us,
 "You are my Beloved Child."
 All of us are driven to by a great need
 to love and be loved.
 In our baptism, we know
 that we are accepted, affirmed, and loved
 by someone who will never stop loving us.
 We may be tempted to think
 we have to maintain standing for God's love,
 but in fact God's love is always there.
 God proclaims us a Beloved Child,
 and we are so, but not because we are worthy
 of love in and of ourselves.
 We are loved because God our Creator
 declares us so.
 The spiritual effect of baptism
 is not so much in the actions the church performs
 as in the action the Triune God performs.
 The Holy Spirit descends upon us in baptism,
 just as the Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus,
 who receives the Spirit in order to pass it on.
 Baptism is the outward sign of the invisible grace
 which declares, "I am God's Beloved Child.
 God is *for* me."
 In time I may turn from God.
 I may even mock and ridicule the new identity
 given me by God.
 But God's word endures: "You are my beloved."
 I cannot escape this love.
 Baptism locates me in the Creation that
 has had my name on it since the Beginning.
 My DNA literally comes from the original light
 that God spoke into existence.
 In my baptism I reclaim the moment
 before I was even human,
 before anything or anyone was created.
 I get in touch with time-before-time,
 when God's spirit moved upon the waters.

CONCLUSION

Perhaps none of us is so very different
 from a striving politician.
 We're all striving for something.
 We hope to die acclaimed
 for something in our lives.
 Such hope is worthy and it even may hold
 the mustard seed of transformation.
 Regardless of our striving,
 God's pronouncement remains in baptism:
 "You are my Beloved Child."
 God is all that matters.
 Imagine that voice
 speaking at your own baptism –
 even if you were an infant,
 before you had accomplished
 anything yet in life.
 "You are my child, my beloved.
 "With you I am well-pleased.
 "Having passed through
 the primordial waters of baptism,
 you are mine."
 Nothing can ever take that away.
 By following Christ as God's Beloved Children,
 we participate in the divine work
 of mending and restoring the Creation.
 Amen.