

## Turning and Washing

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March 7, 2020

Today we explore two more meanings of Baptism as a living symbol of the Christian life: Turning and Washing. These were the elemental meanings of the baptism of John the Baptist. They are important to us in the baptism of Jesus the Baptist. And they are important to us in the baptism of our hearts and minds.

### I

First, let's talk about turning. "Jesus came preaching", the text says, and what he preached was: "The time is ripe! The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe the good news, the gospel".

The Greek word here for "repent" is *metanoia*, a change in one's mind, being given a new mind, or as Marcus Borg put it, "to go beyond the mind you have." The great Hebrew word which was the one both John and Jesus had in mind was *shuv*, to turn to God, or return to God, to turn around. I believe every turning to God is a *returning* to God, the one who made us and who loved us from the first. We have come from Love, and God is ever calling us to return to Love.

The word “repent” may give you a sick feeling in the pit of your stomach, bring some scalding sense of shame. But it need not.

Ever been driving along and suddenly heard a police siren and saw the flashing lights in your rear-view mirror. That’s how some feel when they hear the word “repent”.

But I believe the true sound of repentance is the sounding of trumpets over the canyon at dawn. They are playing a New World Symphony. They are announcing: Here comes the gospel; it is the best news you’ve ever heard! Turn and believe.

## II

So let’s focus on the meaning of Turning in our lives. Years ago on one of my first trips to Iona I took the train back from Oban to Glasgow. The train had one stop half-way in between. I did not know I needed to change from the car I was in and get into another one, one which would take me on to Glasgow. I stayed in my seat, probably reading a book. The car began to move. As it went along I began to look out of the window at the beautiful scenery. After awhile I said to myself, “This scenery looks familiar!” Then I said, “This looks *real* familiar!” Then I said, “I’m on my way back to Oban!” So back I went so I could catch the next train to Glasgow.

It's easy in life to get on the wrong train, and you may not realize it for awhile; then we begin to realized that our life is headed in the wrong direction. What do we do first when we realize this? We get off the train! At the next stop! This is turning, this is what Jesus had in mind when he called out "Repent!" Turn, return to God.

Sometimes the turning happens when we've hit bottom with our compulsions and addictions, with our self-defeating, self-sabotaging behaviors. The Recovery Movement talks about "The gift of desperation". We become desperate enough to change; we are given the grace of turning. Of course, you don't have to wait til then. Turning anywhere along the wrong road is a gift.

Sometimes we turn because of some moving experience of beauty, or goodness, or truth or love, and we realize what we are missing, how pale and meaningless our life has become.

The poet Rainer Maria Rilke gazed at the ancient sculpture of Apollo and what he felt, which he later put in a poem about the experience, was: "You must change your life."

Dorothy Day, the great champion of the poor and founder of the Catholic Workers Movement was early on an agnostic and member of the American

Socialist Party. But then she started on the road to conversion which came to its climax when she had a baby girl named Tamar.

Mary Oliver the poet wrote a poem about the miracle of a summer day. Her last lines are a question:

Tell me, what is it you plan to do  
with your one wild and precious life.<sup>1</sup>

Jesus shows that it is the very beauty of the love of God that turns us to God. This is the gospel he had in mind when he said, “Turn and believe in the good news.” We are rarely bullied into real change; we are wooed. Paul said, “Do you not know it is God’s kindness that leads us to repentance? (Romans 2:4)

### III

Now let’s talk about Washing. Baptism symbolizes the washing away of sins. All of them, not some. In the Baptist form of Baptism, full immersion in water, you don’t get a little wet. You get all wet! So God forgives not some of your sins, but all of them!

The ancient image is of being washed clean. In the ancient mind sin leaves a stain. We cannot wash it off ourselves, God does the washing. As Isaiah offered these words from God:

Though your sins are like scarlet  
They shall be white as snow  
Though they are red like crimson  
they shall become like wool. (Isaiah 1:18)

My first pastorate was in a burley tobacco farming community in central Kentucky. One late summer I went to help my parishioners “put up tobacco”, as they called it. They took me first out to the sweltering field to cut the tobacco. It wasn't 30 minutes before I was thanking the good Lord he had called me to be a preacher, not a farmer. It felt like it was 95 degrees hot with 95 per cent humidity.

They showed me how to bend down with the blade and cut off the tobacco stalk near the ground, then to spear each stalk over a metal spindle at the top of a wooden stick and slide the stalk down the stick. I would repeat this until the stick was full of tobacco stalks. Then it began all over again as I made my way down the row.

By the end of the afternoon I was drenched in sweat and covered from head to toe with sticky tobacco juice. My jeans were so soaked with tobacco juice that when I took them off to take a shower they practically stood up by themselves. Never had a shower felt so good!

There's something about sin that leaves a kind of stain. Have you every been involved in a conversation with people that started out right but then turned ugly in the way people were talked about? And you felt like you wanted to go home and take a hot shower? You may not have said anything but the actions of the group left a stain.

When we've done something wrong, betrayed our highest values, when we've harmed another, we feel stained. As Lady Macbeth says, trying to wash her hands from the sin of her complicity in the death of King Duncan: "Out damned spot, out I say.... all great Neptune's ocean [will not] wash this blood." But God can, and God will.

I know people who have been violated, abused at the hands of another and they have felt stained, and what they wanted to do was to escape to the shower and let the water try to make them clean. The violation had left a stain.

Biblical imagery about sin carries this elemental meaning being washed, being made clean.

### III

The topic of sin may make us cringe, or run for cover! With good reason. It has become a toxic word. John Bradshaw in his important book *Healing the Shame That binds You* has helped me understand how words like sin and guilt

have been linked with what he calls “toxic shame” a shame that can cripple and bind us.

There is a difference between *healthy guilt* and *toxic shame*. Healthy guilt says, “You’ve made a mistake.” Toxic shame says, “You *are* a mistake.” Healthy guilt says, “You’ve done something wrong.” Toxic shame says, “There is something wrong with you.”

Healthy guilt helps you recognize your mistakes then repair them and make amends. Toxic shame immobilizes you because you believe no repair can be made because the whole problem is *you*, unrepairable you.

Another issue is about guilt, distinguishing between true *guilt* and false guilt. *True guilt* is the pain we feel when we’ve injured another, the pain we feel when we have not lived up to our highest and truest values. *False guilt* is what we are *made* to feel. It is what is imposed on us from the outside, by culture, family or religion when we have done no wrong.

Madeleine L’Engle, who wrote the children’s classic, *A Wrinkle in Time*, wrote a memoir of a time in her life named *The Summer of The Great-Grandmother*. She tells of a period in her life when she was—all at the same time—trying to take care of her aging mother, trying to be the perfect daughter

and wife and mother and grandmother, all the while trying to fulfil her vocation as a writer.

Impaled upon the false guilt of trying to be perfect in all these areas, she grew exhausted, irritable and despondent. Then one day she was counseling a friend and heard herself saying the words she herself most needed to hear:

I don't think real guilt is ever much of a problem for us. It is the false guilt that causes the problem.

Toxic shame, false guilt, sick religion: these things make it hard to talk about sin.

So strike the word, if you need to. Find another to signify the things you've done to injure yourself, or others, or even your relationship with God. Make up one! *Frong* or *Zerkiness*. It is what injures, estranges, keep you in hiding.

Then know: God has washed, is washing, will wash it away, making you clean, making you new!

#### IV

The waters of Baptism symbolize Washing. Of course, it is not the water that does the washing. It is God in God's tender mercies.

Some have maintained through the years that the water itself does the washing, and that the unbaptized from infancy on will end up in hell. In the early



centuries there were many who delayed their baptism until the very end of their life because they believed that water itself saved. They were afraid of committing sins after their baptism, post-baptismal sins, which would land them in hell, so they waited as long as they could so they wouldn't have a lot of time to sin, or be too old to sin. (Good luck with that!)

So, no, the water itself doesn't do the forgiving, the cleaning, God does. But the water itself is a powerful symbol of the washing of sin that it helps us feel it, internalize it. We human being need tangible, touchable, feel-able signs of what God is doing. The old Protestant definition of a sacrament is right on target: "The outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible grace."

John Calvin, the Protestant Reformer, said, "God knows we are creatures and so loves us in ways that we can understand: in bread and wine and water." In the waters God is saying, *Love*.

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1. Mary Oliver, "The Summer Day", *New and Selected Poems* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992) p. 94.