

The Long Emergency, Our Great Work, and a Kairos Moment

Isaiah 42:1-9; Galatians 4:1-7; Matthew 3:13-17

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Baptism of Our Lord

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Christian baptism begins at the river. Walking in the resurrection and our participation in the New Creation begins at the river. Our vocation, our calling, begins at the river. You might be baptized by immersion, by affusion (pouring), or by aspersion (sprinkling) but they all begin at the river or baptistry or font. Here at Austin Heights, we do not usually baptize in a river, although Pastor Sarah was baptized in the pond behind where Joe and Barbara used to live. We stood in mud almost up to our knees and muddy water almost up to our shoulders, but into, under, and through the muddy water she went. Here, we practice baptism by immersion but we recognize and affirm baptism by affusion and aspersion, too.

Old John the Baptizer was at the river, calling people to turn their lives around and be baptized. So Jesus shows up at the river, seeking baptism. John hesitates, but Jesus insists, and into, under, through the muddy Jordan he goes, taking all God's people with him. And then he comes up out of the water, to walk into God's New Creation – and all of us go with him.

Baptism is on my mind a lot these days as I wonder what it means to belong to a group that uses the adjective “Baptist” to describe its Christianity. For many of our Fundamentalist white Baptist brothers and sisters, baptism seems to simply be the symbol of getting saved so you'll be in heaven someday. Otherwise, it doesn't seem to mean much of anything; therefore, most of the Christian life is a vacuum filled with white American nationalism.

But baptism has not always been so shallow. Indeed, we want to be deep-water Baptists who practice baptism as the initiation into God's radical work of transforming the world and transforming our lives. Baptism signifies our joining up with Jesus in God's great work. So let our baptisms be in deep water full of all Jesus embodied and taught. Let us come out of the water to walk in the way of Jesus. Let our baptisms be an outrage now just like they were in the seventeenth century. In 1646, Anglican critic Daniel Featley observed of the "Dippers" rampant in England: "They preach, and print and practice their Heretical impieties openly.... They flock in great multitudes to their Jordans and both sexes enter into the River, and are dipt after their manner with a kind of spell...containing their erroneous tenets.... And as they defile our rivers with their impure washings, so the presses sweat and groan under the load of their blasphemies" (Bill J. Leonard, *Baptist Ways: A History*, Judson Press, 2003, p. 51).

So we go through the water and come out to walk in the Way of Christ, of being about God's great work. Cultural historian and Roman Catholic priest Thomas Berry, had a 1999 book entitled, *The Great Work*, in which he wrote, "The Great Work now... is to carry out the transition from a period of human devastation of the Earth to a period when humans would be present to the planet in a mutually beneficial manner" (p. 3). He went on, "Perhaps the most valuable heritage we can provide for future generations is some sense of the Great Work that is before them of moving the human project from its devastating exploitation to a benign presence. We need to give them some indication of how the next generation can fulfill this work in an effective manner" (p. 7).

Well, we're the next generation Thomas Berry was writing about. It is up to us to be about what he called the "great work" of transitioning our world, our lives, and our communities into a future that will not be like anything we've known before. Probably our future will be harder, perhaps in some ways better and other ways worse, but whatever way will be different. Our great work, our vocation, is to be a people, a community of people who lead and show that there is another way different from exploitation, domination, and violence. God calls us to the great work of embodying the way of shalom, of harmony, of right and just relationship, of peace and goodness and beauty with each other, and with all of Creation. This is Christ's work. It is our work. And it all begins in baptism, at the river.

This great work will not be easy. James Howard Kunstler entitled his 2005 book *The Long Emergency: Surviving the Converging Catastrophes of the Twenty-first Century*. We know about short emergencies but we have no experience with long emergencies. Long emergencies mean that emergency becomes the norm, not the exception: storms, drought, famine, refugees, wars, fires, heavy flooding, unrest, with increasing Fundamentalism and nationalism. To cope with long emergencies, indeed, to be able to do the great work through the long emergency takes preparation and training. It means going deep – deeply into the life of prayer, deeply into the Word of God, and deeply into worship in community. It means going deeply into God. It means going wide making connections with others who are about this great work and learning from them and working alongside. It means going long, developing the stamina and perseverance of a Christian community that knows how to endure, how to keep on keeping on. It means going local helping our local community connect and build just relationships with each other across racial and class lines, nurturing and growing a local economy, especially a local food economy, and helping our community and helping each other move

away from the reliance on fossil fuels to use of renewable energy sources. It means going slow – recovering the sense that the great work we’re about is always, and I mean always about relationships and community building – with God, with each other, with others, and with all Creation. And finally, it means learning to stop – to learn to trust God so that we’re able to stop, remember that it all does not depend on us so we can practice Sabbath, so we can rest and enjoy and appreciate the beauty of all that God has given us.

Going deep, going wide, going long, going local, going slow, and learning to stop: this is our great work for the long emergency in front of us. Let me add one more: going improv. It means learning how to improvise. By going deep and long and slow, and so on, we become people with such a profound sense of identity and sense of whom we belong, that we are able to improvise into this long, uncertain future. Sam Wells, the rector of St. Martin in the Fields in London says, “Most of the Christian life is faithful preparation for an unknown test” (*Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics*, p. 80).

Rabbi Mordechai Liebling of Philadelphia writes in a recent essay that he learned valuable spiritual practices from his parents who both were Holocaust survivors. He said his parents taught him that people could experience unimaginable destruction and pain and still maintain their humanity with open and loving hearts and the ability to live with uncertainty. Rabbi Liebling said that none of us know what the future holds. Global climate change means learning to live with uncertainty while maintaining loving relationships and in order to do that means that we must be grounded and connected. Out of that groundedness and out of that sense of communal bond and identity that goes down into our bones, then we’re able to improvise in an uncertain world, for that unknown test (see “Living

in the Four Worlds: Spiritual Practices in the Midst of Climate Disruption” in *Rooted and Rising: Voices of Courage in a Time of Climate Crisis* ed. Leah D. Schade and Margaret Bullitt-Jonas, p. 5-9).

Back to our Gospel reading. After thirty years of preparation – thirty years of walking with, spending time with, and deepening his life in God, and after thirty years of walking with, spending time with, and deepening his life with his neighbors and with Creation, Jesus goes to John and is baptized. He then emerges from the muddy waters of the Jordan River toward his great work. He walks straight into the wilderness, the essence of uncertainty, and makes sure his life and great work is centered, directed, and empowered in and by the living God. Finally, he begins his ministry, his great work. Mark says that Jesus began by preaching, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is near, turn your lives around, and believe the good news” (Mark 1:15).

When you hear in the New Testament the phrase, “the time is fulfilled,” hear “the time is ripe” or “the moment to which God has called you,” the unique moment of God’s visitation. It is the word “kairos” which means God-filled-time, holy time. The Greek language gives us a different word for standard, sequential, chronological time: “chronos.” Clock time—the passage of days, weeks, months, and years. Chronos is your doctor’s appointment at 10:00 on Monday... your hair appointment at 2:00 on Friday... the kids soccer game at 9:00 on Saturday. Sometimes we’re late at chronos or we’re not sure whether it is Thursday or Friday, but whatever it is, chronos just keeps running on. Kairos is different. Kairos denotes a unique opportunity. A kairos moment presents one with an urgent choice. A decision must be made, a new pathway must be taken, a change of direction must be followed. Chronos is how most of us live our lives day to day.

But kairos is that special moment of divine visitation, when we are faced with the choice of answering God's call. Jesus began his ministry by proclaiming, "This is a kairos moment. It's time to change. It is time to turn around and join the movement of God."

When Jim Antal wrote his greeting to us as we begin to study his book in Adult Bible Study, he said, "I believe that you and I have been born "for just such a time as this," he was quoting from Esther chapter 4. The Hebrew tradition is that God sets aside certain places, "holy places" where God visits, intervenes – like a burning bush – and that God sets asides certain times, "holy times" when God intervenes – like Esther "for such a time as this." For such a time as this is kairos time, what Bishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa called, "a kairos moment."

Shortly after I began as a young pastor in 1980 I discovered the work of Wendell Berry. Among Wendell's many gifts to me was the recognition of the local, the small, and the particular – all gospel notions, by the way. By the time, Jane and I arrived here thirty years ago, I had immersed myself in thinking and preparing myself to do pastoral work in the local, the small, and the particular for almost ten years. About the mid-80's I read Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue*, a book of philosophy in which he concludes talking about crucial turning points in history such as the Roman empire's decline into the Dark Ages and the formation of new forms of community within which the civil, the intellectual, and the moral might survive. In other words, St. Benedict organized monasteries. Benedict, along with others, figured it out as they went – small, local, and particular communities of faith that had influence far beyond their size. MacIntyre concluded his book with the call for a new St. Benedict.

We moved here in August 1989 and on Sept. 1, 1989 Stanley Hauerwas and Will Willimon of Duke Divinity School published *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony*, which was a provocative call for the church to recover its identity as a community in Christ and be intentional, disciplined, and bold in returning to Jesus and his teachings in order to be about ministry in the world. “Lean, redeemed, loving communities of Christ,” is how someone put it. In 1990 philosopher Stephen Toulmin published *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity*, a small but jam-packed book challenging the modern view of certitude, and calling for “Lilliputians,” (referencing Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*) small, humble communities who know who they are and are able to adapt, improvise, and influence a big, uncertain world.

Since then, over these past few years as I have read more and more on climate change and theology and the church, it is interesting to see how theologian after theologian and writer and journalist and on and on say the same thing: the answer to climate change and the way to survive in this changing world we’re entering is to form small, local communities of faith, who together help the larger community transition to smaller, local economies living in harmony with Creation (see Michael Northcott, Timothy Gorringer, Bill McKibben, and others).

I could go on. Suffice it to say that for thirty years I’ve been immersed in reading, studying, and praying, while also teaching, and preaching that God works in and through the small, the local, and the particular. Thirty years of preparing you for an unknown test. Thirty years of us, together doing the ministry of Jesus Christ, worshipping Jesus, immersing ourselves in Jesus and the Jesus Way. Thirty years of a small, local, and particular community of Jesus Christ at work. The Apostle Paul

says in Galatians 4:4, “In the fullness of time, God sent his son...” The fullness of time – when the time was ripe... the kairos moment.

Well, in the fullness of time, God calls Austin Heights to face the long emergency of climate change, refugees, racism, violence, and uncertainty; we are called to embody God’s great work. Austin Heights this is a kairos moment.

December 1, 1955 dawned like any ordinary day of chronos time. A seamstress and civil rights activist named Rosa Lee Parks sensed the moment of God’s kairos. After a long day of work at Montgomery Fair department store, she boarded the bus and refused the driver’s demand to relinquish her seat to a white passenger. She later explained her motivation that December evening: “I was not old, although some people have an image of me as being old then. I was forty-two. No, the only tired I was, was tired of giving in.” Rosa Parks knew about chronos as she had been preparing herself for years for an unknown test – active in church, in the local NAACP, and had been through training at the Highlander Center in eastern Tennessee. But when the time was ripe, she stood up by sitting down. Her solitary act launched the Montgomery bus boycott, which propelled 26- year-old M. L. King, Jr. into the forefront of the civil rights movement. It was a moment of kairos in American history. It was a simple, though courageous act by a small, particular woman, in a local town but it changed this country. God works through kairos moments in ways beyond us, when we step into them.

Austin Heights, there are kairos moments. God gives them to us and God calls us into them. Perhaps it is when we least expect it, the chronos of minutes, hours, days, and years are going along and then we come head-on with the kairos

of God's unique moment. And we have to decide— answer the call, or stay on the sidelines. We are at a kairos moment.

Now you know and I know the chronos continues. But the kairos comes right in the middle of the chronos changing the chronos, changing us. So, for example, today after lunch some of you – usually women – will be in the kitchen washing dishes. But we wash dishes, not use Styrofoam or paper, because of our great work. The kairos collides with the chronos and changes even what kind of dishes we use. The small takes on a new significance, and we pray that God is working in and through multiple small, local, and particular actions bringing about change and transformation of our world and us.

Obviously, the great work will take more than doing dishes and recycling. The call is for our entire lives to be changed – and we are not assured at the outset how much change, what the change will look like, or the risks involved. All we know is that God in Christ calls us. Now is the time Austin Heights has been preparing for.

In 1962 my uncle was in the Army and went through specialized jungle warfare training in Panama. Their final test after months of training was to escape and evade local indigenous people through the jungle and return to their base. It took about three days to escape and evade through the jungle. But in that Army training platoon were three sailors, an old chief and two seamen, and every day the Army training sergeant harassed these three Navy guys. Every day they made the Navy guys do 30 extra pushups in front of every one, for example. On the last day before the escape and evasion test, the Army guy called the three Navy guys to do their daily extra 30 pushups. At the conclusion, the Navy chief yelled, "For the

Navy.” And the three sailors did 30 more pushups one-handed. Then they jumped up, ran over to the bank of the rushing river, used their belts to bind their arms together, and then they jumped into the fast moving current. Down the river they went through rapids, crocodiles and who knows what else. But in half a day they were back at the base, safe and sound after successfully escaping and evading and passing the test with flying colors.

We’re back where we started. At the river. Joining God’s great work begins in baptism. The time is ripe. It is true we do not know where we’re going or how long it will take or the risks. But we strap ourselves to God and to each other and jump in. Come on!

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God,
Mother of us all. Amen.