

Baptism, a Living Symbol of the Christian Life: Dying and Rising  
Mark 8:34-35; I Corinthians 15:20-22

This is the last of my Lenten sermons on Baptism as a Living Symbol of The Christian Life. I call it, Baptism: Dying and Rising.

Baptism symbolizes death and rebirth, in this life and in the Resurrection life to come. It is fitting that this sermon comes at the beginning of Holy Week, Palm Sunday, as we walk with Jesus toward his death and his Resurrection.

The Baptist form of baptism, full immersion in water, is a vivid and dramatic picture of death and rebirth. Growing up I heard many ministers say these words of Paul as they lowered the person under the water, then brought them up and out of the water: “Buried with Christ in baptism; raised to walk in newness of life (Romans 6:4)! That’s what I felt many years ago when I came up out of the water, something like newness of life.

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Let’s first think about dying and rising in this life. I believe God has resurrections in mind for us, here as we live our lives. Something dies and something is born. This new “borning” often happens when something has died.

A question we might well ask ourselves is: “What needs to die so that new life can come?”

I think this is part of what Jesus had in mind as he talked to his disciples that day at Caesarea Philippi “Who do you say that I am?” he asked them. Peter’s hand shot up, “You are the Messiah, the Christ”, he answered. Jesus commended him.

Then Jesus began talking about what was to come: he would be arrested and put to death by the powers-that-be. Peter said, “No Lord, this should never happen to you!” Then Jesus rebuked him and said, Put these thoughts of Satan away.

The idea of a Suffering Messiah did not compute in the Jewish mind. Messiah was to come and end suffering, not suffer himself. Fred Craddock expressed this great reversal of thinking Jesus was presenting: Instead of “Where the Messiah is there is no suffering”, rather, “Where suffering is, there is the Messiah.”

Then Jesus called the crowd following him to join close with the disciples. He said,

If anyone would come after me let them deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me.

Then he added, to drive the point home:

For those who want to save their life will lose it; and those who lose their life for my sake and the kingdom's sake will save it.

It is a gospel paradox:

Finding comes in losing, and losing helps you find.

There is a kind of dying that leads to new life. Sufi mystics talk about “dying before you die”, meaning, letting the things in your life that need to die, die. This is one dimension of “denying self”. The spiritual journey is the daily letting go of the false self, or selves, so that we may connect more deeply with our true self created in the image of God.

The false self is the ego-driven self. The false self is full of compulsions, like those the church in its early centuries called “The Seven Deadly Sins”: Pride, sloth, envy, anger, greed, gluttony and lust. The false self is the self imposed on you from those outside, even culture itself. It is not right for you. The false self can be your idealized self, your “perfect” self. It sits on your mantle like an idol. Life has a way of toppling this idol. Now you can begin dealing with your *real* self, which is where redemption can really happen.

What *resurrections* need to happen in your life? At the end of one of Wendell Berry's poems is this last line: “Practice resurrection.” Yes, right now,

wherever you are, “Practice resurrection!” It is form of spiritual practice to look for the ways you can experience new life. It is a spiritual practice to learn to see resurrection happening all around you.

And sometimes there is a denying of something that comes first. An old way of thinking that gets you in repeated trouble. There’s an old Buddhist saying that the Recovery Movement has adopted: “Don’t Believe Everything You Think!”

And there are these we continue to do, like an old habit we need to break, which undermine our lives. So to such things we say: “Watch me turn! Turn away from you!”

We begin to let go of the things that are killing us. It is the work of the Spirit in our lives to help us be finally ready to let go. “Practice resurrection!”

## II

Now let’s turn to the other meaning of dying and rising: Resurrection! Our resurrection in the life to come. Our lives do not end in death. In dying we receive the Final Healing, the Universal Homecoming.

Near the end of his life Jesus spoke to his bewildered and grieving disciples and said:

Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Abba’s house are many rooms

More rooms, I would add, than we can ever know. Then he said,

...I go to prepare a place for you, and if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you unto myself that where I am, you may be also.

(John 14:1-3)

The Great Homecoming.

The disciples, that day, could scarcely have believed what Jesus said was to come. It went beyond all they could think.

But Sunday morning, the one we call Easter, God raised Jesus from the dead. And all *heaven* started breaking loose!

I Corinthians 15 is Paul's great sermon on the Resurrection. He began by recounting all the resurrection appearances of the Risen Christ to his disciples, then to others in those days following Easter. Then he recounted his own encounter with the Risen Christ on the road to Damascus.

As he brought the sermon to a climax he said:

But in fact Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died.

That is, his resurrection will be yours too, his is the sign of things to come! Then Paul exclaimed:

For as in Adam we all die, so in Christ we shall all be made alive.

All!

Here is my fondest hope: Universal Salvation, what in Acts is called “the restoration, or reconciliation, of all things”, that time when, to use Paul’s words, “God will be all in all”.

It is the resurrection of all God’s children into the Everlasting Arms. But what about *him!?*, we might say, or *her?! Not them!* And I would say, yes, them too, but not as they *were*, as they *shall be*.

Near the end of his Resurrection sermon Paul says, shouts, sings:

Lo, I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed.

( I heard of a church that put that verse above the door of the nursery: “We shall not all sleep, we shall all be changed.”)

Then Paul says it again:

For the trumpet will sound, and the dead shall be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed!

Changed, transformed, in the light of God's Eternal Love, the Light that purifies and heals.

John Donne the great poet and preacher at St. Paul's Cathedral, London, in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, preached a sermon on the Resurrection and pronounced his own Resurrection hope:

I shall rise from the dead...from the prostration of death, and never miss this sun...for I shall see the Son of God and shine myself as that sun shines.

I shall rise from the grave, and never miss this city...for I shall see the city of God, the new Jerusalem.

To use Jesus' words, we shall not die forever but have eternal life. To use the words of a poet, Death is the extinguishing of the candle that we may see the Dawn.

Dying and Rising? Resurrection life? Universal Salvation? Do I believe it? With most of me I do, and not just on Sundays! As for doubts, doubts are not a disqualification. As Paul said, we all "see through a glass darkly" It is love that wins, and love that saves.

The great German theologian Jurgen Moltmann was lecturing at Wake Forest Divinity School. At the end of the lecture, in the question and answer

period, a student asked, “Professor Moltmann, are you a universalist?” Meaning, someone who believes we all will be saved. Moltmann answered:

No, I am not a universalist because there are some people I do not want to see again. But I think God is a universalist because God has made us all, and God will want to see us again.

That is my hope as well.

### III

Baptism is a symbol of Dying and Rising, resurrection in this life and in the life to come. It is a belief that undergirds my living, and is my gladdest hope.

Did I believe all these things I’ve been talking about these past weeks when I was baptized at nine years old in the baptistry of Ardmore Baptist Church in Winston-Salem?

Following Jesus and Calling him Lord

Being the Beloved

Turning and Washing

Belonging to a Family of Faith, the Body of Christ

New Birth and New Creation

Anointing, Holy Spirit and Calling

Dying and Rising?



Just a tiny bit of it. But these are the things I am coming to believe, and these old baptismal waters help me believe it more and more, everyday.

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“Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front” Wendell Berry, *The Selected Poems of Wendell Berry* (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 1998), pp.87-8