

Baptism of the Lord – 2021B

Many people don't always want to watch an entire movie, but really enjoy "dropping in" or "stopping by" a movie just to catch one particular scene. After watching that scene, they'll surf on to another movie to drop in on. Nearly any hour of the day, one can find these movies and others rolling across the screen, and millions drop in to watch no more than 15 minutes — just to catch their favorite scene.

It seems perfectly normal in a culture of convenience, a twitch culture of shrinking attention spans, video mania and instant gratification. A harmless habit, perhaps. Still, all habits, even the most "harmless" ones, have a way of shaping our lives, including our imagination and our capacity for faithful living over the long haul. Our habits are those practices that will make us who we are; if we get used to a 15-minute fluff break, will we have the capacity for an hour of thoughtful reflection with the one we love who needs us at the end of the day?

Maybe, maybe not — but if your attention span is shaped to take pleasure in 15-minute gulps it's less likely that you will be able to give your full attention to anyone or anything, including God, for more than a few minutes. That is the subtle way that habits work in our lives — we don't notice the effect until much later, and even then, we may miss the reason for our actions.

Here's the kicker: Too often we approach discipleship as something we can "drop in" on, or "stop by" whenever we feel like it. In fact, the common complaint about Christians is that too many are

Sunday Christians, but not Monday Christians. Christians for one day of the week, while checking their faith at the door for the rest of the week.

Drop-in movie habits mirror a spiritual crossover trend that most of us would rather not admit; a style of drop-in spirituality or drop-in discipleship where we nod to God for a few quick devotional minutes and then we're on our way, business as usual. A little taste of upbeat worship here, a sip of Bible reading there, not too deep and nothing that challenges our imagination. It's a momentary feeling of satisfaction, just like a little movie viewing of our favorite scenes, but if that's all we ever have time for in our lives with God, then it's a false comfort; a habit that will keep us from going deeper with God and drinking deeply from the well of life.

This sort of religious consumerism is antithetical to a mature life with God, growing in wisdom and faithful discipleship. Growing in our relationship with God is not going to happen with just a little dip here and a sip there. Such forays into tepid spirituality freeze-frame us in spiritual infancy, perpetually clutching our spiritual sippy cups. God has something much different in mind, a life that is far deeper, richer and more fulfilling than a quick fix.

The prophet Isaiah presents a different vision in which we are invited to embrace the abundant life in the presence of God: "Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! ... Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food" (55:1-2).

What this suggests is not drop-in or drop-out discipleship, but a drop-by and stay-by discipleship. Notice the essential words of the text:

“Come” (v. 1). God sets the table, but we have to pull up the chair. The disciple has to respond to God’s faithfulness by taking action of her own.

“Buy” (v. 1). Or buy into. Commit. Take the step, the leap, the plunge.

“Eat” (v. 1). Partake. Experience. Taste. Savor the goodness of God.

“Listen” (v. 2). Pay attention. Discriminate. Be attuned to the voice of God, and tune out competing voices — whether cultural, secular or the voice of entertainment and peers.

“Incline your ear” (v. 3). Fix the spiritual physiognomy so that the voice of God can be heard. Get rid of the noise and interference that can drown out the voice of God.

“Seek the Lord while he may be found” (v. 6). Pursue single-mindedly, search diligently for. Make the presence of God a priority. Take advantage of the opportunities to walk with God while you still have them.

“Forsake” (v. 7). Abandon whatever doesn’t work for your relationship with God. Decide what is holding you back, and let these things go.

“Return to” (v. 7). After letting go of the bad, grab the good. Turn to what is right, good and positive. Turn to God for forgiveness and mercy.

Isaiah seems to acknowledge that most of this is counterintuitive. That’s why we are reminded in verses 8-9 that the

way we live life is based on a different paradigm or construct. It's a matrix that most will not understand: "My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways."

This is the heart of it. If we order our lives according to conventional wisdom, then none of this is going to make sense. But if we "come" and "buy" into a higher reasoning, a different way of doing business, a divine wisdom, we will align our lives with the divine purpose.

The life that God invites us into is not a drop-in relationship or one that involves a few minutes here and there whenever it happens to be convenient. Rather, the mature life of faith with God is one that feasts on the riches of a deep and abiding relationship with him. It is not a fast-food religion that God wants. No, the prophet tells us it is much more like a long, sumptuous dinner, lingering over the meal, savoring the taste, enjoying the conversation. This kind of deep maturity with God means spending the necessary time pursuing this relationship; the kind of time that one would give to any pursuit that is worthy of your full attention.

"Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?" Indeed, Isaiah's question should be hung as a banner over the entrance to our shopping centres and our places of work. The poet Mary Oliver asks a similar question, "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"

What will we do? We will come, buy, eat, listen, hear, forsake and turn to God who calls us to himself. Dropping in or stopping by

is not enough. Discipleship is an adventure we want to be a part of from start to finish.

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