



TOUCH POINT

## Let's Get Tattoos! – Touchpoint for December 6, 2023

Mark 1:1-8 (NRSVUE) The Proclamation of John the Baptist

<sup>1</sup>The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ.

<sup>2</sup>As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,  
who will prepare your way,

<sup>3</sup>the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord;  
make his paths straight.’”

<sup>4</sup>so John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>5</sup>And the whole Judean region and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him and were baptized by him in the River Jordan, confessing their sins. <sup>6</sup>Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. <sup>7</sup>He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the strap of his sandals. <sup>8</sup>I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with<sup>[g]</sup> the Holy Spirit.”

**Grace and Peace to you from the mystery in whom we live and move, and have our being.**

John the baptizer, a Jew, lived by choice on the margins, far from synagogues, leaders, and a traditional way of living. He did not wear the clothes of a priest and claimed no authority. But in some way, he was called to participate in God's divine nature. To administer to those who came to him of their own willingness, the ritual of baptism. John the baptizer, a Jew, was baptizing Jews. Something only gentiles were required to do upon converting to Judaism.

According to historians, Rome was considered a cesspool. Leadership was corrupt. Baptism's purpose was the cleansing of the filth of that time for this new vision to be received. The Christ of The Way. A new way for the times and the future. An open heart was needed to receive the dramatic shift Jesus would bring. Full body immersion reflected that willingness and God would do the rest. Today the western version of baptism has changed. It is a requirement for getting a clean slate and eliminating real and imagined guilt. It is also a symbol of membership in a group that comes with religious perks. Emotionally, it is a get-out-of-hell card.

Maybe it's more personal than all of this. Perhaps it's about a declaration of our identity. No wonder the two baptisms were mentioned by John. There is the horizontal baptism—a person baptizing a person—it's a communal experience. Then there is the baptism with the Holy Spirit, in which a person surrenders in humility to God's declaration of their identity. As it was declared over Jesus and announced to all critics, “This is my child in whom I am well pleased!”

If baptism is about the washing away of our sins, then shouldn't we need to bathe more? I understand the phenomenon evangelical theology presents: God has forgiven our sins, past, present, and future. However, I can't pre-wash mud I haven't stepped in yet. It's not reasonable or logical. In the material world we have a linear, cause-and-effect view of life. Hmm... So, my future sins, either intentional or unintentional, are pre-washed. Maybe it makes for fancy jeans, but I'm not so sure it's good theology. Perhaps God is not linear, but

rather layers and layers of story. Perhaps these interpretations are used to extricate ourselves from ugly feelings of unworthiness.

There are different ways denominations deal with baptism for sin-cleansing. One believes in pre-washed infant baptism, another believes in adult super-soaking. Still another believes in an ongoing wash cycle where you can never drift far from the washing machine.

In the summer of my fourteenth year, I returned from a weeklong Christian event in Dallas, Texas. Every evening the Cotton Bowl was filled with nearly 100,000 young Jesus converts singing along with musicians like Johnny Cash, Kris Kristofferson, Larry Norman, and Love Song. The euphoria stayed with me several days following, until the reality of my imperfect living disappointed me to the soul. I felt worse than I did before I gave my life to Jesus. Was I even a Christian? I couldn't utter the words, "Praise the Lord," for every little thing anymore. I was a backslider at 14.

During that time, I questioned my infant baptism in the Presbyterian Church. So, I asked if I could be re-baptized by immersion. They would not do it as they recognized my infant baptism as the real deal. So, I got baptized in a swimming pool with other Jesus Freaks. Euphoria returned only to be disappointed by the next misstep. I wished I'd never believed, because the Bible says, 'Better to have not known the truth than to know, and sin.' I was so passionate in my love for God, I felt it to my fatherless core. How could I stay close to God with sin in my life?

I had been christened, dunked, splashed, and even baptized myself in the bathtub. I thought living a holy life was impossible, so I ended attempting to live for God, and I stopped praying. The Christian life was too hard. That's when I learned of grace. I let go of God as a possession. Instead of becoming the evil I feared and losing Christ, Christ was in my humanness through grace. I was relieved. And isn't that what we really want, freedom from our feelings of fear? Fear of punishment, abandonment, and utter loneliness? In our emotional desperation we become vulnerable to revivals and snake oil evangelists and cult-like leaders.

Now, as I read the stories told of Jesus, I don't see a man who condemned. I see one who broke through people's illusions of unworthiness. But he didn't do it through therapy sessions and motivational workshops. I believe what Jesus is saying is, "I know you want to feel worthy, but I have bad news for you. You are unworthy! What you don't understand is that you were never expected to be worthy!" As he said to the woman caught in adultery, "Now where are your accusers?" This was her moment of awareness. "I have none," she said. "Yes," Jesus said, "you have none. Now feel free to sin no more." Let go of the illusions that you were expected to be sinless. Let go of the illusion that a symbolic ritual can set you free. Let go of the lie that others can declare who you are. For I have declared you my child and I am deeply pleased.

She was tattooed on the heart, and it can never be removed. Not by sin and not by earthly authorities, religious or otherwise.

At baptism it is not about our declaration of acceptance of God, it's about our full acknowledgment of God's reception of us! This mystery invites us into God's heart. This mystery is the heartbeat in all people, whether aware of it or not. Though we may sin, doubt, judge, curse, deny, betray, we cannot remove the tattoo placed on our hearts as a reminder that we belong.

Baptism is a listening of God's declaration of his choosing, not my declaration of my choosing. It's not a prerequisite to passage into an elite group, a passport to communion or another offering pledge for the Church. It is a ceremony conducted to acknowledge a truth that existed before I declared it so. Before the

foundations of the world, you and I always belonged. Before and after our human flaws it was so. It removes the effort and renders absolute receivers of what we could never earn through earthly memberships.

This Advent season, may you prepare the way of your heart for a birthing, an awareness of your declared worthiness. Its symbol is a vulnerable infant rather than an accomplished adult. May you hear the same voice Jesus heard as he came up out of the Jordan. "You are my child in whom I am well pleased!" Today Jesus might have said, "Hey, you are really stressing about your worth, aren't you? You have worked hard at this life thing, but you don't know who you are, do you? You need something you can recall, to remember your belonging. Rejecting the illusion that 'you are not enough' you may hear when your critics, internal and external, bother you."

"I know a good tattoo artist. Let's go get one!"

**Amen.**

## Opening Songs

### **Be Still**

(The London Fox Taize Choir, Remember Me)

Be still, know that I am God

### **Prepare the Way**

(Taizé)

Prepare the way of the Lord. And all the people will see the salvation of our God.

## Bible Passage

*(A passage takes us from one place to another)*

## Touchpoint

*(Where God's story touches our life story)*

### **My Soul Proclaims**

(Marty Haugen)

My soul proclaims your greatness O God, and my spirit rejoices in you.

- 1) My being proclaims the greatness of God. My spirit finds joy in my savior.  
For you regard me in my lowliness and every age shall call me blest.
- 2) Great and mighty are you, O holy One, strong is your kindness evermore.  
How you favor the weak and lowly ones. Humbling the proud of heart.
- 3) You have cast down the mighty from their thrones. Raising up those of low degree.  
You have filled the hungry with wondrous things and sent the rich empty away.

## The Meal

### **Our Father (The Lord's Prayer)**

(The London Fox Taizé Choir)

## Benediction

### **O, Come, O, Come Emmanuel**

(Salt of the Sound)

O, Come, O, Come Emmanuel and ransom captive Israel.  
That mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear.  
Rejoice, Rejoice, Emmanuel shall come to thee O Israel.