

## The Baptism of Repentance

The fact that Jesus was baptized by John has always troubled the church. After all, John's baptism was a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Yet, scripture teaches us that Jesus was without sin; he didn't need forgiveness. So why did he come to John to be baptised? Why did the sinless Son of God undergo a baptism of repentance? It was questions such as these that prompted me to do a little further research.

I started my search by doing a word study of the verb "repent" in the Old Testament. I discovered that there are two main Hebrew words translated as "repent" in English. The first literally means, "to turn" or "to change directions." The second refers to the kind of sorrow or remorse that prompts us to change our ways. Now... guess who did the most repenting in the Old Testament writings? Well, I'll give you a hint. It wasn't the people of Israel, although God knows they needed to repent and God knows that God called them to repent again and again and again. But more often than not Israel stubbornly refused to repent.

No, it's not the people of Israel who do the most repenting in the Old Testament narrative. It's God. That's right. God. The first time scripture mentions God repenting is shortly after God had created humanity. When the Lord saw how evil everyone had become, God *repented* of having ever created humanity and vowed to wipe everyone off the face of the earth and start all over again – all except Noah and his family that is. For Noah had found favour in God's sight, and God used Noah and his family to be the remnant through which God repopulated the earth after the flood.

In 2<sup>nd</sup> Samuel 24, we read about God sending a plague upon the people of Israel to punish them for one of King David's sins. Seventy thousand people died in the plague, and the angel of death was just about to wipe out Jerusalem itself when we read: "The Lord *repented* of the evil

and said to the angel who was afflicting the people, ‘Enough! Withdraw your hand.’” It’s as if God did not have the heart to carry through on his own threat.

The book of Jonah tells not only the story of the repentance of the people of Nineveh, it tells the story of God’s repentance. For when the people of Nineveh repented from their evil ways in response to Jonah’s preaching, scripture says that God himself *repented* of the punishment he had threatened. As a matter of fact, it was precisely because Jonah knew that God was a repenting God that Jonah did not want to go to Nineveh in the first place. As so Jonah complains to the Lord after God doesn’t carry through on his threats: “That is why I was so quick to flee from you. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who *repents* from sending evil” (Jonah 4:2).

The two most interesting passages in the Old Testament related to God’s repenting are found in 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel and the passage we read from Hosea. In the Samuel passage, Israel had declared war against the Amalekites. It was a Holy War, which meant that every living being had to be destroyed – men, women, children, livestock and even pets. The Israelites won the battle, but King Saul didn’t follow Holy War protocol. He kept a few of the livestock to offer to the Lord as a sacrifice after they had won their victory. And instead of killing the Amalekite king, Agag, Saul captured him alive as a prisoner of war.

About that time, the word of the Lord came to the prophet Samuel: “I *repent* of making Saul King because he has turned away from me and didn’t carry out my orders.” Naturally Samuel was upset and went to Saul and confronted him with his disobedience. Saul begged Samuel to forgive him, but Samuel refused, telling Saul, “The one who is the Strength of Israel will not lie or *repent*; for he is not a man, that he should *repent*” (1<sup>st</sup> Samuel 15:29). Samuel then proceeds to hack King Agag into pieces in front of the troops.

Interesting isn't it? God's word to Samuel is that he had *repented* of making Saul king, but Samuel's word to Saul is that God is not a human being that he should *repent*. Exactly the same word is used in both instances. It becomes even more interesting in the light of God's word to the prophet Hosea centuries later. The message Hosea received from the Lord was intended for unrepentant Israel. This is what the Lord says:

My people are bent on turning away from me...How shall I give you up, Ephraim? How shall I forsake you, Israel? My heart recoils within me, my compassion grows warm and tender – literally, “my *repentings* are kindled together.” I will not execute my fierce anger, I will not return to destroy Ephraim: for I am God, and not a human being; the Holy One in the midst of you and I will not come in wrath.” (Hosea 11:

God's words to Hosea stand in stark contrast to Samuel's words to Saul. To the penitent Saul, unforgiving Samuel declares: “God is not a human being that he should repent.” And true to his vision of God, Samuel never spoke to Saul again. To unrepentant Israel, the forgiving God declares through Hosea: “I repent because I am God, not a human being.” And true to his vision of God, Hosea forgave his wife Gomer, who had played the harlot, and he took her back home to live together.

It is as if the Old Testament depicts a kind of drama being played out in God's own heart between his desire to punish or to forgive, to come to his people in wrath or in mercy. At times, God is pictured as sending armies and plagues to execute his fierce anger. At other times, God is pictured as repenting of the evil he had planned and forgiving his people rather than punishing them further. This drama reaches its climax in the word of God proclaimed by Hosea. By all rights God should have disowned his people as Samuel had disowned King Saul. After all, they had disowned God and turned to other gods for help. But God can't disown the people he loves. Though the people refused to repent, God himself repents and refuses to execute his anger.

And now we come to our New Testament lesson from the Gospel of Matthew. For Jesus is the coming into the world of this repenting God. Jesus' decision to be baptized is the acting out of the decision God had made when, as Hosea puts it, "God's repentings were kindled together" and God resolved to come in mercy, not in wrath. And so, you see, it was indeed fitting that he who is the Son of God should undergo a baptism of repentance. For Jesus was never more Godlike than when he stepped into the muddy water of the Jordan River and underwent a baptism of repentance. Never again in the New Testament do we read of God repenting. Why? Because God has once and for all repented in Jesus Christ. When Jesus waded into the water of the Jordan, it was God's way of saying, "I am in this with you. There is no turning back now. I have decided to pour my very self out for my people and to take the consequences of their sin and alienation upon myself and to join them in their struggle for life and dignity."

I am reminded of one of my favorite all time movies, the 1989 movie *Glory*, for the drama acted out in God's heart in scripture is acted out in the heart of the hero of the movie, Colonel Robert Shaw. Colonel Shaw was the young, white commander of the first battalion of black soldiers in the Union Army. The movie is based on the letters Colonel Shaw sent back home describing his experiences in the war.

Colonel Shaw's assignment is to transform a hodgepodge group of ex-slaves into a disciplined fighting unit. And believe me, he's got his work cut out for him. Most of the soldiers don't even have shoes, and half of them literally don't know their right foot from their left. Shaw's initial strategy is to remain aloof from his troops and teach them proper respect for military discipline and authority. He follows the letter of military protocol and teaches his men to do the same. Sometimes he has to whip them into submission.

But all through this time, the movie audience can see the inner turmoil going on inside Colonel Shaw. He is torn between his desire to whip the men into shape – after all, their survival on the battlefield depends on it – and his desire to have compassion on them. Slowly the men are changed...and so is the colonel. He sees with his own eyes their sufferings – their backs scarred with frequent whippings at the hands of their former masters, their feet turned to pulp because they didn't have proper footwear. He sees with his own eyes the racial prejudice and indignities they face daily simply because of the colour of their skin, and he sees the incredible courage and perseverance they display in struggling to achieve what he himself had always taken for granted – a sense of human worth and dignity. And in the process he becomes less and less able to remain aloof from his men. Their struggle becomes his struggle.

The climax of the movie comes when several Union Army battalions are gathered to attack and capture a Confederate fort situated in a strategic location on the coast of South Carolina. The fort is well defended, and whoever leads the charge would likely suffer many casualties. Colonel Shaw is the first to volunteer his battalion to lead the charge. “Can they do it?” asks the Union general. “Sir,” Colonel Shaw replies, “my men are the finest fighting men in the Union Army.”

The next morning the men in Colonel Shaw's battalion are standing in formation on the beach, ready for his order to attack. Colonel Shaw sits astride his horse, wearing his full dress uniform. But before he gives the command, he rides his horse into the ocean surf and looks out to sea for what seems like an eternity. Then he climbs down from his horse and wades out of the water through the midst of his troops to the front line. A spontaneous cheer swells up from the men as they realize who is among them. Colonel Shaw's transformation is now complete. He is

truly one of them. He is ready to pour out his life for them in their common struggle for human dignity and freedom as he leads the charge against the enemy.

It was truly a baptism of repentance that Colonel Shaw underwent when he climbed down from his horse and waded in the water of the ocean surf of South Carolina – the same baptism of repentance that our Lord Jesus Christ underwent when he climbed down from his throne in heaven and waded into the muddy water of the Jordan River. But I would submit to you that Jesus and Robert Shaw were never more Godlike than when they dared to undergo that baptism of repentance. And in so doing they give us a new vision of God. Not God who sits high and lifted up on his throne in heaven, unmoved as he disciplines his wayward children from afar, sending plagues and wars to whip us into shape. But the God who is so moved by our human condition that he repents of his divine prerogatives and resolves to dwell among us, struggling with us in our own struggle for dignity and freedom, leading the charge against the very gates of hell from the vulnerability of the frontlines.

This new vision of God is hard for us to accept and believe. Like John the Baptist, we try to prevent this God from coming into our lives. This vision of God is hard to accept because it turns our view of God upside down: “You’re supposed to be up there, Lord, in the bliss of heaven, not down here mucking around with us!” As a result, we don’t recognize God’s presence with us. We accept the hurricane or earthquake as the hand of God, but we don’t recognize the human hand reaching out to us in our loneliness or reaching out to us to give us a drink of water as God’s hand. We blame God for sending the disease that took our father, but don’t recognize the innumerable ways God has been struggling down through the centuries to cure disease. We don’t recognize the comfort a friend or stranger gives us in our grief as the very comfort of God. Yes, like John the Baptist, we try to prevent this God from coming to us

and refuse to recognize him when he does. But once we accept this vision of God, we suddenly recognize God everywhere and in the most unexpected places, like the emergency room of the hospital, or a simple conversation between father and daughter that results in new understanding a mutual respect, or the compassion we feel in our own hearts.

This vision of God as lowly servant is also hard for us to accept because of what it demands of ourselves. For it demands of us just what it demanded of Colonel Shaw and Jesus of Nazareth: all that we have and all that we are. To be baptized in the name of Jesus, to enter with him into the waters of repentance, is to join with him in his resolve – in God’s resolve – to so identify with all people in their need that their suffering becomes our suffering, and their struggle for life and dignity and justice and freedom becomes our struggle. We can no longer remain aloof and pretend it is not our problem. To hold any part of ourselves back is a denial of our calling as Christ’s disciples.

For make no mistake. Wherever people are hurting, God is there ministering to their need. Wherever people are struggling for dignity and freedom and wholeness, God is there leading the charge against all the forces that oppress or degrade or cheapen or distort life. This is the Holy War that God is waging in our midst right now. God’s weapons are not guns or swords, or drones or surface to air missiles. God’s weapons are words of truth spoken in love, and deeds of courageous mercy and humble service.

And there is no question who will ultimately win this war. The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the guarantee that the way of self-giving love will ultimately triumph against the forces of evil. The only question for us is will we dare to follow Christ’s and Colonel Shaw’s examples and wade into the waters of repentance? Will we obey their call when they yell,

“Charge!” For be assured, there is no higher calling than this call to lowly service. For it is the way of God. The only question is this: have we made it our way?

Onward, Christian soldiers, marching as to war, with the cross of Jesus going on before!

Glory, glory hallelujah! Glory, glory, hallelujah! God’s truth is marching on!

Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

*Sermon preached by Rev. Herb Gale  
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