

Lent 2A (3/8/20)
Genesis 12:1-4a
Psalm 121
Romans 4:1-5, 13-17
John 3:1-17

The life of baptism is a daily rebirth by water and Spirit. Each new day, our gestating faith emerges from the comfortable obscurity of the womb into the brightness of day, exposed and vulnerable, yet filled with promise. The labor is God's, but the new life is ours. Held in God's motherly embrace, we open our eyes to the world around us, no longer shielded from reality, but able to see it, understand it, and navigate it together by the lead of Christ.

In the early centuries of the church, the final stage of preparation for Holy Baptism took place during the season of Lent. After a three-year process of study and mentorship, candidates for baptism, or “catechumens,” underwent a more rigorous period of instruction during Lent, which included participation in special vigils, laying on of hands, and fasting. In the early morning hours of Easter, they entered one by one into the baptismal chamber, removed their clothing as a reminder that they brought nothing with them from the old life to the new, and descended into a pool. Immersed three times in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, they emerged reborn. And, donning fresh white robes – symbols of the fundamental dignity bestowed on them by Christ – the newly baptized joined their kindred in faith at daybreak to taste their first communion, a sacred meal to strengthen them for daily discipleship in the world to which they were called out again.¹

¹ See Daniel W. Erlander, *Water Washed and Spirit Born*, 16-19.

Our Gospel from John today records Jesus' famous reference to baptism as rebirth: "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born again... without being born of water and Spirit." In our context, **the term *born again* is laden with religious baggage**, held captive by a certain brand of Christian witness that tends to drive a wedge between those who are "saved" and those who aren't. On the other hand, those who don't identify with the *born again* moniker tend to view those who do with skepticism, pigeonholing them as religious fanatics. In either case, the language has become trite and divisive, reducing Jesus' striking image of heavenly childbirth to either a litmus test for true faith or a mark of self-righteousness, depending on your perspective.² But, **in light of the early church's baptismal practices, the image of baptism as rebirth takes on a significance that we can reclaim.**

The extended period of preparation for baptism in the early church was something like a pregnancy. Newfound faith gestated for three years, developing gradually in the warmth of the church's care. Then, the season of Lent leading up to baptism was something like labor, a final phase of intense anticipation as the event itself drew near. And finally, the passage through baptismal water was something like delivery, as new Christians emerged, wet and naked, into the light of Easter morning with a new sense of belonging in the family of faith.

² See Anna Carter Florence, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 2, 71.

Baptismal practices have changed, but we've preserved the sacrament's core meaning: an entry into new life, a naming and claiming by our devoted heavenly Parent, a promise of love and support from family members and friends, and on top of all that, a dinner to celebrate.

And, although the sacrament occurs only once, baptism informs the rest of our life. "A Christian life," Martin Luther writes, "is nothing else than a daily baptism, begun once and continuing ever after" – baptism "makes us God's own" once for all, yet it "daily strengthens the new person, and always endures and remains,"³ like a parent's love. In other words, **rebirth by water and Spirit is new every day, as each morning greets the baptized like a little Easter, another chance to be embraced into the risen life of Christ.**

For as joyful as birth can be, however, it's also destabilizing. The newborn is pushed from the known confines of the womb into the confusion of unfamiliar surroundings. The darkness of gestation suddenly gives way to blinding light. Blinking his eyes, the infant experiences the sensations of life in the world for the first time, confronted with realities that he must learn to see, to understand, and to navigate.

So, too, with the new life of baptism. Just a few verses beyond our assigned Gospel text from John, Jesus insists that **faith, like birth, involves a passage from darkness to light**: "those do what is true come to the light, so that it may

³ *The Large Catechism*, in *The Book of Concord*, 465-6.

be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.” Recall that Nicodemus, a respected leader in the community, has come to Jesus by night. Something has drawn Nicodemus to this unusual teacher, but he’s prudent, so he doesn’t take the risk of approaching Jesus in the light of public scrutiny. His desire to relate to Jesus – to understand God’s purpose – is genuine, but it’s also shrouded in secrecy. His faith, in other words, is not ready to be born. And that’s ok. **When you’re in the womb, you’re supposed to be there. But, then there’s a time to come out into the light of day.**⁴

When the time comes, Jesus insists, be born into the fullness of faith, and join in the life that God dreams for all of us.

Dear church, the life of baptism is a daily rebirth by water and Spirit. We may prefer to stay in the womb, restricting our faith to the safe confines of church and private life. But each new day, our gestating faith emerges from the comfortable obscurity of the womb into the brightness of day, exposed and vulnerable, yet filled with promise. **The labor is God’s, whose unshakable love is like the love of a new parent. But, the new life is ours. Held in God’s motherly embrace, we open our eyes to the world around us, no longer shielded from reality, but able to see it, to understand it, and to navigate it together by the lead of Christ.**

⁴ Jonette Blakney, Preaching Peace table, Tacoma, 3/3/20.