

First the Water, Then the Work
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He did a lot of work...good work...even incredible work. He *changed* things. He brought people together that were once thought to be completely different. So different that they were regularly called “opposites.” He mixed with all sorts of folks—poor; wealthy, those who were judged unworthy or untrustworthy by some. Through his life, through his mission, through all his amazing work, he reconciled people.

And those were not the only boundaries he crossed. He also spoke against the military activities that the government was carrying out. And he did more than just speak against them. He lived his life in a way that embodied non-violence and demonstrated alternatives to the usual powers of the world. Even in the face of violent attacks, he never used violence to respond. He would turn his cheek instead. In turning his cheek, he revealed just how empty the ways of violence really are, and what real courage is.

His life was not about business as usual or maintaining the status quo, but about transformation. Real transformation, real change—not just empty political slogans, or banal advertizing blurbs—but transformation carried out in the name of God and to the benefit of all humanity. It was an amazing life; a life which has challenged and inspired all who have heard its story since.

But before it all—before the transformation; before the non-violence; before crossing boundaries and reconciling people once thought to be opposites—before *all that*, he was baptized. He passed through the water before taking up the work. He wasn’t the first person to do it, but one among many. As Christians we have joined him. We have also passed through the waters of baptism, as he did before us, and as Jesus Christ did before him.

Before all that amazing work, Martin Luther King, Jr. was baptized. And I believe that it was that symbolic yet transformative action that began to lead Dr. King to be able to work real and lasting transformation in the world. Sometimes people attribute Dr. King’s Civil Rights leadership to being rooted in his experiences as an African American. No doubt that was much of it, but it was also deeply rooted in his faith in Jesus, and how seriously he took his baptism and ministry that followed. When he was reflecting on how he would be remembered on the day of his funeral, Dr. King said:

I’d like someone to mention that day, that Martin Luther King, Jr. tried to give his life serving others. I’d like for somebody to say that day, that Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to love somebody. I want you to say on that day, that I tried to be right on the war

question. I want you to be able to say that day, that I did try to feed the hungry. And I want you to be able to say that day, that I did try, in my life, to visit those who were in prison. I want you to say that I tried to *love and serve humanity*.¹

Dr. King was clearly naming his life's work in Christian language, which he underscores by concluding with:

If I can do my duty as a Christian ought, if I can bring salvation to a world once wrought, if I can spread the message as the master taught, then my living will not be in vain.²

King's ability to do great, world changing work came from his Christian faith, which in turn flowed from the waters of his baptism. He passed through the water before he took up God's work.

The traditional reading for this morning ends with Jesus coming out of the baptismal waters, the Holy Spirit coming to him in the form of a dove, the sky opening and a heavenly voice proclaiming, "*This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.*"³ Now this is a lovely image, and good place to stop in order to celebrate Christ's particular relationship with God. But there is another important relationship that gets underway in the very next verse. It reads: "*Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.*"⁴ The same Holy Spirit that just alighted on Christ one verse before, now turns around and brings him into an encounter with Satan.

So, what is up with that? Why so quick a transition? Is there a missing verse somewhere? Well, no, it is basically the same sequence of events in the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke,⁵ with one slight, but notable difference in Luke. The author of Luke appears to feel some discomfort with the immediacy of the transition from baptism to temptation, because he slows it down a little bit. Between the two events he inserts a genealogy of Jesus. So, there is no *real* delay between the two actions other than that narrative aside. Notably, the gospel of John provides a different story altogether. In it, John the Baptizer provides a second hand telling of Christ's baptism, and it doesn't contain a temptation scene *at all*. Both of these changes in the story illustrate the discomfort of John with the human, and therefore potentially imperfect, aspects of Jesus.

¹ From the sermon "The Drum Major Instinct," delivered by MLK, Jr. on February 4, 1968 at the Ebenezer Baptist Church, as recorded in Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr. Edited by James M. Washington, (Harper Collins: 1991)

² Ibid.

³ Matthew 3:17 b.

⁴ Matthew 4:1.

⁵ Matthew 3:17-4:1; Mark 1:11-1:13; Luke 3:22, 4:1-2.

Yet, without his humanity, without the possibility of failure or imperfection, Jesus is well out of reach for all of us. We all have our moments of failure. We all have our blind spots and imperfections. Yet we are none the less beloved children of God. So, I reckon it a gift that Jesus was baptized, *and* that he was tempted by Satan, because that is a story we can relate to within the context of our own lives.

I also see an essential connection between baptism and confronting the powers of Satan. The first empowers and enables the other. By following Jesus in the sacrament of baptism, we spiritually prepare ourselves to confront the powers of evil at work in the world. Like Jesus, and Dr. King: first we pass through the water, and then we get to doing God's work.

This has been a prevailing view of many Christians since the beginning. Baptism has long been understood to connect us with Christ so we can call on his power in our own lives. In baptism we are understood to die and rise as Jesus did in the Resurrection. We are believed to die to our old life and rise into a new life of relationship to God through Jesus Christ. Not because there is magic in the water; and not because even Jesus can protect us from every moment of suffering or illness. But because baptism is a significant step in a journey of consciously embracing Christ's teachings and following his ways to bring about reconciliation, transformation and healing in the world.

Our baptisms lead us into the life of Christian community where we hear stories of Jesus and the Apostles again and again, until the lines between our lives and their lives begin to blur and break down. As Christians we meet and worship and practice right relationship with each other and God. We do it again and again until we begin to see the places in our experiences where God is at work. Then we dedicate our lives to nurturing that divine spark as our answer to all the suffering we encounter. Not to turn from it, but to transform it through embracing community. To hold on to one another as we all journey through the peaks and valleys of our lives, strong in the assurance that God is at work within us and between us, and that God loves us and is with us indeed. Baptism is a tie of our shared discipleship, just as surely as joining at the Lord's Table for Communion.

So, it strikes me as profoundly odd that Christians celebrate Communion regularly throughout the year, yet we celebrate our baptism much less frequently—and maybe only at the time it occurs. Not only that, but the majority of us are baptized when we are infants, so we have no way to really remember the experience, apart from photographs, or second hand stories. It is a good thing to remember your baptism. It reminds us of our spiritual path as Christians, and it reminds us that we are connected through this shared ritual. And it gives us the chance to have a memory of the experience of baptism if we were infants when it happened. Martin Luther, the namesake of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., is quoted as saying that we should remember our baptism every time we wash our face. I bet most of us are way overdue on that time table! So, I

want to invite you to share an experience today. As you are moved to do; and only if it is easy for you to do so; I invite you to come forward and remember your baptism. If you would like to be involved but find moving forward challenging, please cross your arms in front of you to indicate you would like to receive some water, too. You may come forward as I continue to speak, please gather in front of the altar.

I will sprinkle you with water to remind you of commitments already made to follow Christ. This is not a re-baptism, because Christians believe that one baptism is sufficient for all time. So we sprinkle the water rather than being dipped into it, or having it placed directly upon us.

This water reminds us all the ways we are connected to God, to one another, and to the people of our faith. Water was there in the beginning when God began creating the heavens and the earth. Water washed the world in the time of Noah. The Israelites crossed over the waters of the Jordan to enter the Holy Land. Water is present in our gestation within our mothers, as it was in Mary's womb with Jesus. It was poured out for the Samaritan woman at the well; it washed the feet of the disciples when they ate their last meal with Jesus, and it was present in Christ's own baptism, the baptism of Martin Luther King, Jr., and the baptism of all who have followed.

Friends, vows and commitments were made for many of us at our baptism. As I sprinkle you remember that you are forever connected to God, one another and all the church communities you have known in your faith lives. Each of these connections is a blessing.
(Sprinkle folks)

Friends, will you pray with me? Loving and transforming God, through this water and the workings of your Holy Spirit, remind us all that sin holds no power over us, your beloved children. Help us to stay faithful to Christ's path, and continue to create new, overflowing life in all of us through the inner workings of your Holy Spirit.
Amen.

You may return to your seats everyone.
Now, is there anyone here who has not been baptized who would like to be now?

(Baptism Service)

Let us now join in the Covenant of the Westhampton Congregational Church, found in your notebooks.

We are united in striving to know the will of God as taught in the Holy Scriptures, and in our purpose to walk in the ways of the Lord, made known or to be made known to us. We hold it to be the mission of the church of Christ to proclaim the Gospel to all people, promoting the worship of the one true God and laboring for the progress of knowledge, the establishment of

justice, the reign of peace and the realization of human kinship. Depending, as did our ancestors, upon the continued guidance of the Holy Spirit to lead us in all truth, we work and pray for the transformation of the world into the Kingdom of God; and we look with faith for the triumph of righteousness and the life everlasting.

May God keep us all faithful to Christ's path. Now that we have passed (through the water, or remembered passing) through the water, let us continue with God's work, friends, lift up your hearts...

(To prayers)

Believer's Baptism Service

Is it your desire to be baptized in God's name and to claim or continue in the joys and responsibilities of being a Christian disciple? If so, please say "It is."

Will you renounce the powers of evil and embrace the freedom found in a new life in Christ? If so, please say "I will, with God's help."

Will you walk in the way of discipleship, seeking a deepening and ever maturing love of our Lord Jesus Christ? Will you act in love and justice and witness to the work and Word of Jesus Christ in the world as best you are able? If so, please say "I will, with God's help."

Will everyone please rise as you are able? *Friends and members of the Westhampton Congregational Church*, Jesus Christ calls us to make disciples of all nations and to offer them the gift of grace in baptism. Do you, who witness and celebrate this sacrament promise your love, support and care as this person lives and grows in Christ? Will you love and support this person, and help her/him to grow in Christian virtues? Will you demonstrate to her/him the ways of compassion, love, and justice embodied by Jesus Christ? If you will commit to all these things, please say "We will, with the help of God."

Act of Baptism

Speak you full name.

Dribble. Father /Son/ Holy Spirit

Baptismal prayer

Gracious God, let your Holy Spirit pour down. Let it bond with the water in this container and the water in the body of your child. Bless and enrich this person, build her/him up to be your disciple in truth and power. Lead her/him in Christ's path and help us all to support her/him in this journey of faith. We pray this in Jesus' name, "Amen."

Friends, please join me in reciting our church covenant, which you will find in the notebooks located at either end of your pews.

We are united in striving to know the will of God as taught in the Holy Scriptures, and in our purpose to walk in the ways of the Lord, made known or to be made known to us. We hold it to be the mission of the church of Christ to proclaim the Gospel to all people, promoting the worship of the one true God and laboring for the progress of knowledge, the establishment of justice, the reign of peace and the realization of human kinship. Depending, as did our ancestors, upon the continued guidance of the Holy Spirit to lead us in all truth, we work and pray for the transformation of the world into the Kingdom of God; and we look with faith for the triumph of righteousness and the life everlasting.