

## EVERYDAY BAPTISM

*John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."*

*In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."*

Mark 1: 4-11

Once a year, just about every year, we read one of the gospel accounts of the baptism of Jesus. And we use this occasion not only to reflect on the mystery of why Jesus chose to submit to the baptism of John, but also to reflect on the meaning of our own baptism.

In addition to the gospels, we usually read one or more of the supporting texts, like Psalm 29 about how God's power over the floods, the elemental forces of water. Or, we read the beginning of the creation story in Genesis, about how the Spirit moved over the waters of a primordial earth, bringing order to chaos. Or we read the words of the prophet Isaiah, the reassurance that when we pass through the waters of adversity or danger or fear, God accompanies us and sees us through.

In the same way that the ordinary elements of bread and wine open up the mystery of Christ giving himself for our sake, throughout the biblical narrative, water serves as a powerful image and metaphor, and it speaks volumes about the meaning and effect of our baptism.

But metaphors are not complete in themselves; they use familiar elements to point us to something more mysterious and harder to grasp. Behind the image and metaphor of water, there is something else going on, both in the baptism of Jesus and in our own experience and remembrance of this sacrament. As indispensable as water is to baptism, it is not the water itself that gives our baptism its deepest meaning and effect on our lives.

Let me tell you a story that comes from a book by Rachel Naomi Remen called *My Grandfather's Blessings*. She writes about a gift her grandfather once brought her. It was not a doll or book, but simply a little paper cup with some dirt in it. He took the miniature teapot from her doll's tea set and took her to the kitchen to fill it with water. Then, back in the nursery, he put the cup on the windowsill and handed the teapot to little Rachel, whom he calls "Neshume-le, an affectionate term that means, "my little spirit," or "my little darling." "If you promise to put some water in the cup every day," he told her, "something may happen."

She writes:

*At the time, I was four years old and my nursery was on the sixth floor of an apartment building in Manhattan. This whole thing made no sense to me at all. I looked at him dubiously. He nodded with encouragement. "Every day, Neshume-le," he told me.*

*And so I promised. At first, curious to see what would happen, I did not mind doing this. But as the days went by and nothing changed, it got harder and harder to remember to put water in the*

*cup. After a week, I asked my grandfather if it was time to stop yet. Shaking his head no, he said, "Every day, Neshume-le." The second week was even harder, and I became resentful of my promise to put water in the cup. When my grandfather came again, I tried to give it back to him but he refused to take it, saying simply, "Every day, Neshume-le." By the third week, I began to forget to put water in the cup. Often I would remember only after I had been put to bed and would have to get out of bed and water it in the dark. But I did not miss a single day. And one morning, there were two little green leaves that had not been there the night before.*

*I was completely astonished. Day by day they got bigger. I could not wait to tell my grandfather, certain that he would be as surprised as I was. But of course he was not. Carefully he explained to me that life is everywhere, hidden in the most ordinary and unlikely places. I was delighted. "And all it needs is water, Grandpa?" I asked him. Gently he touched me on the top of my head. "No, Neshume-le," he said. "All it needs is your faithfulness." (Rachel Naomi Remen, *My Grandfather's Blessings*, pp. 1-2)*

Among many other things, our baptism is a reminder that every day, God pours a bit of water on each one of us, to bring us to life, or maybe to bring us back to life, or to bring out the true color in our life. And every day, we are called to carry a few drops of that same water to others—to our neighbors, to our community, to our family, to our enemies, to our political systems, to our work, to our play, to our world.

In the gospels, the baptism of Jesus is the beginning of a life-long journey that will take him through the villages of Galilee teaching and preaching about the dawn of the kingdom of God. It is the beginning of a ministry, bringing what he called "living water" to and for the outcast and poor, the tax-collectors and prostitutes, the blind and those who have troubled spirits. It is the beginning of a journey that will ultimately take him to Jerusalem where he will suffer death by crucifixion and then be raised. But his baptism is not just the beginning of his journey. When we follow Christ through the waters of baptism it becomes the pattern for our own journey of faithfulness. It means that, like Christ, we take on the suffering of others, that we identify with the loneliness of the stranger, the alienation of the refugee, the desperation of the poor, the outrage of the abused. It means that we enter into the lives of the people around us, in whatever way we are able, and make their problems our problems, and make our hope of resurrection life their hope.

Baptism is about water, and we will continue to celebrate this essential element and powerful sign. But baptism is about more than just water—it is also about faithfulness. Our baptism, whether as an infant or adult, reminds us that God is faithful to us—every day. Remembering our baptism—remembering the meaning of our baptism—calls us to a faithfulness of our own, to live out the meaning of our baptism.

Every day, Neshume-le.

Every day, my darlings.