

A Baptismal Concern

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The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. They said, "If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger." - Exodus 16:2, 3

It is my understanding that I baptized between 410 and 420 people when I was pastor of Sandia. Wendy Wiele went through the records when she was clerk of session. I had asked her another question. The number was an aside. I had never thought much about a number beforehand, other than one time I was contacted by a Baptist seminary professor doing research.

It turned out that I had done more adult baptisms than most Presbyterian pastors, say, one out of five. (And a whole bunch when I was in the South Valley.) The Baptist seminary professor was impressed until I told him that it was less a matter of these adults having conversion experiences at Sandia than their parents just never got around to seeing that they were baptized growing up. It is not unusual for a family situation to be such that a child, even one with some church background, doesn't undergo baptism. They take care of it, then, as adults.

I've always said a word about the meaning of baptism preceding the ceremony during the worship service. There are a number of things that can be said, but what I think is most important has to do with the water coming from the Biblical story in which the Israelites passed through the Red Sea.

Freed from slavery to Pharaoh in Egypt, emerging from the waters marked the beginning of their journey toward new life in the Promised Land. Analogously, the water of baptism marks the official beginning of our journey into the abundant life of salvation. A joyous celebration like the Song of Moses in Exodus 15!

Perhaps what we ought to be mindful of as we look back on our baptisms is that we need to be cautious. Pharaoh wants us back. There is no mention in Exodus 14 that Pharaoh himself was drowned, only his army. And even if he was drowned, his evil spirit lives on in the many ways in which we and so many others are oppressed today.

Also, we ourselves are ready to give up at times. *The whole congregation of the Presbyterians complained against Jesus in the wilderness. They said, "If only You had left us alone! Being a Christian is inconvenient at times, downright hard at others, and increasingly unpopular. You have brought us out into this wilderness to work us to death with one good deed after another. And not only that: people make fun of our beliefs!"* - Exit Us If Things Don't Get Easier

So often our song of joy turns into a sad song along the way. But not only is God at work to free us from our self-destructiveness, but also God is at work in us to save us from the oppression inflicted by so many outside powers. Pharaoh's oppression today includes all the diversions offered to us in which to waste our lives, all the manipulation from so many sources who want us to live lives that profit them, all the temptations set before us daily to follow the crowd like lemmings off a cliff, all the behind-the-scenes deals made by multi-national corporations that are meant to keep us in our place. And so much more. Jesus is able to save us from both internal and external taskmasters, but ours is to pay attention to what is going on out there and follow his lead.

It is said that the glory of God is a human being who is fully alive, and that's how I'd describe our baptismal hope. That we do not succumb to the life-sapping forces that seek our harm, but live our ordinary lives extra-ordinarily well, based on the teachings, example, and achievements of Christ. No one said it would be easy.