

Story and Meditation: Baptisms

January 10, 2021

Baptism of Christ

Acts 19:1-7

Mark 1:4-11

by Eric Anderson

The story – not this story, but the story within this story – started with a finch.

As stories go, it wasn't an impressive one. It was depressingly simple. The story was this: that cats hunted regularly in one grassy area filled with seeds and grubs and the tastiest insects to eat. To feed in that place was to invite deadly danger. To have a meal there was likely to make it your last meal – and a cat's next meal, if you know what I mean.

A memorable story, to be sure, but not a complex one.

It was also a lie.

Quite simply, this finch was tired of sharing the seeds and grubs and the tastiest insects to eat with all these other birds: the finches, the kolea, the doves, and of course the mynas. So he decided to start a rumor. "Did you see that cat?" he asked one day. "What's that moving in the bushes – oh, and in those other bushes, too?" he whistled.

And in whispers, he'd ask the mynas and the doves and the kolea and the finches, "Did you hear about the cats who caught birds here yesterday?"

It was a simple, memorable, and effective lie.

The other birds took the warning and, bit by bit, they stopped coming. There came a day when the finch found himself all alone in the grassy area, with all its seeds and grubs and the tastiest insects. He set in for a feast.

That was when the cats, who had been intimidated by the larger flock of birds that could raise the alarm or even scold them away, came for their feast.

That is not a story with a happy ending.

This is not a week with happy stories.

On Wednesday, the head of one branch of the United States government spoke to a crowd. He told them lies. He told them to march to the seat of another branch of the United States

government to interrupt them in... counting votes. He incited a riot to interrupt the most basic exercise of a democratic republic: counting votes.

The United States Capitol was assaulted. Rioters broke windows and doors to enter. They drove their own elected representatives from their Constitutional responsibilities. They destroyed and defaced. Five people have died.

The head of one branch of government incited a riot against another branch of government. Is there a clearer example of a high crime and misdemeanor?

The riot, by the way, failed. The votes were counted. The result is clear. A new President has been elected.

The question is, what next?

I am a Christian. I am a Christian pastor and preacher and teacher. I am an ordained minister in a tradition that believes in the power of forgiveness. I am a spokesperson for a community that believes that sin can be washed away.

But there is a funny thing about forgiveness, and it is this: something precedes it. Something comes before it. Something else has to happen first, and that something is repentance. Forgiveness without repentance is simply tolerance for unacceptable behavior. Forgiveness without repentance is abdication of moral standards. Forgiveness without repentance is what brought us to Wednesday, because outrage after outrage has been excused, dismissed, or even justified with falsehood.

No repentance? No accountability? No acknowledgement? No effort to make things right?

No forgiveness.

I will accept no non-apologies for this assault. The perpetrators must stand accountable. Those who have betrayed the public trust must be expelled from office. "I'm sorry if you were offended," does not cut it when the chambers of debate become the settings of brutality.

The President of the United States should not serve ten more minutes let alone ten more days. I call for the immediate impeachment and conviction of Donald Trump.

Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg wrote on Twitter a year and a half ago, "There are specific steps to repentance work: 1) owning the harm perpetrated (ideally publicly); 2) do the work to become the kind of person who doesn't do harm (which requires a ton of inner work) 3) Make restitution for harm done, in whatever way possible 4) THEN apologize for the harm caused in whatever way that will make it as right as possible with the victim 5) when faced with the opportunity to cause similar harm in the future, make a better choice."

John the Baptist would have approved.

Repent your sins. Be baptized. Be forgiven. That's the order. That's the way.

What next for us?

On Wednesday evening, I led a live streamed time of prayer. This was part of it:

“And we pray, O God, for grace, that where we have heard and contributed out of well-meaning ignorance or out of ‘going with the crowd,’ where we have in our ways failed to prevent today’s events, then may we have grace to repent and reform and renew. For truly none of your Creation, O God, are perfect, and where we would project fault truly some of it is projected from our own feelings. So it is. Help us to change that.”

What did we tolerate that was intolerable? What did we accept that was unacceptable? How often did we stay silent when our voices needed to be heard? How many times did we say, “Someone else will take care of that,” and nobody else did?

Cynthia Briggs Kittredge asks at Working Preacher, “How is repentance a life-giving invitation for the twenty first century? All those people in the Jordan were being dipped in water to signify a movement they were joining — John’s movement of repentance and the forgiveness of sin. What movement of justice or returning to God are we joining when we reaffirm our baptism?”

Dr. Kittredge didn’t write those words this week. She wrote them three years ago. You see, this issue of repentance and forgiveness and renewal is one of the eternal movements of the Christian faith. We act. Sometimes we act well. Sometimes we act badly, or fail to act well. We repent. We find God’s forgiveness. We embrace renewal. We act differently, and sometimes we act differently and well.

When we are not attentive to this cycle of the Christian life, our omissions build up. It is simple spiritual and moral negligence. That negligence blossoms into a society that, well, invades the Capitol to interrupt that most basic democratic exercise: counting votes.

“What movement of justice or returning to God are we joining when we reaffirm our baptism?”

And... Who is joining us when we reaffirm our baptism?

The strange conversation the Apostle Paul had with those “about twelve” believers of Ephesus makes clear that Christian baptism is not just about repentance and forgiveness. It is not just about the spiritual cycle that refreshes us. It is also about the Holy Spirit that empowers us. I wish the Holy Spirit prevented us from those failures of omission and commission, that we would be preserved from the errors of acting badly or of failing to act well, but sadly that is not the case. Paul himself, whose embrace of the Holy Spirit was wholehearted, wrote in his letter

to the Romans, “For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.” Perfection, even with the Spirit’s aid, is not ours to grasp.

What is given us in the Holy Spirit is strength and courage and speech and a commitment to truth. It’s not magic. Our strength will lag with fatigue. Our courage may well quail in the face of opposition. We may find the words struggling to leave our lips or find their way to paper or screen. And we may yet be mistaken or misinformed, or just plain misunderstand. The embrace of the Holy Spirit means that we can pause – remember Jesus meditated in the wilderness just after his baptism – and rise again to do our work, to proclaim the truth, to build a better world than the one we found.

The elected officers of the United Church of Christ and the Council of Conference Ministers spoke on Wednesday. They said in part:

“Our faith calls us to acts of love, kindness and compassion. Our faith reminds us that the power of God aligns with the poor and the abandoned, the weak and the hungry, the oppressed and the marginalized. We call on all people of faith and goodwill to use what we saw on Jan. 6, 2021, as a call to justice and a reminder of what happens when evil goes unchallenged.

“Our faithful response to this most recent act of white terrorism and insurrection will be to feed the hungry, shelter the homeless, free the oppressed, welcome the stranger, love the neighbor, and fill the whole world with the love of our blessed redeemer, Jesus. And, as we continue to do so, we will walk in the courage to denounce and dismantle theologies and systems of oppression and hatred, replacing them with theologies of freedom, peace, justice and love.

“We invite all members of the United Church of Christ to a period of sober reflection and fervent prayer. We further urge brave conversation and a willingness to break down the barriers between us and within our communities. May we as Church offer a clear witness of the bold love, honest confession, and simple humility required of us all in this moment. In the words of the prophet Micah, let us go forth to ‘do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God.’”

People of God, affirm your baptism. Repent the errors you have made, that I have made, that we have made that contributed to this. Embrace the Holy Spirit who loves you, and in that strength and courage, do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God.

Amen.