Spirituality
Scripture for Life



by Patricia Datchuck Sánchez

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

January 10, 2016
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

If your experience has been similar to mine, you may recall that when you were incorporated into the life of Christ and the life of the church through the sacraments of initiation, you were called a “soldier for Christ.” As such, we were expected to be staunch defenders of the faith. Yes, later — and in affirmation of the idea — we learned “Onward Christian Soldiers.” We belted out this classic English hymn with as much ferocity as our 7-year-old hearts could muster, no holding back for us, no half measures. While I am certain that I was taught about the other blessings that accompany the sacrament of baptism, the notion of being a soldier impressed me most poignantly.

Today, however, as we recall and celebrate the baptism of Jesus, there is no talk of soldiering or putting up a good defense. Nor is there any idea that our own righteousness has brought about our salvation. On the contrary, the focus is on God, on grace, forgiveness, reconciliation and mercy.

Deutero-Isaiah speaks of comfort for his exiled contemporaries. He could have said, “I told you so,” or listed the many reasons why they deserved their sad and shameful circumstances. But the prophet spoke for a God who does not kick us while we are down. Rather, speaking tenderly as he was directed by God, the prophet assured his people that God is strong and powerful; yet God chooses to love and

care for sinners as a shepherd gathers his flock to his bosom, because God is first and foremost a God of mercy.

This quality of God is affirmed by the author of the letter to Titus. Herein, one of Paul's disciples reminds readers that all God has done for us in Christ, everything grace has accomplished, all the graces that accrue to believers in the bath of rebirth — these things are due to God's mercy. Because of God's mercy, we are justified, and we have become heirs in hope of eternal life.

In our celebration today of Jesus' baptism, and in gratitude for our own many experiences of God's mercy, we might do well to consider the quality of mercy more carefully. Although there are many words for "mercy" in the Hebrew scriptures, the most frequent is *hesed*, which defies precise interpretation. *Hesed* can mean loving-kindness, love, loyalty, faithfulness and/or covenant love. As John L. McKenzie has explained, *hesed* is not only the love exhibited in virtue of the covenant; it is also the movement of the will that initiates the covenant and every other overture of love that God extends to humankind ("Aspects of Old Testament Thought," *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: 1990). Indeed, the entire history of the encounter between God and humanity can be summed up as one ongoing act of *hesed*. More than any other attribute, *hesed* reveals God's personal identity and the key to understanding God's character. God's love for us is not only the love of a Creator for what has been created (Isa 43:1-7, 21), but is essentially the love of a father (Hosea 11:14; Isa 1:4; Jer 3:19; 31:20). Indeed, God's love for us is even greater than that of a mother for her child (Isa 49:15; 66:13).

If such is God's mercy or *hesed* or love, what should be our response to God — we who are so loved? It seems our response should include our most diligent effort to be a more sincere reflection of the God whose mercy creates and sustains us. Shouldn't people look at what we do, listen to what we say, see how we live our lives, and immediately be able to discern to whom we belong? Our promises of renunciation and belief should be evident in the lifestyle we cultivate. Since, through baptism, each of us is initiated into the life of the one God, Father, Son and Spirit, doesn't that make us brothers and sisters to one another?

That relationship makes each of us responsible for the other. Am I my brother's keeper? Am I my sister's caretaker? Yes! If another has need, is homeless or hungry, is sick or lonely and afraid, and I am aware but do nothing, then my baptismal vows are false; my faith is a sham. We who are signed with the cross and washed in the

blood of Jesus, we who are seasoned with salt and fired with the light of grace, are charged to renew daily the baptismal promises that make us who we are. Through daily prayer, we are to follow Jesus' example in integrating the faith we profess with our lips with the faith we express in our daily lives.

The late Raymond E. Brown, whose baptismal commitment was evident to all who knew him, often stressed the significance of Christian baptism by insisting that "the day a person is baptized is more important than the day when a person is ordained priest and bishop." Amen.

ISAIAH 40:1-5, 9-11

Israel's escape from Egypt into the desert, where they became a people covenanted to God in love and mercy, became for the Jews the pivotal moment of their history by which all other significant events were interpreted. For that reason, it isn't surprising that Deutero-Isaiah chose to describe the return home of his people from exile in Babylonia in terms of that first exodus. Envisioning their journey homeward as a second exodus, the prophet consoled the exiles with the hope that the miracles of power that had marked their first desert trek were to be repeated: the desert would become their highway, the high mountains would witness their good news and God their merciful shepherd-king would carry them.

As their companion during their exile, the prophet also helped his contemporaries to interpret the circumstances and events that had led to their downfall. Slowly, his words of comfort began to fan into a flame the faint glimmer of hope to which they clung. At first, their hope had its basis in political events. Cyrus the Persian was rapidly rising to power and posed a threat to the continued dominance of Babylonia. True to his vocation as prophet-interpreter, Deutero-Isaiah recognized, in this political event, the hand of God at work on behalf of the exiles. When Cyrus, whom the prophet called "God's anointed," was successful in overcoming the Babylonians and in allowing those in exile there to return to their own homelands, Deutero-Isaiah looked beyond the politics and attributed this turn of events to God. Always merciful, ever concerned and forever involved in the lives of the Israelites, it was God who had secured their release, insisted the prophet.

This insistence constituted the introduction or the prologue of the prophet's work (Isa 40:35), which also included his call and commission. Because of the plural verbs in the mandate (vv. 1-2), some scholars suggest that God's declaration of comfort or

mercy was addressed to the heavenly company of angels whom God sent to care for the exiles. A similar idea is reflected in Psalm 91:11: “for to his angels he has given command about you that they guard you in all your ways.” Other scholars are of the mind that the plural verbs indicate God’s choice of Deutero-Isaiah from a group of prophets. Perhaps the best interpretation is one that coincides with the biblical tradition of a heavenly court who witnessed and approved of God’s decrees (1 Kings 22:19-23; Job 1-2) for the earthly sphere.

Once mandated, the prophet’s message was focused on a positive new beginning for God’s people, an era of restoration and reconciliation, inaugurated and realized by the power of God’s word. The same word that had called the universe into being — “Let there be … and so it was” — was now speaking to the hearts of God’s people: “comfort” … “fear not to cry out … here is your God.” That same word continues to speak to each of us, in love, with caring and mercy.

TITUS 2:11-14; 3:4-7

Part of the letters called “pastoral,” Titus was probably written by a disciple of Paul or a sympathetic commentator on the Pauline heritage several decades after the apostle’s death. Raymond E. Brown and 80 to 90 percent of critical scholars agree that Titus reflects the issues and circumstances of the church in Crete near the end of the first or (less probable) early second century C.E. (*An Introduction to the New Testament*, Doubleday, New York: 1997). Among these issues were the presence of false teachers whose efforts threatened the orthodoxy of the faith; church structure, which was more and more needed as the community grew and spread; community relations and belief.

Today’s excerpted text deals with these latter issues and constitutes about two-thirds of Titus. With an interest in proselytizing his readers, the ancient author invited believers to live in a manner worthy of the grace of salvation — temperately, justly, devoutly, eager to do what is good. In those verses omitted from today’s reading, the author specified that the modeling of good deeds should include being submissive to rulers and authorities and being courteous to outsiders. As Raymond E. Brown (*op. cit.*) has noted, “nothing is more harmful to such a public image than foolish inner-Christian dissensions and quarrels.” Such behavior is not only contrary to the grace each has received in Jesus; it guarantees a reduction in membership as people will go where they are spiritually fed, supported and edified.

The second portion of this pericope (3:4-7) is probably an early Christian hymn, liturgical formula, credal formula or baptismal hymn. In one long sentence, the kerygma is beautifully summarized and eloquently expressed. As Thomas C. Oden has pointed out, the text sets forth the *basis* (because of God's mercy), the *what* (rebirth and renewal, justification by God's grace), the *means* (through the Holy Spirit and by grace) and the *goal* (the eternal life for which we hope). "Into our syndromes of sin," says Oden, "came the *hesed* of God" (*First and Second Timothy and Titus*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, Ky.: 1989). God's salvific work is set forth in three closely related metaphors: cleansing, birth and new life. Through this triple action of regeneration, the process of justification begins.

Justification, or being set in a right relationship with God, is not something that can be earned or merited, no matter how great and heroic the effort. On the contrary. Paul, the mentor of the author of Titus, was quick to point out that all is gift. We are saved, justified, reborn and renewed not because of our own righteousness but "because of God's mercy" (3:5). Such depth of mercy (of *hesed*) has been shown to us by God; how can we not show mercy to one another? To paraphrase Mother Teresa, "Be the living expression of God's mercy, mercy in your eyes, mercy in your face, mercy in your smile, mercy in your warm greetings. We are all but God's instruments who do our little bit and pass by. I believe that the way in which an act of mercy is done is as important as the action itself" (*The Joy in Loving*, Penguin Group, New York: 1999). (Mother Teresa's original quote uses the word "kindness" instead of "mercy.") Be merciful as God is merciful.

LUKE 3:15-16, 21-22

Careful readers will notice that the Lucan evangelist has reworked his Marcan source in his narratives about the roles of John the Baptizer and Jesus. Scholars believe that Mark wrote in the late 60s; Mark featured John as the first major figure in his Gospel. Luke and Matthew, who wrote in the 80s, and John in the 90s, were careful to represent John as subordinate to Jesus and his role as secondary to Jesus. Some still clung to the belief that John had been the Messiah; to clarify matters, Luke addressed the issue head-on.

Not only did Luke portray John repeatedly denying the claim that he was the Savior, he also had John deflect attention away from himself, telling the people about "one mightier, who is to come." In Mark's version, the evangelist specified that this one would come "after me," but Luke omitted these words lest anyone wrongly assume

that Jesus followed John as a disciple follows a master. Luke tells his readers that John himself proclaimed his unworthiness to be the Christ.

The reference to the undoing of the thongs of Jesus' sandals portrays John in the position of a slave or a student, as this was an act performed only by someone in a position of subservience to another. John also compared his baptism with water as preparatory to, and lesser than, that of Jesus, who would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire! Even Luke's description of Jesus' baptism attests to his superior role. The description is narrated in a subordinate clause, and coupled with the Greek genitive absolute. Luke left no doubt as to the identity and missions of Jesus and John: "and Jesus was at prayer, after likewise being baptized" (v. 21).

Luke is unique in his emphasis on the importance of prayer for Jesus, and he made mention of the praying Jesus before and during the key events of his ministry, e.g., at the inauguration of his public service (3:21), before choosing his disciples (6:12), before announcing his passion (8:18), at the transfiguration (9:28), before teaching his own how to pray (11:2), at the Last Supper (22:25), agonizing over his imminent death (22:41), and on the cross (23:48). In Luke's second volume, The Acts of the Apostles, the early Christians were represented as following Jesus' example and his emphasis on prayer (Acts 1:14; 2:42; 4:31; 12:12).

While Jesus was praying, the Holy Spirit descended on him, and a voice from heaven ratified the role and the identity of Jesus as God's beloved Son. Linguists explain that the Greek word for "son" (v. 22) may be understood as equivalent to the Hebrew word for "servant" (Isa 42:1), thereby casting Jesus in the role of the Isaian son and servant who served God with absolute fidelity even unto death Just as the Servant pleased God, so too did God's favor rest upon Jesus from the outset of his mission to save all peoples.

Filled with the Spirit, empowered by the Father's favor, grace, mercy and love, Jesus at prayer and in his baptism remains the example for all believers whose life in him is initiated in baptism and daily nourished in prayer.

Prayers: Baptism of the Lord

by: Joan DeMerchant

Introduction

Brothers and sisters, today we are reminded that Jesus' ministry began just as ours does: by his baptism. By entering into the waters of baptism, he was identified as God's own son and filled with the Holy Spirit. That baptism unleashed great power in his life that enabled him to fulfill his calling through unimaginable demands. Jesus' relationship to God was unique, but in our own baptism, we too are claimed as God's own and filled with the Spirit to fulfill whatever is asked of us.

Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, you were the one whom John proclaimed: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you entered the waters of baptism in Galilee: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you were anointed by God and filled with the Holy Spirit: Lord, have mercy.

Prayer of the Faithful

Presider Brothers and sisters, let us pray for ourselves, for those who will be baptized, and for all those we are called to serve as followers of Jesus.

Minister For the church: that it may be a strong model and resource for all called by baptism to follow Jesus … we pray,

- For those throughout the world whom we are called to serve, especially the most vulnerable and marginalized … we pray,
- For those who have lost or have never discovered the power and energy of baptism … we pray,
- For all who are afraid to respond to their baptismal calling, especially those living in dangerous or violent situations … we pray,
- For those who prepare others for the sacrament of baptism: for pastors, catechists, RCIA directors and parents who teach their children … we pray,
- For all who will be baptized in the coming year and for those who will accompany them ... we pray,

For those whose lives are consumed with the need to provide for themselves and their loved ones … we pray,

For the sick, the dying and the grieving among us; and for those who have died … (*names*) … we pray,

Presider God who claims us as your own in baptism, we pray for the courage to live out our calling to follow Jesus in service of others. Bless us with peace and courage, and fill us with the power of the Holy Spirit. We pray in the name of Jesus, whom you called your Son. Amen.

Advertisement

This story appears in the **Cycle B Sunday Resources** feature series. View the full series.