



REMEMBER
YOUR

BAPTISM

{ LIVING OUT THE CHRISTIAN
RITE OF TRANSFORMATION
BY DAVID DESILVA }



THE RITE OF BAPTISM IS A SNAPSHOT OF THE TRANSFORMATION THAT GOD SEEKS TO WORK IN US THROUGHOUT THE REST OF OUR CHRISTIAN LIVES. IN THE CHRISTIAN CHURCHES, THE RITE OF BAPTISM IS BOTH A RITE OF ENTRY AND AN INSTRUMENT OF TRANSFORMATION. BUT BECAUSE WE ARE TAUGHT THAT BAPTISM IS A ONE-TIME ACT, WE MAY NOT KNOW HOW TO USE THIS RITE FULLY AS THE FORMATIONAL HELP IT IS INTENDED TO BE.

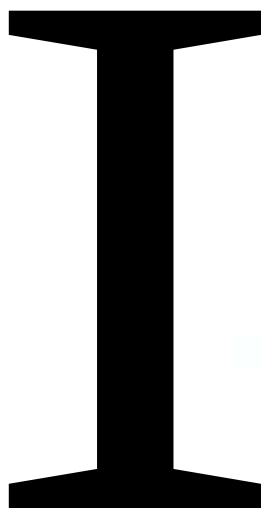
ly formative for my understanding of the baptismal life. Scripture provides the primary images and expresses the essential significance of baptism; the liturgy (itself infused with Scripture and sound spiritual counsel) offers a

means by which people can grab hold of that significance, begin to live it out, and return to in order to find help for the ongoing journey.

PUTTING OFF THE OLD SELF

Paul had a firm grasp of baptism as a rite of transformation: “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life” (Rom. 6:3-4, NRSV). Something dies or begins to die, and something is born and begins a new life in baptism. What dies, according to Paul, is our “old self” (Rom. 6:6; see also Col. 2:11-13). It drowns in the pool, as it were, and we emerge a “new person,” born from a different parent into a new family.

Our old self is the part of us that was born into sin and misshaped by broken people and sick systems. To some extent, families of origin, schools, classmates, associates at work, the omnipresent media, and the dominant ideologies of our societies have all shaped us—or, better, misshaped us—into the image of human



I’d like to suggest some ways we can experience our baptism again, intentionally, on a daily basis. As Martin Luther observed, our baptism—however long ago the event—offers “a garment which the disciple is to put on every day, each day putting the old person to death a little more and nurturing the new person toward maturity.”¹ By holding our own baptism regularly before our eyes, by returning again and again to its implications for our lives, we

become more fully each day the new person who came to birth by water and the Spirit.

In the words of Michael Green, “the whole of the Christian life in time and in eternity is, in a sense, encapsulated in baptism. The Christian life is a baptismal life, and it is all about dying and rising with Christ, in this world and hereafter.”² The rite of baptism initiates us into this baptismal life. It sets out the contours of a transformational process that we are intentionally to engage each day.

In my own spiritual journey, both Scripture and the liturgy of the *Book of Common Prayer* have been equal-

LIVING WATER

Fill a small, clear bowl with water and place it in a prominent place in your home or place of work. Whenever you see it, say to yourself (perhaps touching the water, or using it to sign the cross on your forehead): “I have been baptized; I belong to God; I am new in Christ.”

1. Martin Luther, *The Large Catechism*, tr. Robert H. Fischer. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959, 90, adapted.

2. Michael Green, *Baptism*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1987, 50.



THROWING OFF ALL THAT ENTANGLES

Use the renunciations as a guide to self-examination, asking God to show you involvements with the demonic, ways in which you are enmeshed in the false beliefs and community-corrupting practices of domination systems, and sinful desires that you have not yet renounced. As God reveals these involvements to you, prayerfully explore your engagement with them more fully and consider what a fuller disengagement would look like. Renew your renunciation, reclaiming your death to these things in your baptism, and pray for God's Holy Spirit to fill you afresh and help you walk in line with your renunciations.

MEDITATION: WHAT ARE YOU WEARING?

Enter into a time of prayerful meditation using Colossians 3:5-17 and Galatians 5:16-25. Ask God to reveal some aspect of the "old self" that still lives in you, from which he desires to release you so that Christ may come alive in you more fully. Visualize yourself stripping off those attitudes or behaviors as if an outworn garment.

As you move to the second half of each text, ask God to help you discern where aspects of the "new person" are already part of your regular wardrobe. What facet of the "new person" or the new life in the Spirit does God want to cultivate in you more fully in today's steps along the path? Visualize yourself putting on this virtue, and pray for the grace and discernment to walk more fully in the "new person" you have put on in baptism. This exercise might be fruitfully accompanied by journaling.



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brokenness rather than the image of divine fullness.³ The old self is not a pretty sight. It seeks its own gratification at the cost of others' dignity, fulfillment, and growth. It thinks highly of itself and meanly of others. It acts viciously to protect its own interests. It turns people to painkillers like compulsive eating, needless spending, or sexual addictions rather than helping them deal with the underlying issues. It poisons relationships. It is a gravity well that threatens to suck down our own souls into itself.

Baptism breaks the power of this "old self," but experience also tells us that the old self continues to live—we even nurture it—long after our baptism. And so baptism initiates us into a lifelong process of putting off this old self, the self we are apart from God, like a garment that is ill fitting, uncomfortable, and too restrictive for the person that the Holy Spirit is bringing to life within us. The baptismal life is a life of dying to our life of self-will, self-seeking, and self-serving, learning to imitate the Christ who sought the good of others and God's good purposes for them before all else.

BAPTISM AS RENUNCIATION

Baptismal liturgies since the third century have facilitated this dying to the old self by means of formal acts of renouncing all those things that feed the old self—all those forces that are not from God. In the form found in the *Book of Common Prayer*, the renun-

ciations are as follows:

Do you renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God?

Do you renounce the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God?

Do you renounce all sinful desires that draw you from the love of God?⁴

These questions, affirmed once in the rite itself, remain valuable as tools for self-examination, confession, and "course correction." They continue to challenge us to grow in our awareness of the forces around and within us seeking to hinder the work of the Holy Spirit in us and through us. They invite us to sharpen our ability to discern our own impulses as well as the spiritual dynamics of the systems surrounding us, freeing us to move more consistently in alignment with the movements of God's Spirit rather than the contrary movements of other powers.

However we might visualize Satan, the existence of evil forces and their impact on human psyches and actions are difficult to deny, as those who counsel people recovering from occult involvement often attest. Coming alive to God requires that we discard every counterfeit, persisting in our renunciation of all competing spiritualities, recognizing behind them the subtle activity of deceptive and malevolent powers—whether psychics or astrologers, manipulative magic, necromancy, or fascination with the "other Gospel" and "other Jesus" of Gnosticism. As Paul would put it, we cannot share in the Lord's table

3. See further, David deSilva, "1 Peter: Strategies for Counseling Individuals on the Way to a New Heritage," *Ashland Theological Journal* 32 (2000) 33-52.

4 *Book of Common Prayer*, 202.



and in the table of demons (1 Cor. 10:21).

The second renunciation calls us to examine our collusion with another kind of spiritual power—the power exercised by the domination systems that have permeated, shaped, driven, and constrained human society and human lives.⁵ Domination systems are social structures that have taken on a life of their own. They imprint on each new generation the mind-set that allows those structures to continue to shape and constrain human relations, assuring their own perseverance. They often work against God’s vision for human community, a vision of peace, justice, and relational wholeness where all enjoy the gifts of God’s good creation. Militarism is an enduring one, imprinting deeply on humanity its fundamental premise that inflicting death and hardships is an acceptable and necessary means of assuring “peace.” Materialism is another one, with its creed that “more is better;” its practices of ensuring the enjoyment of this “more” by a privileged few, its disregard for our calling to stewardship (rather than ownership) of earth’s resources. Patriarchy, which ascribes relative value to human beings and limits their roles and spheres on the basis of gender, is perhaps the most ancient.

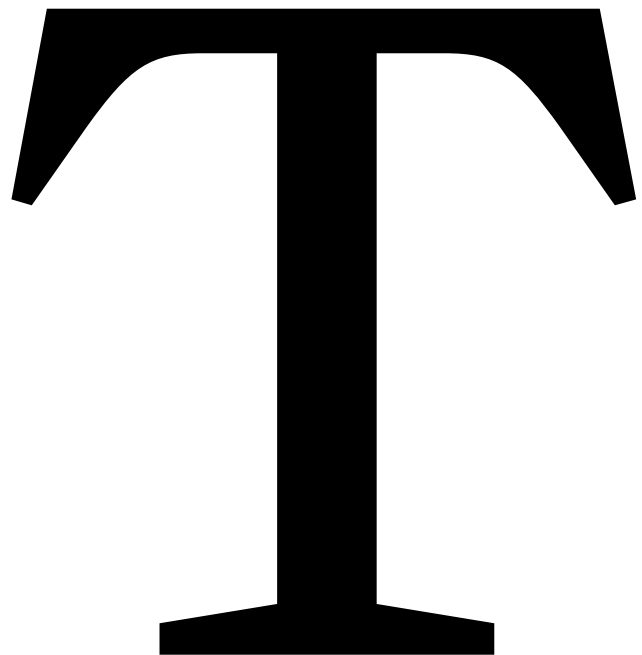
The ideologies perpetrated by these systems distort our view of other people, deform our relationships, and conscript us for the agenda of their own perpetuation—rather than for the agenda of seeking how to live out God’s vision for human community, the “kingdom of God.” These ideologies have become instinctual; their practices are taken for granted; they are the “default settings” into which we are born and bred. Dying to our old self includes dying to the influence of these systems, withdrawing our participation from them insofar as they conflict with the life of the new person and the community of the New Creation, and ceasing passively to enjoy their benefits, knowing this also enmeshes us in their sins (see Rev. 18:4-5).⁶

The third renunciation requires the least explanation, but perhaps the most discipline! We are often all too aware of those “sinful desires that draw [us] from the love of God,” both in the sense of loving God as we ought through doing what pleases God, and the sense of replacing the experience of God’s love for us with the indulgence of lesser loves and desires. The culture of consumerism (no longer limited to Western culture!) is no help to us, fostering these lesser desires and attacking the logic of saying no to self-gratification at every turn. But once again, au-

thentic fulfillment of our core longings requires the renunciation of inauthentic attempts to appease our deep hunger with shallow compensators.

By renouncing all these forces that distort the image of God within us—that feed, in other words, the “old self”—we make room for God’s Spirit to help us grow into the likeness of Christ, who is the image of God and template for the “new person.”

PUTTING ON THE NEW SELF



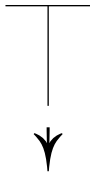
The central Christian mystery is not just about dying: it is also about rebirth and life beyond death. Dying to the “old self” carries with it the promise of “beginning to live to God” as the “new person” born by water and the Spirit, emerging from the water and set on the path of growth into maturity in Christ.⁷

Putting on this facet of baptism daily reorients our attention to our new upbringing in God. We leave behind those facets of our first upbringing that reflect human brokenness rather than God’s wholeness. We move toward the transformation into Christlikeness that is our destiny as God’s children. The “new person” with whom we clothe ourselves in baptism exhibits the beauty of “compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience,” while our relationships exhibit the beauty of forgiveness, love, and harmony. The new person is none other than Christ coming to life in us, and we ourselves living for Christ: “You were taught to put away your former way

5. A helpful primer on this subject is C. Dale White, *Making a Just Peace: Human Rights and Domination Systems*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1998). See also Walter Wink, *Naming the Powers* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1983); *Unmasking the Powers* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1986); *Engaging the Powers* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1992).

6. See further D. A. deSilva, “The Revelation of John and the Practice of Christian Counseling,” *Asbury Theological Journal* 60 (2005) 67-87, especially 74-75, 83-85.

7. Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ* 2.12.



AN EXERCISE IN ADORATION

Using a hymn or text that helps you enter into adoration, open yourself to the awareness of Christ's presence. Ask Jesus to open your eyes to more of his character, and your heart to more of his love. Settle into prayerful meditation on some portion of Jesus' teachings (for example, Matthew 5-7, Luke 6, Luke 14, John 13-17), a few verses each time you practice this exercise. Ask Jesus to reveal the extent to which you are *already* living in line with his word, and also where your thoughts, speech, and action need to change in order to live *more fully* in line with his commands. Where you sense inner resistance, pray for insight into the source of this resistance, for a clear vision of how he would have you embody his instruction, and for the ability to trust the path forward that he shows.

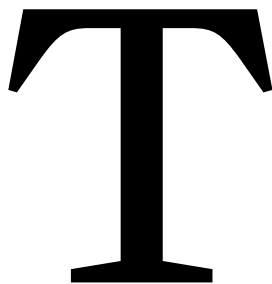
EXERCISE: BAPTISMAL EXAMEN

Use the fivefold vows as a means of examining your past day. How fully have you attended to *your* baptismal vocation this day? What opportunities were well used? Which were not? Envision what the coming day will bring. How can you approach—or adjust—the day's activities so as to live more from the transformed self envisioned in the baptismal vows? Ask God to open your eyes to those people and places beyond your normal focus, so you may be attentive to God's leading in new directions.



of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness" (Eph. 4:22-24, NRSV).

BAPTISM AS ALLEGIANCE AND REDIRECTION



he transformation of the baptismal life always involves "turning from" *and* "turning to." Just as the suppression of the "old self"

is matched by the nurturing of the new person, the baptismal liturgies join the threefold renunciation with a threefold declaration of commitment:

- Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Savior?
- Do you put your whole trust in his grace and love?
- Do you promise to follow and obey him as your Lord?⁸

Remembering and revisiting this act of adherence becomes a fresh opportunity to open ourselves to God's love and power and redirect our attention and energy to reach out for all that is from God. Answering these questions affirmatively each new day focuses our attention, indeed our *intentions*, on Jesus, directing our energies for the day's activity toward the progress in transformation toward Christlikeness that we can discover in it. The more Jesus fills our vision for the day, the less quarter we will give to those powers we have renounced.

Keeping Jesus before us as "Savior" reminds us that the power of sin, the sick and death-dealing systems of the world, and Satan is broken. That deliverance allows us to look past their lies about the "way things are," their deceptive promises, and their threats. Keeping Jesus' favor and love before us—indeed, letting these surround and uplift us—assures us of Jesus' personal investment in us and in seeing our transformation all the way through.

⁸. *Book of Common Prayer*, 302-303.

Keeping Jesus' lordship before us fixes us on the path toward transformation as we make his example, his words, and his living voice the foundation of today's agenda, direction, and pace.

Enjoying the love and security he offers, fulfilling our two most basic needs, frees us from the coping mechanisms and compensators that keep us bound to the old life and the evil powers that rule over it. Keeping Jesus' lordship before us fixes us on the path toward transformation as we make his example, his words, and his living voice the foundation of today's agenda, direction, and pace.

BAPTISMAL LIFE IN "REAL LIFE"

Following the acts of renunciation and commitment, the baptismal liturgy of the *Book of Common Prayer* invites the whole congregation to reaffirm its commitment to the story of redemption (in the form of the Apostles' Creed) and to the life and mission of the new person in the form of five vows.

- Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?
- Will you persevere in resisting evil and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?
- Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?

