

In this season of short days and long nights, teach us the lessons of beginnings: that waitings and endings may be a starting place, a planting of seeds which bring to birth what is ready to be born – something right and just and different, a new song, a deeper relationship, a fuller love, in the fullness of your time. Amen. *Guerrillas of Grace, p. 137*

“I have always rather liked the gruff robustness of the first rubric for baptism found in a late 4<sup>th</sup> c church order which directs that the bishop enter the vestibule of the baptistry and say to the catechumens without commentary or apology only 4 words, ‘Take off your clothes.’”

So begins an absolutely wonderful essay on baptism by one of my professors from seminary.

In it, he imagines what it would have been like to be baptized in the early church and today we celebrate the very first baptism, when Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan river.

In the passage from Matthew that ends with that lovely blessing – “This is my beloved, my son, in whom I am well pleased.”

Or, this is the one in whom I delight, I find happiness in him.

The idea of using water as a way to purify oneself and to wash away sin was already established as a Jewish ritual at the time of Jesus’ baptism but after Jesus’ death, this ritual was adopted as a rite of initiation by the Christian community.

Baptistries, as one might guess,

were the buildings where baptisms took place in the first centuries of the church, the most famous being the Baptistry in Florence.

They were often either next to or attached to cathedrals.

Last fall we spent 5 weeks in Italy. Naples was the last stop on our trip.

The cathedral in Naples is not especially notable, not even making it to the top 10 sites to visit.

But as we wandered the city, we found ourselves in front of the cathedral and decided to go in, although, at the risk of sounding like a spoiled brat, I was pretty “churched-out” by that point.

The interior was unremarkable, but over to the side was a small entrance booth and a roped off path to an area one couldn’t quite see.

It cost 2 Euros to get in which was a deterrent

but they were selling postcards  
that showed a ceiling covered with Byzantine mosaics  
which are definitely on my top 10 list.  
So I paid my money, hardly noticing that the area I was entering was a baptistry.  
The room did have the mosaics, although they weren't in great shape.  
The only other thing in it was a basin of stone in the floor,  
about 6 feet in diameter and maybe 2 feet deep.  
The sign said that this was the oldest baptistry in the western world,  
dating from the late 4<sup>th</sup> c.  
The oldest part didn't turn out to be quite true,  
but it was very, very ancient,  
dating from a time when Constantine became the first Christian Roman emperor  
and the ink was barely dry on the Nicene Creed.  
Oh to be standing where those first Christians came  
to be formally and publicly admitted into the church.  
I felt as if I had been transported by a time machine  
into one of the most sacred spots on earth.  
I remembered the essay by my professor describing those early catechumens,  
which was the word they used to designate people seeking baptism,  
and the word we still use today.  
I imagined them, naked, shivering, waiting so eagerly for their new life to begin.  
In those days, they spent 3 years, 3 years, to prepare for this moment.  
They studied, they fasted, they did as many good deeds as they could –  
feeding the hungry, visiting widows –  
to demonstrate that they were worthy of this great initiation.  
They underwent numerous exorcisms.  
It says in early church documents that people in certain categories –  
brothel keepers, actors, and charioteers - were not even eligible for baptism.  
So entering this building to be baptized was not the result of some idle whim  
or last minute confession but the very deliberate and momentous decision  
to do all that was expected of each of them to receive this immense blessing.  
They arrived at the Baptistry on the night before Easter,  
eager to know what lay beyond the inner doors  
that had never been opened to them.  
The ceremonies of that night,  
which today we have distilled down into the 2-hour Easter Vigil service,  
included not just being immersed in the baptismal pool,

but being bathed in expensive oil,  
and receiving a cup of milk and honey,  
a symbol of the promised land into which they were now eligible to enter.  
After the baptisms, the bishop banged on the doors of the church with his staff  
and they entered, for the first time,  
into the most glorious space filled with mosaics of every color, but especially gold.  
Even today, entering one of those churches takes your breath away.  
And of course, they could now go up to the altar  
to receive the bread of life and cup of salvation.  
What is it about those early ceremonies  
that seems extra lovely and consequential, when the faith was new,  
the church uncorrupted by political, financial and abuse scandals?  
Before humanity, in all of its messy goodness and badness,  
had meddled with the simple message of Jesus.  
I felt as if just by touching the sides of that baptismal pool,  
maybe some of that enthusiasm and purity of the early church  
might rub off on me.  
As a side note, when I was looking for some information on that baptistry,  
I ran across a TripAdvisor review of the Naples cathedral which said, “  
To enter the area of the Baptistry, one has to pay some 2 Euros.  
The irony is that this is just a hole in the ground!” Just a hole in the ground!  
Today we could quibble with the idea  
that the early Christians had to earn their way into the church,  
that receiving communion was a privilege, the result of studying and good  
behavior, but that is revisionist history.  
The preparation and admission rites made sense in that time and place.

So let's get back to baptism for a minute.  
You know. baptism has almost too many symbols and themes –  
water and fire, shells and white robes, a washing away of sins, purification,  
illumination, moving from death into life.  
We don't consider baptism  
to be a condition for entrance to eternal life anymore  
and, these days, at least in my experience,  
it is often done to keep the grandparents happy  
or to get one more use out of that lacy christening robe  
that has been passed down through the family.

Setting aside all of these things, the most important thing about baptism is the words that came down from heaven on that day at the river Jordan, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.”

Another translation might be –  
This is my son in whom I delight. I find happiness in him.  
God finds happiness in him and not just in him but in every one of us too.  
Because that is the real message of this rite.  
It is really one way, not the only way, but one way, for us, baptized and unbaptized, to hear the message and know the truth, so hard for us to believe, that we are beloved, that we are precious, that God finds happiness in us.  
And I guess as I stood there in that room, with nothing but a stone pool, I felt that sense of belovedness that is at our core.  
We were created by a God that loved the creation into being, from the very first cell of life that appeared.  
That, like the oil that was poured over the heads of the catechumens, we are being bathed in love.  
That the whole universe sparkles like the mosaics in that church.  
That all of the mysteries of existence can be summed up in the eternal goodness and truth of God’s love that just is – lavished upon us with cause or without.  
So in the knowledge of those beautiful truths, let us stand, like those early catechumens and affirm our Baptismal Covenant (p.304)