

## **Homily – Transitions and Baptism**

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A few years ago the San Jose Mercury News ran a series of articles on the Cycle of Life. Each month they had a different article. They started in January with birth, always a good place to start. And, they ended in December with death.

The topics they chose for the cycle of life were

Birth

Childhood

Puberty

Teen Years

College

Wedding Day

First Job

Parenthood

Divorce

Middle Age

Old Age

Death

Now, there are several things that I find interesting about this series of life events.

First, each of these events mark some very significant yet common transitions in life, changes that are consistent with my own life experience. For example, life is very different before I left home for college and after I left home for college.

Also, life changes when you have a child. I started drinking coffee the week my daughter, Katie, was born, and I am still drinking coffee today, twenty-five years later.

And, my own divorce was a seminal moment in my life. It was one of the most traumatic events of my life and it caused me to re-examine who I am and what I want to do in life.

So, I can resonate with the changes caused by these twelve Mercury News life events.

Now, the second thing that I found interesting is also quite disturbing to me. According to this newspaper list, I only have two events left. I've gone through all but Old Age and Death.

I would like to believe that at fifty-three I have more than two things left to experience in life.

Third, I have had some transitions in life that didn't make the newspaper list. Perhaps the writers at the Mercury News needed to keep the number of life transitions to only twelve, or perhaps they stayed with the most common experiences. Some of my other seminal experiences include

Moving back in with my parents after college when I was unemployed.

Buying a first house.

Coming to accept and like myself as a gay man.

Having someone I love be diagnosed with cancer.

Taking a layoff package and starting seminary.

And, getting ordained as a priest.

Each of us has had seminal life experiences that change us and make us who we are today. Some of these transitions in life are not easy, but we would be very different people without them.

Our Scripture readings today are also about a life transition that makes us who we are. As we celebrate the first Sunday after Epiphany, our focus is the baptism of Jesus.

And as we remember Christ's baptism, we also remember our own baptism.

Baptism is an event that changes our life forever. While it didn't make the secular life event list, life before and after baptism is different.

Baptism is like, birth and marriage and parenthood and death.

Baptism is a seminal moment that changes the course and quality of life.

Whether you were baptized as an infant, or as an adult, baptism is life changing.

Now doesn't all seem right with the world?

The priest is telling you that baptism is as important a moment as birth, marriage, parenthood and death.

This is what you expect to hear in church. In the Episcopal Church, like most other churches, we lift up and proclaim the importance of the sharing of the bread and wine, and we lift up baptism.

Now let me give voice to what is in the back of the mind for some of you. And if this is not in the back of your mind, it is certainly the general view of many of our loved ones.

For many, a list of life changing events would not include baptism.

It makes sense that a secular newspaper would not include baptism, but many Christians would also not include baptism, at least not up there with birth, marriage, parenthood and death.

Now since I have given voice to this thing that wasn't supposed to be said about baptism, let me give voice to a couple of other things.

In our Book of Common Prayer we have something called 'emergency baptism.' For Episcopalians the norm is to have a priest or bishop perform a baptism in the midst of the congregation that is welcoming in the newly baptized person. For us, baptism is a community event.

However, in an emergency, anyone can baptize a person and in anyplace. All that has to be said is "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

And, like magic, a person is supposed to have their life changed.

This may be the basis for the fact that some have difficulty in placing baptism with the significantly life altering events of birth, marriage, parenthood and death. It seems too much like magic. Or, put another way, without the magic, baptism seems insignificant.

Now, in the work I have done as a hospital chaplain at Stanford, we occasionally did emergency baptisms. These are very holy and special times when we are able to

make a difference in someone's life. However, I can understand that some will have trouble with the idea of emergency baptism.

Here is another reason that many might feel baptism is less important.

Both my daughter and I were baptized as infants. For both of us, our parents and godparents said some words of acceptance in a church ceremony. I was present as a six-month old baby and I wore a lacey, white dress that had also been worn by my grandfather. There wasn't much else that I did for my baptism.

Many people struggle with the concept of infant baptism. For many it makes sense that a life is changed when an adult is baptized. An adult is making a choice to enter into relationship with God and with God's people, but an infant...

How does an infant have their life changed by baptism when there is no act of intent of volition? An infant is not making a choice.

The parents and godparents are making a choice and making a pledge to raise up the infant in a church. And, the church community is making a pledge to surround and nurture the infant.

By the way, neither of these pledges are one-time events. They are ongoing commitments of love.

But still, the infant did not make the pledges.

Now, here in our faith tradition we baptize infant. It is a sacred time in which we welcome infants into our community so that they can grow in their faith participate in the Eucharist with the rest of the community.

But, I want to give you permission to wonder. Is baptism really as life changing as birth, marriage, parenthood and death? Is baptism really an important life transition?

And it will come as no surprise, that your priest stands in front of you here today to say that "yes, baptism is an all-important life transition."

And, the way that I get there, is by putting the magic back into baptism.

I have spent much of my life removing magic from my spirituality because it seemed crazy and illogical and too much like hocus pocus. To accept the life changing aspect of baptism I had to allow a little magic back into my journey with God.

Or, as I was telling one of you a few weeks ago, I let some mystery back into my faith. The word “mystery” for me is the same as “magic” but to me it doesn’t carry some of the baggage.

You can use whichever word you want, but baptism has a been of mystery associated with it that just can’t be explained.

I have no hard evidence, logic, or facts to give you to prove to you that the mystery of baptism is a major life transition. But, I belief anyway.

Two of today’s Bible readings talk about the Holy Spirit being part of our baptism into a life with Jesus. And, it is the Holy Spirit part of baptism to which I want to draw your attention.

Traditionally we use water in the physical part of baptism. We are baptized with water, but at the same time we are baptized by the Holy Spirit.

As Christians we believe in the Holy Trinity, which some call the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and other call the Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer.

In ways I will never be able to fully explain, baptism is the first time we are filled with the Holy Spirit. It is not something that we earn but is something that has been made possible by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

In my own life experience, the following is the best example I can use to describe what it feels like to be filled with the Holy Spirit.

It is one of those larger than life moments in which you feel connected to God, connected to another person, connect to yourself or connected to something else in creation.

It is a moment when you feel pure joy, love and sometimes-even insight.

The Holy Spirit is also sustaining us during the lowest moments of life. In those moments when we don’t know how to continue, the Holy Spirit lifts us up in ways that are beyond our own human ability.

The Holy Spirit is always surrounding us with love, but baptism is that moment in a person’s life when they are first filled with the Holy Spirit. It would be over-simplifying God to say that it is always a feeling, but that feeling I described earlier is

still the best way I know how to explain what it means to be filled with the Holy Spirit.

It is easy to poke holes at baptism. It is easy to miss or dismiss the life changing aspects of the sacrament of baptism.

We must continue to grapple with some of the tough parts of our tradition, especially those that just have to be taken on faith. We must continue to open ourselves up to the Holy Spirit so that we can gain the insight that is only available from God.

Just as God declared Jesus, the beloved, we are all the beloved of God. Whether we are baptized or not we are always surrounded by God's love. However, with baptism God's love becomes part of us. All spirituality is about transformation, dying before we die and being reborn as our True Selves in Love.

Yes, life changes with birth, marriage, parenthood and death. It also changes with baptism.