

Baptism Sunday - Entering a new life

Today as I mentioned at the beginning is the first week of Epiphany.

This translates as "appearance" or "showing forth". Epiphany means a usually sudden manifestation or perception of the essential nature or meaning of something. In the church it's the season of the manifestation of the humanity of Jesus, the birth and Baptism.

This past Friday was Día de los Reyes, or Three Kings day.

In some countries including my ancestral one in Mexico, three kings celebrate the day when the Magi came from the east and followed a star leading them to the Christ child.

For kids it means opening three gifts and having a day of celebration with a rosca, a bread that is made just for that occasion.

Now from Friday to this Sunday the lectionary jumped from a baby being presented gifts from the Magi to Jesus age 30.

Now this is the age where he starts his ministry so he makes a quick stop by the Jordan river for his Baptism.

So here we are on Baptism Sunday.

When you think of Baptism what comes to mind friends?

A preacher dunking, submerging, sprinkling, or using a little shell on someone's forehead with water.

Matthew chapter 3 starts with John going around Judea saying "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

The Scriptures tell us that people were coming from Judea and all the regions around Jordan to repent from their sins and to be Baptized by John the Baptist.

Before the scriptures that we read today John says, "I baptize you with water for repentance."

He says, "the one who is coming after me is more powerful than I, and I am not worthy to carry his sandals."

John was proclaiming, announcing, setting the stage for Jesus to enter.

Now friends, let me ask you about your Baptism.

How many of you have been Baptized and when was it? (Will you enter that in the local chat. I'm curious about this.)

I was Baptized when I was a baby at the Iglesia Catolica (Catholic church) Cristo Rey back home in Brownsville, Texas.

I do not remember but I was told I was dressed in this cute little white dress and my parents looked on with pride as I was Baptized by the Priest.

I even appeared in the Brownsville Herald, the local town's newspaper announcing my

Baptism.

My family had a huge fiesta. I mean it was big with my family celebrating as I followed in our Catholic tradition.

That was my Baptism, my first one.

I was Baptized again when I was twelve years old.

My mother had left the Catholic Church and was now part of a conservative evangelical pentecostal congregation.

So at twelve I was offered to make the decisions to really commit to the work of God and enter in community with my church.

I was told that my Baptism when I was a baby did not count because I had not made that decision of my own free will.

In my early twenties I was Baptized again in a church in Dallas Texas. Here I was told that the first two Baptism did not count.

See when I was a baby I did not remember.

When I was twelve I might have been pushed by my family to do it and it did not count because now as an adult I could make my own decision.

When I came to the UCC this was one of the first questions I made, do I have to be Baptized again?

I was told no.

In the United Church of Christ Baptism is one of our sacraments and it is known as the way to become part of the universal church.

Meaning we share this with many Christ followers from all over the world.

Which is why the UCC recognizes your Baptism when you were a child and or that of any other denomination in the Christian church.

Phew!

I would had been on my fourth Baptism you all!

I am probably the most Baptized avatar here.

Has anyone been Baptized more than once like I was?

I'm just curious.

My Catholic parents believed I would burn in hell or be in limbo if as a baby the Priest did not sprinkle me with Holy water.

My evangelical church believed I would burn in hell if I did not accept Jesus as my savior, confess publicly my sins,

and was born again with the submersion of my body in the water.

I mean submerge all the way in.

In my twenties I was told that I had to really decide if I could be a productive member of a church.

Plus, I had to publicly commit to salvation, and to be in obedience.

In my twenties I was told that my salvation had to be followed by my Baptism, the symbol of renewal and obedience.

The obedience to be cleanse, and to be forgiven as I gave a public declaration that I was going to be a productive member of the church.

As I considered all of these explanations I hear about my Baptisms. I mean this is just all about my Baptism
this is not even what people have argued over ages when it comes to why we do this.

I can't help but wonder, why did the Son of God who was free of sin, need to be Baptized?

I wonder if perhaps this was Jesus' way of showing the world his humanity, his humility.
Perhaps this was the way to anoint him as he was entering his new ministry.
I mean kings got anointed by oil and maybe he wanted to be anointed but with water.

Now can you imagine friends being John the Baptist and here is this guy who you believe is the messiah come to you and stands there for you to Baptize him.

I mean think about this like if you are John and your raising your voice saying, "repent! Someone greater than me is coming and here comes Jesus down the water."
John probably though Jesus was going to take over.

In three different Biblical translations friends John is not only surprised to be asked by Jesus to Baptize him he wants to completely refuse. Like I don't think so.

In the NRSV translation John says, ""I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?""

Like are you kidding?

In the Message it says, "John objected, "I'm the one who needs to be baptized, not you!"

I mean this translation has the words I object!

While in the Voice Biblical translation it says, "John demurred and said I need to be cleansed by You. Why do You come to me?"

The voice has the word demurred.

In all of these objections friends I was thinking about what it means to be a leader starting out in ministry.

John recognizes him as the one he is proclaiming and lifting up as the Messiah. He was saying this is a bad idea. I object. I demurred. You need to Baptize me!
I need to be cleansed by you. What are you doing?

Did Jesus not realize what people might think to see him with John who has been out there yelling "repent! Repent for the kingdom of God is near?"

Did Jesus not realize that people might get the wrong idea about him? I mean he is just starting out.

“Dios mío qué dirá la gente!” “Oh my Lord, what will people think?”

But from the start here is Jesus showing us his ministry, his life, and his actions outside the box.

I mean this should have given us a clue to what was coming.

See, Jesus exemplified what it means to be a leader, to be humbled, to set an example of what would become a new movement.

Despite John’s objections, Jesus says, Baptize me.

In the NRSV version verse 15 Jesus says, “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.”

Key word: It is proper. “

In the Message it says that Jesus Insisted.

“Do it. God’s work, putting things right all these centuries, is coming together right now in this baptism.”

Do it! This puzzle is all coming together.

Do it man! It is all part of the plan.

In the Voice, Jesus says “It will be right, true, and faithful to God’s chosen path for you to cleanse Me with your hands in the Jordan River.”

It will be right!

As I meditated on these words I can’t help but see how Jesus encouraged John to do what he has been doing in the Jordan river.

And in doing so Jesus gives John credibility.

Imagine the people around, the smell of the water, the view of this man going in like everyone else was doing so humbled and Baptized by John.

What Jesus did was transformative, setting a precedence for all those seeking a new life.

Jesus was the first to show us how to amplify the voices of others. He set an example of how to amplify the work and the ministry of someone new.

I’m sure that John was ridiculed or laughed at.

What is that guy doing in the water?!

And so we following in this example we amplify the voices of those who might not be invited to be part of a community.

As pastors and leaders we amplify the ministry and the work of those around us.

We lift them up because there should be no competition when it comes to the work of God.

Like we all do our thing and our gifts come together.
Women helping other women climb the ladder at work.
People helping each other succeed.
A community of siblings helping each other without the fear of outshining another.

What a way for Jesus to have shown us this first.
How today we raise up the voices of those in the Transgender, or Black and Brown communities.
We set up a place that is open and affirming and we make a way for many to find a home.

See friends Jesus did not need to enter the waters to repent but rather to show his commitment to new way of living.

Baptism friends means entering a new life with a different level of consciousness.

Amplifying the voices of those who are silenced by injustice.
Now that is the true meaning of entering a new life one that has a new fresh perspective of seeing others.

Standing with those in the margins, calling out oppression and helping those in need is what being committed to following in the way of Jesus means.

As believers of Jesus the Christ we believe in the power of repentance, forgiveness, and community.
Each church from the faith tradition of Christianity follows the sacrament of Baptism with this in mind.
And while we believe in these things we focus on the Grace of God in our lives to be renewed, and transformed in a way that gives life and not one that is center in fear.

Now if you are new to First UCC in Second Life you might be wondering how we as a church would offer Baptism when we don't really have water here.
Well if you are new let me tell you about our Baptism here.
If your not you let us remember the day when Jonni was Baptized.
Just in case you want to be Baptized, talk to us so we can arrange it.

Baptism friends requires the elements of water, the words that says "I Baptize you.... In the name of our Creator, Jesus our redeemer and the Holy Spirit."
It requires your name to be entered into the congregation or community that says, we will be with you through the good and the bad, helping you in your journey as you walk with us and Jesus in your life.

This is one of my favorite things to tell people in real life when I talk about my community of faith here at First UCC in Second Life.
I love telling people that Jonni the avatar, our friend, a real person was Baptized in this community. (Pic of Jonni)

Pastor Jerome Newstart Baptized someone far from us all but connected through the Internet.

The Word that became flesh transforming into a digital presence that reaches into many across this world.

Jonni had water before him, his hands in a water bowl, and he had the community of First UCC in Second Life
(pic of community) stand by him as he was given the words of Baptism. I Baptize you...

Today, friends, I invite you to remember your Baptism.
If you can't remember because it was long ago or when you were a baby, know that it still counts.

Today I invite you friends to renew your commitment into a new life, and to be affirmed by this community that welcomes you.

This is our shared identity through the waters either sprinkled, dunked, or immersed, that we are connected through an undeniable love from above.

The encounter of Jesus in the Jordan river with John the Baptist ends with the heavens opening up and the dove descending.

Those words, "This is my beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Those words my friends are also for you my friend.

Believe that you are beloved.

Believe that you have been transformed by the grace of God.

So I ask you my friends, on this Baptism Sunday, how is the Holy one manifested in your life?

Amen