

Baptism, Inside and Out: A *Mash'kah* – *Mik'veh* Approach

Sermon by Pastor Dan Harrison, 1/7/18 (Church of the Covenant)

I remember it like yesterday. My mother leading me in the pivotal prayer to ask Jesus into my heart. I was only 7. And then marching down the aisle with a beaming smile on my face the following Sunday at the First Baptist Church, during the invitation at the end of the service. The gentleman down at the front of the church gingerly guided me to a nearby pew and began discipling me with a booklet called *Reaching New Heights*. I took the book home and completed it over the next two weeks, and then I proudly delivered it to the same man just before Sunday service, who then took me up to the dressing room adjoining the built-in baptistery, just behind the stage. I was one of three people being baptized that day, and I was the youngest. The pastor briefly coached me and the other two candidates, explaining how to hold our nose with our right hand while simultaneously holding our wrist with the left. I practiced. Now nervous and excited, I entered the unexpectedly warm water of the baptistery, and assumed my position as the pastor said some spiritually meaningful words like, "I baptize you in the name of the father, son and holy spirit, buried with Christ and risen with Him to life," while dunking me carefully below the water line, careful to ensure true immersion had taken place. As a right of passage for any Baptist, and most Christians, I was *in*. I was now counted among the "believers", the faithful. I was a *baptized* Christian.

As Christians we historically look at baptism as a rite-of-passage, a symbolic ritual in which we present ourselves as followers of Jesus, because Jesus himself, in scripture, commanded us to do so. Jesus said, "believe and be baptized" (Mark 16:16). There is little doubt that it held monumental significance for the first church. In Peter's first sermon he said, "repent and be baptized" (Acts 2:38) to the masses who heard him share the story of Jesus, and the purportedly three thousand people who were moved to follow Jesus in baptism that day. It was in essence an act of obedience. Even when Phillip was sharing this same story with the travelling Ethiopian a short time later, the Ethiopian felt compelled to find a nearby body of water and be baptized (Acts 8:28-40). There is something powerful about this deep, spiritual desire to do something physical with ritualistic significance. In its later iteration, a more proactive approach was implemented by many when we began to baptize our infants too; we saw this as an opportunity to dedicate our children to God, again, out of obedience, as a

setting apart of our child for God's blessing. It is a bit of preemptive surrender on behalf of the parent, commending our child into the hands of God, asking for God to watch over our most beloved possession, much like Hannah did with her son Samuel in the ancient Hebrew story (I Samuel 1:21-28).

One may easily ask, "How did baptism find its way into Jewish rituals? Was it common in first century Judea?" Though we can't say for certain whether or not it was popular in Jesus' day, we can say that it was not necessarily *uncommon*. We are aware from historical literature that contemporary Jewish communities in the region like the Essenes and the Qumrans practiced forms of baptism, and from the biblical accounts it appears to be quite accepted and understood among the religious leaders like the Pharisees as John, Jesus' cousin, regularly baptized his followers at the Jordan river, and Jesus would later do the same. There was a significance to the baptism that harked back to the teachings of the prophets of old. The prophet Ezekiel alluded to the symbolic power of water six hundred years earlier when he said of God, "I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleanness, and from all your idols I will cleanse you" (Ezk 36:25). John later talked about the act of baptism in conjunction with repentance as well, making a connection between physical and spiritual restoration, if not just symbolically, by the water representing a cleansing from all wrongdoing. This sentiment was later affirmed in the first Church as leaders such as Paul wrote, "having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish" (Eph 5:26-27), and even the same is true with writer of Hebrews who said, "let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water" (Heb 10:22). In both passages the idea of water metaphorically washing over us finds its place comfortably within the beginnings of Christian theology. This then begs the question, what is *the water*? What does *it* represent?

Before exploring the contents, though, let us explore the action itself. Chris Witcombe, professor of Art History at Sweet Briar College, says that "A river can also symbolize a barrier separating two different realms. In ancient Egypt, the dead pharaoh was carried across the Nile, to be buried...passing from the side of life to the side of death." He says this can also be seen in the famous allegory *Pilgrim's Progress* where the river is the last obstacle before reaching the heavenly city, again from death to life. He also points out to further this idea that, "In many Christian hymns and spirituals, the dead must cross the Jordan

River to attain the next life...Fountains and rivers share the general symbolism of water as a source of life.” Our own evolutionary journey echoes this same idea, and among the Hebrew prophets we find a similar answer. Isaiah, twenty-eight hundred years ago, said, “With joy you will draw water from the *wells* of salvation” (Isaiah 12:3). Nearly a hundred years later, the prophet Jeremiah, expanding on this same concept, admonished the rebellious nature of the people, voicing God’s observation, “for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water” (Jer 2:13). In both prophetic eras, the water clearly symbolizes the Creator, the Source of life and salvation. Interestingly, in these cases, the emphasis seems to be less on *Mikveh* (the Hebrew word for baptism) or bathing with the water and more on drinking the water, *Mashkeh*.

Drawing on a solid understanding of the prophets, Jesus clearly ascribed to the same school of thought. In John chapter 4 he enters into what is in my opinion one of the “cutest” conversational exchanges in the New Testament, when Jesus talks to the woman at the well. After asking her for a drink, he tells her, “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you *living* water” (John 4:10). She wittingly replies, “How will you get this water? This well is deep and you have nothing to draw it with”, but Jesus graciously expounds on this idea of living water and tells her, “whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (John 4:14). Of course Jesus is speaking spiritually, and sharing an idea of baptism but from within; a *Mashkeh* rather than a *Mikveh*. This concept seems to germinate and grow further a bit later in the Gospel of John when the writer explains, “On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, ‘If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said -Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water-’ Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified” (John 7:37-39).

John the Baptist seemed to understand the distinction between the *Mikveh* (external baptism) and the *Mashkeh* (internal baptism—*a meaning coined solely by me*); I feel John highlighted as much when he said, “I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit” (Mark 1:8). He prophesied Jesus’ ability to move beyond the simple water baptism and to a deeper baptism inside the person, referring to the Holy Spirit, God’s living water flowing from within.

Paul's interaction with those in Ephesus who had stopped short with John's baptism, and had not progressed spiritually, gives us a wonderful illustration of this deeper meaning of both an internal and external baptism, "When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them" (Acts 19:6). Paul prayed for them and they were then "baptized" inside (*Mashkeh*) to complement their baptism of repentance outside (*Mikveh*). The Holy Spirit, or presence of God, permeates the flesh and dwells in the heart (or mind). It indwells each part of us, connecting to the memories we hide and the memories we celebrate. It intervenes with our consciousness and converses with us there. But we must recognize it, and invite it to do so. Can God crash into our consciousness with or without our invitation? Sure. However, inviting God to flow in our stream of thought and bed within our heart is an active decision in which we accelerate that process, look for those signals of the divine, and readily change course regularly in concert with a higher calling based on love, founded on compassion, and laced with absolute selflessness.

These ancient truths have found themselves imbedded within Buddhist practices as well. Shen Shi'an, writing for an inter-religious exhibition in 2011, states that, "The offering of water at Buddhist shrines symbolises the aspiration to cultivate the virtues of calmness, clarity and purity with our body, speech and mind...through the generating of generosity, compassion and wisdom. Upon perfection of these qualities, enlightenment (synonymous with True Happiness) will be realized." Similarly, when we choose to accept God's presence in our life, we evolve into something greater. Let us together heed Jesus' words, "To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment" (Rev 21:6). See, God requires no payment to drink from his fountain or bathe in the Creator's waters of life. Not only are the contents free, but the act itself becomes the refuge we seek.

Tich Naht Hahn, in his book *The Miracle of Mindfulness*, says of the act of doing, "If while washing dishes, we think only of the cup of tea that awaits us, thus hurrying to get the dishes out of the way as if they were a nuisance, then we are not 'washing the dishes to wash the dishes.' What's more, we are not alive during the time we are washing the dishes. In fact we are completely incapable of realizing the miracle of life while standing at the sink. If we can't wash the dishes, the chances are we won't be able to drink our tea either. While drinking the cup of tea, we will only be thinking of other things, barely aware of the cup in our hands. Thus we are sucked away into the future—and we are incapable of actually living one minute of life." Just as Hahn so eloquently describes living in

the act itself, rather than making each act simply a means to an end, we are invigorated in the moment. We transcend from death to life while in motion. We consciously move from a state of numbness to vitality within the acts of *Mashkeh* and *Mikveh* when we welcome God's Spirit within us, both internally and externally. Here we can rest in Jesus' promise to the prophetic author of Revelation, "The angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb...there will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light" (Rev 22:1;5). This light within each of us awakens when we seek its primordial presence within our lives. Let it come, let it come, inside and out, let it come. Let it permeate each cell within our bodies and fill our mind, heart, and body with its divine presence, illuminating who we are in God, and who we are in this world. Let us all be baptized in this essence, this spirit of selfless love and kindness. Let us be baptized in God, as we journey inward and outward, together as one.