

# Baptismal Grace and Rampaging Santas

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Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?' But Jesus answered him, 'Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness.' Then he consented. And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved,\* with whom I am well pleased.' -- Matthew 3:13-17

"Sunday December 23, 2007, Wellington, New Zealand." I wonder how many of us saw this news report. I saw it myself just after the holiday, as the glow of the season was beginning to fade – as it now has for many of us – into the chill of a bleak midwinter.

And here's the news story. In Wellington, a group of families had gathered expectantly in line at the local movie theater, expecting to enjoy the film "Enchanted." You know. The one about the cartoon prince charming and his damsel, coming suddenly to embodied life – popping through a manhole cover in the middle of the Broadway theater district, as only perhaps a Disney film could make happen. Well, what these waiting families in Wellington got was no twinkle, twinkle little star. A gang of about 50 apparently drunken ruffians, dressed like santas, stormed by in full red-and-white regalia -- frightening customers, destroying property, and (as the news report was careful to emphasize) "swearing." These rampaging santas even destroyed the Christmas tree in the Cineplex lobby.

Imagine. Imagine how disconcerting this must have been to the awaiting five year olds, suddenly being ushered into the very unenchanted realm we dismally call "real life." It's

enough to shake the faith of any child. Who would have thought this of Santa? Didn't Santa promise to bring joy and gifts and good cheer?

Well, soon enough, we learn in life, don't we, that things don't always turn out the way we expect, and that often hurts.

We've probably all been there, haven't we? – awaiting in innocent expectation, only to have our fervent hopes dashed by the chaotic sweep of a situation gone all wrong. People disappoint us, our government disappoints us. The church often disappoints us.

Yes. But that's why I like baptisms. Baptisms are memorable events. The most familiar baptism of course is the story we heard read today – of Jesus and John the Baptist. We had a baptism in this congregation not too long ago, and I suspect that Rosetta will remember receiving that event for a good long while. So will many of us. I know I will.

One reason I like to witness baptisms is that I don't remember my own. Not because mine wasn't important, but because I was barely conscious. Like many of us, I was only months old when the sacrament was performed, and as a teenager I was never very eager to hear the tale retold for the umpteenth time, usually during Thanksgiving, Christmas or Easter dinner with people I saw only during Thanksgiving, Christmas or Easter dinner. Not a conversation I found especially inspiring. Especially the part about the darling dimples and the white lace christening pajamas. (I've since gotten rid of the pajamas, I'm happy to report.)

As a teenager, I don't even remember knowing that baptism was a "sacrament." Since my family were suburban Methodists, we never talked about "sacraments," so at the time it was not clear to me that there might be something more interesting to it than the sentimental recollections of my family history. After all, I recall thinking, *my own* baptism was not performed for me. It was performed for *them* -- family and friends, just one more social ritual

that was really about my parents' and their own expectations for me (which included producing grandchildren in a picketed cottage somewhere in Boboland).

So as an alienated child of the 60s, I wasn't much concerned with baptism, simply because, I thought, it wasn't much concerned with *me*. But I was wrong. It *did* concern me because it spoke to *others* -- to those in whose care I was being placed: as if God were still speaking in that ritual moment: "Here is my beloved, so take this person into your care, for what you do for him is what you do for Me." So -- Rosetta's ceremony back in November reminded me that there is something more here than embarrassing tales told to teenagers, and believe it or not, it has a little something to do with rampaging santas.

Baptism for us is a sacrament – one of the two sacraments recognized by most Protestants (the other of course being communion). The very word "sacrament" is interesting, because its origin came through the Latin word *sacramentum*. This just was not a very good translation of the original Greek, and it doesn't take any lengthy scholarly discussion to point this. Simply put, those Romans were a very practical people, and their Latin language really didn't touch upon the Greek here, whose word was *mysterion* – mystery. The best those sturdy Romans converts could do to describe those newly introduced Christian practices was to borrow a term from the military, having to do with a soldier's obligations after taking an oath of allegiance. And you can see why this came to mind. What did Pastor James ask Rosetta? Questions like:

- Do you accept the Jesus as your Savior?
- Do you renounce the powers of evil?

And so forth. These are ancient questions which our liturgy has preserved, and to Roman ears these must have reminded them of the rousing cries they were already accustomed to: "Do you pledge allegiance to your God? All Hail Caesar!" And the history of the church

has been confused ever since – between, on the one hand, allegiance to the visible powers of this world (and the Roman Caesar, by the time of Constantine, would become a Christian emperor); and, on the other hand, allegiance to the powers of our unseen God.

Roman sacraments were purely political. There's no mystery to political power: it's brutal and predictable, and you know what the game is, once you learn to play it. You hit me, I'll hit you back, with all the force of the world's greatest superpower if necessary.

But the Christian sacrament, the *mysterion*, is different. It's "the outward sign of an inward grace" (in St Augustine's formulation), and grace is a *total* mystery, and it's not restricted to ritualized ceremonies either – for the mystery happens whenever, somehow or other, in the midst of a distracted or broken life, that voice as if from heaven is felt to say: "Here is my beloved, in whom I am well pleased." In the midst of a broken life! "Well pleased"?!?

Where does this come from, this inner awareness? How is this possible – that each of us, warts and all, is pleasing to God? That's the mystery of grace, that's what events like baptism open to us. And over time, that's what the word "sacrament" has often come to convey -- the experience of the presence of the healing spirit of Christ within the community. And it is in the realm of spirit that we exist as human beings.

And now, after all of this, I can get to my main point.

It's a truly special occasion when the person being baptized is an adult, because in that case the baptism is his or her own choice. And here's where those rampaging santas enter the picture. For I suspect that most adults who make this choice have *expectations* – expectations about what lies ahead. A baptism is a rebirth, and so in some ways the newly baptized are like children opened to the new possibilities of life before them. Should we not have these expectations? Are we not told to hope in the future? Are we not told that a precious

promise awaits us as members of the body of Christ? Yes, and I suspect that we hope -- perhaps, secretly, subconsciously -- that our newly awakened life will mean fewer problems, fewer disappointments, fewer occasions of needless suffering for us and for those we love. For after all we got the power of God now!

And sometimes these miracles do seem to happen, right away. But can we expect this to happen right away? Can we expect the causes of our discomfort to clear away, like the fragrant sky behind the descending dove over the River Jordan? Can we expect that if only we get the right spiritual infusion at baptism, or in communion, or in our prayer life – that this will change our circumstances in life? Radical changes do sometimes occur, by the grace of God. But I wonder how many of us, who may experience a spiritual rebirth or a special moment of God’s calling (or whatever language you want to give this) – I wonder how many of us later on feel a bit like children witnessing the promise gone all wrong. For here we are again, back in the same cruddy world! Saints and santas, rampaging out of control, damaging our lives and damaging our world – despite the promise we thought we heard.

Now I don’t mean to rain on Rosetta’s or anyone else’s parade. But Saint Paul famously counsels us: “When I was a child...I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child, but when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.” Part of what this means for us, I suspect, is that our renewed life in Christ includes taking in the somber fact of adulthood. The world is a mess, and that isn’t going to change any time soon. There is a war going on. There are homeless in the streets, landlords evicting tenants, fatal diseases, and professional and personal barriers to happiness that most of us secretly know or fear.

Yes, the lives of some of us are less than we’d like them to be, and though we hope for the best, we cannot expect this to change magically over night, even after we receive the Word and Sacrament of grace.

That's the bad news. So what's the Good News? What then *can* we expect?

There is a line from the Gospel of Thomas – one of the non-canonical writings of the early church, which addresses this:

“His disciples said to him, "When will the kingdom come?" [Jesus replied]: "It will not come by watching for it. It will not be said, 'Look, here!' or 'Look, there!' Rather, the Father's kingdom is spread out upon the earth, and people don't see it."

What an interesting idea! The advent of the Kingdom is already here before us, and we just don't see it. Why not? I think this gospel is saying to us that some of us are not looking at our selves and our world in the right way. And here, it seems to me, is one great gift of grace. What we *can* expect is that a life of spiritual formation that proceeds from that first experience of grace will draw us – not into a different world, but into a fuller awareness of the world we have, where new possibilities, already present but hidden till now, shine forth in those same events, which before seemed so bleak. And from that, one little corner of the world begins to get transformed. That, dear friends, is a big part of the gospel message. This is God's world, and God's possibilities for our everyday lives lie open before us if only we know how to look and listen for them.

So what about all those rampaging Santas we meet in this world? What are we to make of their behavior? It's sometimes hard to keep faith in the face of all the riot and rampage. But, I rather liked what one cinema patron in Wellington said, standing in that disrupted movie line, as her small befuddled son asked her: “Mommie, are these guys Santa's helpers gone crazy?” “No,” she said, “they're just idiots.” And so I ask you: should *idiots* be the ones who determine whether or not we lose our faith? I would hope not.