

Christ Church Parish
Tacoma, Washington
Adult Formation Epiphany | Lent 2021

Baptismal Fonts and Spiritualities in Early Christian North Africa
Second Session Tuesday, February 2: A Nuptial Bath

The Feast of the Presentation of Our Lord Jesus Christ



*God of steadfast love,
you sent your Son to be the light of the world,
saving people everywhere from sin and death.
As Anna gave thanks for the freedom he would bring,
and Simeon saw in him the dawn of redemption,
complete your purpose once made known in him:
Make us the vessels of his light,
that all the world may know your peace.
Grant this through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Bathing with little water

The average rainfall in Tacoma and Seattle in our wettest month, December, is 6.1 inches. In Tunis, Tunisia, it is 2.1 inches. North Africa is marked by eight months of dry weather with little rainfall, and a humid, hot summer. There is not an abundance of water in what the United Nations has called a “water-stressed” region of the world. Perhaps this illuminates the use of water among the people of North Africa in the early Christian centuries. While the famous Roman bathhouses were open to elites, the many poor laborers who toiled in sweat – the majority of the population – would find refreshment in drinking a cup of cold water, not bathing in it. There is limited evidence of bathtubs; it seems only the wealthy few could afford them. The vast majority washed by pouring water from a pitcher over the body. Bathing was thus reserved for special occasions throughout much of the Roman Empire, including Roman Palestine and Roman Africa.

Consider this story from 2 Samuel: “David rose, washed, anointed himself, and changed his clothes. He went into the house of the Lord, and worshiped ... he then went to Bathsheba and lay with her; she bore a son, and named him Solomon” (2 Samuel 12:20, 24). Or this story from the Book of Ruth: “Naomi, Ruth’s mother-in-law, said to her, ‘My daughter, here is our kinsman Boaz ... See, he is winnowing barley tonight at the threshing floor. Now wash and anoint yourself, and put on your best clothes and go down to the threshing floor ... When he lies down, observe the place where he lies; then, go and lie down with him” (Ruth 3:1-4). Bathing was frequently associated with preparation for a special occasion, in particular an amorous encounter with a potential lover or one’s wedding.

Marriage between God and God's people

Drawing on the ordinary experience of marriage, the biblical authors used the spousal image as a metaphor of the relationship between the God and God's people. In the patriarchal culture of Israel (and the Mediterranean), God was envisioned as the groom and the people of God as the bride. [Let us remember that metaphors used to describe God neither contain the fullness of God nor are they literal depictions of God]. "Your Maker is your husband, the Lord of hosts is his name," writes the prophet Isaiah, "the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer, the God of the whole earth" (Isaiah 54:5). "As a young man marries a young woman, so shall [God] your builder marry you, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you" (Isaiah 62:5). This metaphor continues in other prophetic writings; indeed, the Book of Hosea is constructed entirely on image of bride and bridegroom.

Awareness of the biblical metaphor illuminates its use by the authors of the New Testament. Indeed, we find nuptial imagery, especially wedding feasts, in many of the stories and parables of Jesus. And what did he say of himself? "Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day" (Mark 2:19-20; Matthew 9:15; Luke 5:34). Or this: "[John the Baptist] said, the one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. For this reason my joy has been fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:29-30).

Paul continues the image: "I feel a divine jealousy for you [plural], for I promised you all in marriage to one husband, to present you as a chaste virgin to Christ" (2 Corinthians 11:2). Another author wrote in a similar vein, "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, so as to present the church to himself in splendor" (Ephesians 5:25-27). While the New Testament offers the metaphor of marriage between Christ (*christus*, a masculine noun) and his Body, the church (*ecclesia*, a feminine noun), it also includes reference to the intimate relationship between Christ and the individual: "Anyone united to the Lord becomes *one with him*" (1 Corinthians 6:17).

It should not surprise us, then, that the marriage or nuptial bath would become one more way of understanding Holy Baptism: washing in water as or as preparation for intimate union with Christ at the wedding banquet, the Holy Eucharist. It is good to remember that in the early church, water washing, anointing with chrism, clothing, and eating and drinking were considered *one single act of initiation* with different dimensions rather than "separate," stand-alone events. Remember: "What is born in the womb is brought to the breast to be fed."



The circle

In his study of early Christian symbolic forms, the New Testament scholar, Graydon Snyder, brings our attention to the circle, an image that holds a surplus of meaning. He notes that the earliest ritual gathering spaces in human history were circular, in imitation of

the sun and moon, and the turning of the day and seasons. To be in the circle is to participate in the fertility of the earth's seasons. To be in the circle is to be aligned with the cosmos. Still yet the circle has come to express never-ending time, entering into eternity: there is neither a detectable beginning nor ending to the circle. The Spanish symbologist, Juan Cirlot, suggests that in contrast to the square, symbolic of different directions (NSEW), the circle expresses union.



Tipaza



Tiddis



Tébessa

In the more arid climate of North Africa, baptism would count as a special occasion; indeed, an once-in-a-lifetime occasion. The three baptismal fonts pictured above are from Roman Tipasa (Tipaza), Roman Tidi (Tiddis), and Roman Theveste (Tébessa) – all in Algeria, to the west of Tunisia. Note that they are formed of stone in concentric circles – gone is the undulating labial form of the yonic “birthing” fonts we saw in Tunisia. Here, the person to be baptized would step down into the base of the pool and either be dunked or have pitchers of water poured over the head (while begin immersed at least to the waist in some fonts).

For a number of early Christian bishops – presiders and preachers at the sacraments of initiation – the nuptial imagery of the Bible influenced their interpretation of the baptismal gestures: “I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God who has clothed me with the garments of salvation, covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels” (Isaiah 61:10). Some emphasized the baptismal pool as the place of union between Christ and the newly baptized since it is Christ who actually baptizes through the gestures and words of the minister: “Anyone united to the Lord becomes *one with him*” (1 Corinthians 6:17).

Others compared the marriage ritual to the baptismal ritual: one took a scented bath before being anointed with fragrant oil and clothed in a clean garment – the bride and groom then came together to the wedding banquet and from there to the wedding bed where they enjoyed intimate sexual union. In like manner, the

Christian was washed in the font, anointed with fragrant oil, clothed in a clean white robe, given a burning torch, and then led to the eucharistic table – the wedding feast – as the people sang a psalm of welcome (and many times roared their approval with *ululation* and clapping – no polite applause here!): listen to forms of ululation here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1fPGqEpLYuQ>

The sacraments of initiation – baptismal washing, anointing with chrism, and receiving one's first communion – were referred to as a "spiritual marriage" between the neophyte (the "newly-enlightened" one) and Christ. There are occasional references in the baptismal sermons of Cyril of Jerusalem to sweet-smelling crowns of greens and flowers placed on the heads of the newly-baptized, "crowned" with Christ as God's "regents" on earth, anointed as stewards and caretakers of the creation. The practice of wearing a new "church hat" at Easter can be traced to the practice of crowning.

The calendars of the Episcopal and Roman Catholic churches designate the week after Easter Sunday as an "octave" – a full week from Sunday to Sunday of intense celebration of the paschal mystery of Christ received in the sacraments of initiation. This complements the older practice in North Africa (and other regions of the Mediterranean) of keeping a marriage octave: a full week of celebrating in which the nuptial couple gathered with family and friends each day for a celebratory meal. During the Easter or Paschal octave, the newly baptized would come each day to the church for the Holy Eucharist: "Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb" (Revelation 19:9).

While one kind of font – the yonic or vaginal – signifies baptism as a birth into a new household in which adults are treated as infants and infants treated as adults, the circular font can express union with Christ – but also a centering in the cosmos, the life of the Holy Three, and the opening of the eternal in the midst of the temporal, of ordinary time.

Questions to consider in light of this understanding of Christian identity – the very thing the sacraments of initiation bestow:

1. If the image of baptism and thus Christian identity as spiritual union or marriage with Christ is a new one for you, what understanding of baptism has been operative in your life?
2. When Christians have forgotten their union with Christ in Holy Baptism, it has been the Christian mystics who remind us that all Christians are called into intimate union with Christ – this is different than knowing a lot about Christ or studying the gospels or heeding Christ's call to be active in the world. It is about cultivating a relationship of trust and love. The great English mystic, Julian of Norwich, writes: "The place which Jesus takes in our soul he will never vacate, for in us is his home

of homes, and it is the greatest delight for him to dwell there ... And the soul who thus contemplates is made like [the one] who is contemplated" (*Revelations of Divine Love*, 22). What is one way in which such a relationship can be nurtured?

3. Many hymns in the Christian tradition speak of spiritual union: "Come down, O Love divine, seek thou this soul of mine, and visit it with thine own ardor glowing" (Bianco da Siena, 1350); "Soul, adorn thyself with gladness, leave behind all gloom and sadness ... Hasten as a bride to meet Him, and with loving rev'rence greet Him" (Johann Franck, 1649); "Jesus, lover of my soul, let me to thy bosom fly" (Charles Wesley, 1740); "Mothering God, you gave me birth in the bright morning of this world" (Jean Janzen, 1990); "The journey is holy: to union with Christ, in service and justice and self-sacrifice" (Susan Palo Cherwien, 1995). Is there a passage from Scripture, a hymn text, or a text from the liturgy that has deepened your sense of spiritual union with Christ?

4. Many Episcopalians, Lutherans, and Roman Catholics dip their hands in the water of the baptismal font upon entering a church, and with wetted fingers make the sign of the cross over their forehead or heart. That gesture is a baptismal gesture. Now if we consider baptism as marriage to Christ, what might that gesture signify?

Sources

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