

1

When my children were young, it was always a challenge going down the toy aisle at the store. Maybe you have had a similar experience of taking young children shopping, for everything on the shelf seems so attractive to young shoppers. “Will you buy that for me, Daddy?...I love that toy...I will be so good if you get that for me...I need that, Daddy.” I often replied, “I know that looks attractive, but maybe you could be satisfied with what you already have. I didn’t bring any money for that toy today.” Sometimes I would open my wallet and show that I had only a few dollars, and that would suffice for an answer, until one day my daughter said, “Use that card thingy and charge it.”

John the Baptizer ran into a similar situation while he was baptizing people in the Jordan River. They weren’t shopping at Walmart, and yet, they wanted something. They wanted some reassurance, some guarantees. The narrator Luke begins telling about the event by setting it against the background of who was in charge:

In the fifteenth year of the rule of the emperor Tiberius—when Pontius Pilate was governor over Judea and Herod was ruler over Galilee, his brother Philip was ruler over Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias was ruler over Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas—God’s word came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.

To the listeners, these would not have been popular names, rulers who inherited their leadership from corrupt families, but in the midst of political uncertainty and unrest, John the Baptizer appears on the scene, inviting people to step into water and repent of their sins, to turn around their hearts and lives and seek God’s forgiveness. He also warned them of the consequences of not changing, of the danger of being chopped down like a tree that doesn’t produce fruit. “Change your lives and hearts!”

People in the crowd became unsettled, wanting some reassurance, probably using a similar tone of

2

voice that my children used when begging in the store, “I need that. What should we do?”

John replied, “If you have two shirts, give one to a person who has none. If you have food, share it with someone who is hungry.”

The unpopular tax collectors even asked what they could do, and John replied, “Collect no more money than you need to take.” The tax collectors were known for taking not only the required taxes but taking extra money to fill their own pockets.

Even soldiers wanted to know what they could do, and John told them, “Don’t cheat or harass anyone. Be satisfied with your pay.”

In essence, he was telling everyone, “Be satisfied—give away your extra, take only what you need, and don’t harm anyone.”

Be satisfied? That’s hard to do, isn’t it? We get so attached to everything we have, and we always think we needed more. Sometimes it’s hard to let go—that is, until you have to move it. Staci and I discovered this past summer that the process of moving makes it much easier to get rid of stuff.

Rather than moving years of accumulation, we took truckloads of cherished items to the thrift store or church yard sale, knowing they could resell the items to enhance their ministries.

Now it would be tempting for us to say with the crowd, “Well, John, we’ve follow your instructions. Now can we sit back and relax, knowing we have helped others and we’re satisfied.”

Before we even have a chance to relax, our narrator Luke tells us that the crowd was “filled with expectation.” Some Bibles translate this phrase as “Everyone became excited” (*CEV*) or “The interest of the people by now was building,” (*The Message*), but the Greek word Προσδοκῶντος (*prosdokontos*) implies a much deep expectation, more than a can-you-buy-me-that-toy-on-the-shelf expectation. There’s a tension and mixture of fear and hope, a sense that God is going to do something amazing in the world.

It’s sometimes tempting to think we have done all God wants us to do. Check the items off the list. Feel we’ve accomplished what God has called us to do. As a church we might be tempted to say, “We

3

created a list of tasks with our interim, and we've accomplished many of those items, so now we can be satisfied and coast." Or maybe you've thought, "I'm in my 70s or 80s or 90s and have done what God asked me to do, so now I can be satisfied and retire from the expectations of what God might do in the world."

It doesn't work that way. God is never done moving in the world. God is always active, nudging us forward into new adventures. Through our baptisms, we are reminded that God always gives hope, offering salvation to those seeking meaning for their lives.

Think about the day of your own baptism—I suggest that event reminds you of two things.

First, baptism reminds us that God is always cleansing our lives, for we always make mistakes and need another chance, as was the case of the police officer in a small town who stopped a speeding motorist on Main Street.

"But officer," the man began, "I can explain."

"Just be quiet," snapped the officer. "I'm going to let you sit in jail until the chief gets back."

"But officer, I just wanted to say...."

"And I said to keep quiet! You're going to jail!"

A few hours later the officer looked in on his prisoner and said, "Lucky for you that the chief is at his daughter's wedding. He'll be in a good mood when he gets back."

"Don't count on it," answered the fellow in the cell. "I'm the groom."<sup>1</sup>

Baptism reminds us that God continually cleanses us from our sins, from our mistakes.

The second thing that baptism helps us remember is that God calls us to join with God in healing the world. When Jesus himself stepped into the waters of baptism, he was agreeing to join with God. It's as though Jesus said, "Yes, God, I will join you in expectation, for I want to be part of what you are doing in the world." When we step into the waters of baptism with Jesus, God creates

④

something new, filled with expectation that the world will change for the better.

God creates something new through our baptisms, though we may not recognize it until many years later, as was the case of a Philadelphia congregation who watched three 9-year-old boys being baptized forty years ago. That same year the church was unable to continue their ministry due to its shrinking membership, so the members sold the building and disbanded.

One of those boys was Tony Campolo, now author and Christian sociologist at Eastern College in Pennsylvania. Dr. Campolo remembers: “Years later when I was doing research in the archives of our denominations, I decided to look up the church report for the year of my baptism. There was my name, and Dick White's. He’s now a missionary. Bert Newman, now a professor of theology at an African seminary, was also there. Then I read

the church report for ‘my’ year: ‘It has not been a good year for our church. We have lost 27 members. Three joined, and they were only children.’”<sup>2</sup>

No one knew in the midst of that congregation’s turmoil that many years later those three children would bring hope to many lives. Not everyone who enters the waters of baptism becomes a famous professor or serves as a missionary, but through God the waters can bring healing and hope to many.

Our congregation is not the same as it was fifty years ago, or even ten years ago, but we can still be filled with expectation that God is doing something amazing here. You and I may not see all the results that ripple into the world, but we can be satisfied that we are doing what God calls us to do. This year I look forward to being satisfied with what we can do while also being filled with expectation of what God is doing among us.

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<sup>2</sup> Billy D. Strayhorn, *Drink Deep*, eSermons.com

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<sup>1</sup> *Homiletics*