

Radical Immersion
Baptism of the Lord
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Trinity Bixby
Rev. Lucas Levy Keppel

[Luke 3:15-17, 21-22](#)
[Isaiah 43:1-7](#)

Have you ever noticed that each generation has words or phrases that become strongly associated with them? I'm not talking about the labels for the generation – Boomer, X'er, Millennial, and so on. No, I'm talking about words like, “Groovy.”¹ “On fleek.”² “The Bee’s Knees.”³ “Cowabunga!”⁴ “Daddy-O.”⁵ “Yeet”⁶ “Tickety-boo.”⁷ Even “Twitterpated”⁸ – though that’s seemingly becoming popular again. For my generation, one of the most common was “Radical!” – or its shortform, “rad.” For a good while, it seemed like everything was “totally radical!” Your pants are made of parachute fabric? Radical. You got an A on that exam? Rad, man. You got the car for the weekend – rad – but you dinged the door? Rad...ish? It was used so much that we sometimes forgot its meaning went well beyond slang.

Unlike a lot of the generational words, radical existed before the generation, and continues to be used today. As a noun, it’s often used negatively – “radicals disrupted the event...” and also often misused as a synonym for “extreme” like, “radical left” and “radical right.” But when you look for its root meaning, you find it means... “changed at the root” You see, the Latin for root is “radix” – thus, a radish is a root vegetable. Radical – changed at the root.

That takes us quite handily to our scripture passage today – where John the

¹ Going well, smoothly, like the needle of a record player in a vinyl groove. Boomers/Gen-X

² Smooth, well-put-together. Originally used about eyebrows! Late Millennials/Gen-Z

³ Absolutely the best. Greatest/Silent

⁴ Shouted to express amazement or joy, especially when attempting a physical challenge. Gen-X/Millennials

⁵ Term of endearment for a man. Boomers

⁶ Expression of hope and success during/after great exertion, whether physical or mental. Gen-Z

⁷ Smooth, according to plan. Silent

⁸ Originally, filled with nervous energy and probable romance. (Silent/Boomer) Now, ironically exhausted after a long stream of tweets. (Millennial)

Baptist is, well, baptizing people. Specifically, he is in a flowing river, the Jordan, dunking people under the water completely and restoring them to the surface. People from all over sought him out, seeking an external sign of repentance and returning home with an intense memory of change – a change at the root of their being.

Immersion in water is not unique to John, by the way. Jewish people have special pools that they fully immerse themselves in at particular points in their lives. These pools, called mikveh,⁹ had to be filled with “living water” – either from a natural spring or from rainwater. John’s practice of immersion, then, was rooted in tradition, but encouraged people to go beyond, to be immersed in the water of the wilderness, to pledge repentance, and to make a change in their lives that starts at the root of their being.

Now, though it wasn’t in our reading today, John was known as something of a Wildman. He’s out there, wearing camelhair and eating locusts and honey, dunking people under the water – and he’s claiming to be not radical enough. Because while he’s immersing people in water, he says, there’s another person coming who will immerse people in fire, burning away the chaff while gathering the wheat. It’s easy to be uncomfortable with this description, especially as it’s usually interpreted as referring to whole people – the “wheat people” will be saved while the “chaff people” will be burned in never-ending fire. But – that interpretation only gets you so far before you run into an issue – namely, that the wheat and the chaff are one plant in separate parts. One plant, rooted in the ground, containing the good fruit – the edible bits – and the chaff, or non-edible bits. John is telling people not that there are good people and bad people, but that each of us contains good bits and bad bits. By radical repentance and radical immersion, John is showing that you can change yourself at the root to bear more good fruit – and that those bad bits will be burned away.

With this interpretation, we also solve another problem – if baptism was only

⁹ Technically, the plural is mikva’ot, but I’m using mikveh as a collective plural for ease of comprehension.

a symbol of impurity or repentance, then why did Jesus, the sinless one, get baptized? Through his baptism, Jesus showed that baptism was about a greater connection – that through baptism, we are all connected at the root, with the Holy One. That’s why it’s so important that the division between heaven and earth was opened, a dove descends, and a voice resounds, “You are my Son, whom I dearly love; in you, I find happiness!” In that moment, we see a vision of the holy Trinity – God, Spirit, and Christ – and experience the radical nature of God’s grace and forgiveness.

You see, God’s promise to humanity rings out in this moment. Like the promise made when the prophet Isaiah spoke to God’s children in exile, telling them “Do not be afraid, for I have paid your debt. I have called you by name; you are mine. When you go through deep waters, I will be with you.... When you walk through the fires, you will not be scorched, and flame won’t burn you.”

In the baptism of Jesus, God names him: you are my Son, whom I dearly love. At that moment, God is with Jesus, breaking whatever barriers exist between heaven and earth, showing that Jesus is filled with God’s love and grace and hope. That the radical gift of God’s forgiveness and grace isn’t because we are baptized – but that in baptism, we recognize our connection to God through Jesus.

Lutheran Pastor David Lose puts it this way:

Yes, baptism is about forgiveness. But it’s also about relationship, about being named and claimed as children of God... God forgives us not to make us God’s children, but because we already are God’s children. Forgiveness is a result of God’s love for us, not a condition of that love.¹⁰

This is precisely why we baptize infants and adults, and encourage you to remember your baptism frequently: God’s love for you has existed since the beginning, even before you can remember. In baptism, we recognize that we are already radically immersed in God. That God’s love is like the water that surrounds us in pools, in rivers, and even in baths. That God’s forgiveness changes us at the

¹⁰ David Lose, “Baptism of our Lord C: Forgiveness... and so much more!” *In the Meantime* (2019) <http://www.davidlose.net/2019/01/the-baptism-of-our-lord-c-forgiveness-and-so-much-more/>

root by burning away our sin without scorching us. That God has called us by name – and has known us from the very beginning.

I'll leave you today with this important note: remember the mikveh, the pool of water, that we talked about before? Though it literally means a collection of water, the same Hebrew root letters also spell the word for hope. When John baptized people, they were repenting of their bad actions, and he was radically immersing them in mikveh, water and hope. When we remember our baptism, we should remember God's love – grace – forgiveness – and hope. That is a radical immersion.

May you be changed at the root by your immersion in God's love, immersion in God's Word, the Christ, and immersion in God's Spirit. May your immersion always lead you to take root in the living water of God, that you may be filled with the good fruit planted by God within you. Amen.