

**BEHIND THE CURTAIN  
BRAIN-WASHING  
LUKE 3:15-17, 21-22  
JANUARY 9, 2022  
BAPTISM OF OUR LORD**

In the classic movie The Wizard of Oz, Dorothy finds herself swept by a tornado into the land of Oz.

Oz is inhabited by Munchkins who are ruled over by the Wizard of Oz,

who announces himself with flames and belching smoke,

and in a loud voice says that he is "The Great and Powerful Oz."

He shouts insults at Dorothy and her friends.

The wizard says he'll grant their wishes

if they bring back the broom stick of the Wicked Witch of the West.

It's all quite intimidating,

leaving them emotionally and physically shaken.

After a series of adventures involving flying monkeys and the death of the wicked witch,

they take the broomstick to the wizard of Oz.

Dorothy insists the Wizard keep his promises to each of them.

The Wizard tries to put them off, shouting,

"Come back tomorrow."

About that time, Dorothy's little dog Toto runs up the steps and pulls back a curtain,

to reveal the Great and Powerful Oz...

is an ordinary man operating a machine

that makes him seem more great and powerful than he really is.

He tries to fake it, shouting into his microphone,

"Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain."

But it's too late.

They now realize the man behind the curtain is the

~~not-really-so-great-and-powerful Wizard.~~

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In this season of Epiphany,

we are pulling back the curtain to see who Jesus really is.

Unlike the Wizard of Oz,

when we pull back the curtain on Jesus

we discover he is not less than we expected, but more.

Much, much more.

More than just a baby,

more than a preacher and teacher,

more than a good moral example,

more than a prophet,

Jesus is the messiah, the savior,

the Son of God, the Word of God made flesh.

And today we're going to consider a bit of what it means to follow him.

I want us to think of it in terms of "brainwashing."

Brainwashing,

the idea that a person's whole way of thinking and being can be radically altered by outside forces,

is a concept that is much debated.

The Chinese term, "wash brain,"

was originally used to describe the

coercive persuasion used under the Maoist government in China,  
 The term was picked up and turned into “brainwashing” in 1950  
 by a journalist who was trying to explain why, during the Korean War,  
 some American prisoners of war cooperated with their Chinese captors.  
 The concept caught on,  
 and soon researchers were employing it to try to figure out  
 why someone would join the Chinese Communist Party or the Nazi party.  
 The concept has been applied to religious cults,  
 divorced parents making accusations regarding how the other parent treats the children,  
 and, most recently, Islamic radicalization.  
 Brainwashing made its way into the popular mind,  
 featured in books and movies like 1984 and The Manchurian Candidate.  
 But scientific research does not uphold the popular view.  
 Most of what is called “brainwashing” is either  
 coercive persuasion  
 or simply an extended period of immersive education and socialization.  
 That being said,  
 aren’t there times when you would love to see someone’s entire way of thinking radically altered?  
 What if, during World War 2,  
 they had discovered a way to capture Nazi leaders and change their mindset?  
 Wouldn’t it be great if we could find a way to brainwash an Islamic terrorist  
 into being a peaceful and productive citizen in a non-Islamic nation?  
 What if we could brainwash someone out of being an alcoholic or drug addict?  
 You could brainwash away all sorts of destructive ways of thinking and acting.

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Today I want to suggest God wants to do some brainwashing with all of us,  
 not coercive persuasion,  
 but radically altering our mindsets,  
 freeing us from our addiction to sin,  
 even giving us a new identity.

That is some of what is pictured in water baptism; brainwashing.

Let’s start by revisiting the ministry of John the Baptist.

You may recall the text earlier indicates John brought “a baptism of repentance.”

Repentance, in New Testament Greek, it is “metanoia,”  
 meaning “change of mind.”

The idea is baptism indicated one’s desire to  
 turn away from sin and back toward God,  
 to be radically reoriented.  
 Radically reoriented.

Right there it seems to get very close to the idea of “brain washing.”

John the Baptist’s call to repentance brought a certain level of interest from the people.

### **LUKE 3:15-17**

They were wondering if John might be the Christ, the messiah.

But John quickly pointed them away from himself.

They were to keep their eyes open for another,  
 someone coming who was much more powerful than John.  
 (John was clearly not a politician!)

The one to come will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

The word for “baptize” means to plunge, immerse, drench, or saturate.

This is not a light sprinkle he’s talking about, but something more substantial.

While John's baptism was about repentance,  
 an intention to turn away from sin,  
 the one to come would baptize with the Holy Spirit,  
 the presence and power of God to empower us to make  
 the turn-around that we intend through repentance.  
 And his winnowing fork is in his hand to clear the threshing floor.  
 The wheat harvest was taken to a threshing floor on a hill with a good breeze.  
 The winnowing fork was used to toss the harvest in the air.  
 The dust and hulls would blow to the side in the breeze,  
 while the clean kernels would fall to the threshing floor,  
 where they could be gathered up.  
 The dust and hulls, chaff, would then be burned.  
 This Holy Spirit baptism was a picture of a purifying fire, the good preserved,  
 while sin and corruption would be destroyed.

People heard the message of John,  
 and they came to be baptized.  
 They really had a desire to get closer to God.

### LUKE 3:21-22

What I find fascinating is that Jesus' baptism is mentioned almost as an aside.

"Jesus was baptized too."

There's no description of how he was baptized.

Sprinkled with water from a shell? Dunked? Splashed? Shot with a Super-Soaker?

It's not in the text.

Though that Greek word for "baptism" suggests  
 more than just a little water was involved.

The focus of the text is not on the method of baptism,  
 but is more on the fact that he was *with* the people.

Even here, at the beginning of his ministry,  
 he is identifying with humanity,  
 even in its fallen sinfulness.

Because this was, after all, a baptism of *repentance* for the forgiveness of *sins*.

Luke then turns the spotlight on the fact that Jesus was praying.

The Son of God, in earthly and bodily form,  
 employed prayer to be in communication with his heavenly Father.

If he needed prayer,  
 how much more do we need prayer?

And it was in the context of prayer that "the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove."

"In bodily form."

Luke is pressing the point that this was not just a *subjective experience* that Jesus had,  
 but an *objective occurrence*.

It wasn't just inner feelings,  
 but an actual event of something real happening.

"And a voice came from heaven,

'You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.'"

Clearly this is the voice of God the Father,  
 pulling back the curtain,  
 affirming the identity of Jesus as the Son of God.  
 And not just his identity by title,  
 but as one specially loved by the Father.

It may seem ironic that,  
 in the very same moment Jesus identifies so deeply with *sinful humanity*,  
 his identity as the *Son of God* is confirmed by the Father and the Spirit.  
 But I think, rather than irony,  
 that tells us something about the true nature of God.  
 He is not some philosophical abstraction in the sky,  
 high and lifted up,  
 untouched by the nitty-gritty reality of our lives.  
 No, God is more in tune and in touch with our lives than we ever imagined.  
 Jesus comes as the bridge between heaven and earth,  
 a God-became-flesh living bridge.  
 In his baptism, we see who Jesus *really is*,  
 who he was from the *beginning*,  
 who he is in that moment,  
 and who he will be *all the way to the end*.  
 It was an epiphany, a revealing.

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And *your* baptism says something about who *you* are.

When you introduce yourself to someone, what do you say?

My name is...

Perhaps you then tell them what you do for a living.

"I work for this company," or "I'm an accountant."

Depending on the setting you might identify yourself by your relationship with someone else.

At your children's school you are so-and-so's mother or father.

If you are at your spouse's Christmas party, you are so-and-so's husband or wife.

How do you identify yourself to yourself?

When I was in high school,

there were jocks, kickers, druggies, nerds, and BQs.

Being a trumpet player,

I was one of the Band Qs.

Of course, you know some of your own inner stuff...

your uncertainties, your fears, the sins and temptations you continue to struggle with.

All of that goes into what you say about yourself,

your sense of identity.

And the world sends us all sorts of messages about who we are.

You are a Democrat or Republican, a progressive, conservative or moderate.

You are male or female or whatever gender identity you choose.

Perhaps you are defined by your sexual orientation.

You are a consumer, a spender of money.

So the advertisers are after you.

You are an appetite seeking to be satisfied.

You are this race or that race,

with positive or negative values attached to that.

You are what you think,

or you are what you feel.

Through media and social media, through our educational establishments,

through *every imaginable* means of communication,

we are bombarded and brainwashed with definitions of who we are.

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But do you ever consider your identity relative to your baptism?

At his baptism God made clear Jesus' identity:

“You are my Son, whom I love;  
with you I am well pleased.”

And at your baptism God says something about who *you* are.

Just as Jesus’ baptism pulled back the curtain on who he was,

so *your* baptism pulls back the curtain to say something about *who you are*.

Now, some church traditions see water baptism as a sign of “my faith.”

I come to faith and so *choose* to be baptized.

So they allow only believers’ baptism at a certain age of accountability,

because the person being baptized is the active party.

So in their baptism, the individual is saying something about themselves.

“I choose faith in Christ.”

But other churches, including the United Methodist Church,

see baptism as a sign and a means through which God lays claim to the person who is baptized.

God, working through the church, is the primary actor.

The Bible teaches that God lays claim to the individual before they are aware.

Jeremiah described how God worked in his own life,

“Now the word of the LORD came to me saying,

‘Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,

and before you were born I consecrated you;

I appointed you a prophet to the nations.’”

(Je.1:4)

So we can baptize infants and small children.

When we baptize an infant or a small child,

we are acknowledging God’s grace extended to that little one

before they have a clue,

before they are able to understand and respond in faith.

And because we see water baptism as God’s commitment to that person,

we do not rebaptize.

Because God has not changed his mind about you.

You may have changed your mind about God... several times in a day!

And so you should recommit yourself to him.

But God never changed his mind about you.

So he has no need to recommit himself to you.

And we have no need to rebaptize anyone.

In your baptism, God says some vitally important things about you, about who you are.

He says,

This one is mine.

This one I love.

To this one... I offer forgiveness of sins through payment made on the cross.

This one is worth everything to me.

To this one I offer new life and eternal life.

This one I want in my family.

This one I would adopt as my son, my daughter,

and I will be their Father.

THAT is who God says you are.

Does anyone’s opinion of you matter more than what God says about you?

The trouble is that we hear the messages from the world day after day after day,

but we do not hear what God says with that kind of frequency.

We keep ourselves immersed in our culture rather than in scripture and prayer and the things of God.

Today is a good day to start new, turning our attention back to what God says about us.

Rather than a New Year's Resolution,  
 which is promised on January 1, and forgotten in a week,  
 let's renew our baptismal covenant  
 and ask for the Holy Spirit to help us live it out.

As a first step in renewing our baptismal covenant,  
 I invite each of us to remember some of what God says about us through our baptism.

**(Dip hand in baptismal bowl and sprinkle water with each affirmation)**

Repeat after me:

I belong to God.  
 I am loved by God.  
 I am forgiven by God, at great cost.  
 God's Spirit lives in me.  
 I have new life from God.  
 I have eternal life from God.  
 I belong to the family of God.  
 I am a son/daughter of the most high God.  
 God is my Father.

**(REPEAT)**

On the other side of our baptismal covenant is our response to  
 what God has done for us in Jesus Christ.  
 Our response is not just a passive receptivity,  
 but also an act of commitment,  
 giving our lives to him and his work in the world.

As a way of refreshing our sense of commitment,  
 we'll read together a historic Wesleyan Covenant Prayer:  
 "I am no longer my own, but thine.  
 Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt.  
 Put me to doing, put me to suffering.  
 Let me be employed by thee or laid aside for thee,  
 exalted for thee or brought low for thee.  
 Let me be full, let me be empty.  
 Let me have all things, let me have nothing.  
 I freely and heartily yield all things to thy pleasure and disposal.  
 And now, O glorious and blessed God,  
 Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,  
 thou art mine, and I am thine. So be it.  
 And the covenant which I have made on earth,  
 let it be ratified in heaven. Amen."

Finally, let's seek the guidance and help of the Holy Spirit  
 in living in faithfulness to this covenant.

**(PRAYER)**