

Planning for Worship During Lent, Year A

Living Our Baptismal Calling

by Taylor Burton-Edwards



The baptistery at Philippi, marking the traditional spot where Lydia and her household were baptized by Paul. Note the baptistery proper (slightly left of centre) is in the form of a cross.

It's Lent. Why an image of a baptistery? Why not the cross?

Because the primary purpose of Lent from the earliest church -- and as both

the Roman Catholic and the Revised Common Lectionary now support it -- was to prepare candidates for baptism at Easter. Lent was designed to help the church help these candidates become purged from sinful ways, and live more fully into the way of Christ. Lent was and is the final stage of labor before new birth, a final incubation before “hatching” into new life. The Season after Epiphany has prepared the congregation to take on this work with newcomers to the faith as well as those who are preparing to make deeper commitments. The Season of Lent is the time for the congregation to fulfill its role as “midwife to the Spirit” for these candidates as fully as the Spirit may allow.

This work of midwifery is solemn, but not somber. It is also joyful, hopeful, challenging, and expectant. We fix our eyes on the birth or growth to come in the lives of the candidates with whom we journey, and we do what it takes to facilitate not just their rebirth in baptism or their recommitment in reaffirming the baptismal vows, but their thriving in new life from that day forward.

During Years A and B, John’s gospel plays a prominent and dramatic role in the Lenten readings, as it has done in a number of lectionary traditions reaching back to the early church. These readings from John correlate with challenging statements or questions posed to baptismal candidates and, by extension, to the whole congregation. These questions have been variously called “examens,” “examinations of conscience” or scrutinies. Roman Catholics and an increasing number of Protestant denominations, including United Methodists in Daniel Benedict’s book, [*Come to the Waters*](#), have recovered the practice of offering the scrutinies as a response to the Word during this season.

Each week, the gospel reading and the Scriptures that accompany it remind us all of key things our calling to Christ in baptism, our call to discipleship, calls us to do and keep on doing. The following reflections may help you as you plan not just worship, but also other formational processes during these weeks to help your candidates and the congregation alike not just learn about but begin and continue to remember and live out our baptismal calling.

The First Sunday in Lent: Called to Renounce

Lent always begins with an account of Satan tempting Jesus after Jesus had fasted for 40 days in the Judean desert (Matthew 4:1-11). From at least the second century, we know that baptismal services always began with a renunciation. The exact words of the renunciation have varied slightly from place to place, but they were all close to this version from Cyprian of Carthage in the third century: “I renounce you, Satan, and all your works, and all your pomps.” This story provides the basis for that renunciation.

To turn stone into bread was a work suggested by Satan. For Jesus to cast himself from the temple's pinnacle to create a spectacle of the angels rescuing him would have been part of the theatrics, the "pomps," of Satan (though "pomps" has other and wider social meanings as well). To bow down and worship Satan would have been to embrace and pledge allegiance to Satan. Jesus instead renounced Satan and his works and his pomps. We who follow him are called to do the same. Here at the start of Lent, we hear and claim God's call to make the same renunciations and live as those who have done so.

What does it mean in for people to renounce Satan and all his works and all his pomps where you are? How are you preparing people for baptism to be able to make such a strong renunciation, as Jesus himself did? What do you do to help people answer God's call not simply to say the words, but continue to live out the renunciation they make?

The Second Sunday in Lent: Called to Be Born Again

The gospel this week records a late-night meeting between a spy from the Pharisees (Nicodemus) and Jesus. We do not know all that motivates the spy to come, but he certainly received more than he bargained for. Jesus turns his opening bit of flattery ("no one can do the signs you do apart from the presence of God") on its head. "No one can see the kingdom of God without being born again" (verse 3). The physical and cultural equipment we're born with can't help us see and can't allow us to enter God's kingdom. Only our rebirth by water and the Spirit can do that (verse 5).

Baptism is the sign and ordinary means of the needed rebirth. But the water and the ritual alone do not make rebirth happen. This is the Spirit's work.

When we are called to come to the waters of baptism, we are being called to nothing less than rebirth. And we are being called to recognize that without such rebirth, or "[new birth](#)" as John Wesley called it, no matter how we have been raised, or what goodness we have known or done, we are utterly incapable of either seeing or entering God's kingdom. The Spirit must open our eyes. The Spirit must usher us in.

Nicodemus did not understand the language of being "born again." So Jesus told him another story he could understand, the story of Moses lifting up the serpent on a pole.

Likely, many today do not understand the story Nicodemus could understand, but we may resonate with the one that left him puzzled. The point is not simply that Jesus offers a "new beginning," but that we also absolutely need it! Water washed, yes, but also Spirit-born. What can you say or do in worship

today and in continuing to prepare people for baptism to help them, and your congregation, “get” not only the offer, but the necessity of the new birth, a new birth the Spirit delights to offer because God so loves the world?

The Third Sunday in Lent: Called to Drink and Share Living Water

We have this week and in the coming weeks some of the longest readings from the entire three-year cycle of the lectionary, with the exception of the story of the suffering and death of Jesus that we hear on Palm/Passion Sunday (synoptic gospels) and Good Friday (John).

These readings are long because, especially during this season of Lent, we need to hear *all* they have to say.

This week we need to *see* how Jesus contends for the soul of this Samaritan woman and wins her. Jesus began the conversation by breaking multiple cultural conventions when he asked her for a drink. We, like she, come with all sorts of personal and cultural baggage in our own lives, some of which could prevent us from seeing and experiencing the saving power of God in Jesus Christ. What do you need to let go as a congregation and as an individual to enable you to walk faithfully with all who come seeking living water?

We need to *hear* how this woman continues to bring out that baggage and how Jesus continues to help her lay it aside. Part of the role of the exámenes or scrutinies in worship during Lent is to help acknowledge what candidates and congregation alike need to keep laying aside.

And we need, perhaps above all, to *know and feel* that in asking this woman for a drink, and continuing to challenge her thinking, he was offering her living water that springs into eternal life. When we ask hard questions of candidates and one another in this season, it is because, above all, we desire that they and we may know the joy of drinking from these springs.

She thirsted for the living water, and she drank from it. And when she did, she found not only her life named and transformed, but an irresistible urge to share what had happened to her with others, that they, too, might receive the same living water.

We are baptized in water, over which we pray the Spirit’s quickening presence. The earliest Christians baptized in “living” (that is, running) water whenever they could. They did so as a testimony to this story, as well as Jesus’ own baptism in the Jordan. Stagnant water harbors deadly bacteria. Living water, rushing over rocks, cleans us more thoroughly and is much

safer to drink. We build settlements where living water flows at the surface, or where wells can be dug reaching to underground streams or springs of water.

We, as church, are settled by the springs of eternal life, and call all, far and near, to come to these waters to drink. We are called to drink and share living water. We are not called to hoard it for ourselves, as in a cistern, but to receive it freely, as from a spring, and invite others to share what we have received. And we are called into life in the Spirit, real, constant engagement with the Holy One, whose Life and love cannot be contained in any dwelling made by hands, but always and continually springs up to eternal life.

How will you help your baptismal candidates and congregation join the Samaritan woman's plea, "Lord, give me this water, so I may never thirst again." How will you help them get it in their bones that the water they receive drives them to invite everyone they know to come, see, and drink from these springs?

The Fourth Sunday in Lent: Called to Be Healed of Blindness

John 9 picks up on part of the theme of John 3—that we are born blind with a blindness that only being born again can correct.

For those who have acknowledged their blindness from birth, this text is great good news. It is healing, restoration, and being given a new life that no longer requires us to stumble and beg, hoping for some signs of mercy.

But for those who are certain they see, this story comes as a startling reality check. "But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains," Jesus says (vs. 41).

And so on this Sunday, many Christians lay hands and pray over those preparing for baptism or for reaffirmation at Easter in words like these, included by Daniel Benedict in his book, [*Come to the Waters*](#) (p. 119).

Lord Jesus, you know our blindness. Open their hearts and minds to see and to yield to you anything that stands in the way of their saying Yes to you.

Amen.

The Fifth Sunday in Lent: Called to Come Forth and Enable Others Left for Dead to Do the Same

The story of Lazarus is a calling story of a very different kind. In most calling stories, we see Jesus inviting people to become his disciples. Here, he calls Lazarus, a dear friend, to come out of a tomb where he had been laid for four days after he had died.

The story as John tells it takes great pains to show us that Lazarus was really and truly dead. It states that Lazarus was dead or had died no less than eight times. His family and many of his friends from all over, including Jesus, were weeping in their grief. And, as Martha reminds (verse 39), there is already a stench around the tomb caused by the decaying body of the dead man. Lazarus was dead.

Why continue to emphasize that Lazarus, one beloved by Jesus, was dead? It is because we, too, are dead in our trespasses and sins. And before the holiness of God, all our righteousness has the same deathly stench as filthy rags.

Lazarus is us. We are dead. Stinking dead. And like him, our hope of anything other than further demise and decay comes through Jesus Christ, the Resurrection and the Life.

The call to Lazarus is to come forth, to leave the tomb behind.

Jesus Christ calls us forth to no lesser destiny, in this age and in the age to come.

But Jesus did not raise Lazarus or us alone. He enlisted some to roll away the stone (verse 39). He commanded others to “unbind him and set him free” (verse 44). In raising Lazarus, Jesus not only restored him, but called the community around him to complete what he had begun.

And so it is in baptism. We are buried with Christ, dead to sin, and raised with him to walk in newness of life. But this never happens alone. We walk together with all who have died and are being raised, that the fullness of Christ’s resurrection may be known in our lives now and in the age to come. We come to life in the midst of the body of Christ and pledge ourselves into union with it, a body that itself pledges to continue to surround us with love and forgiveness and to pray that we may be disciples who walk in the way that leads to life.

We who were dead welcome and pledge to live eternally with and for the dead made alive in Christ.

And looking to the day when the new birth is realized in water and Spirit, we pray on this day over all who continue to prepare to come to the waters:

Lord Jesus, you are the resurrection and the life, call (names of candidates) out of the grave of old hurts so they may enjoy eternal life with you and your people. **Amen.**

Lord Jesus... help and deliver these people whom you have called to baptism. Lift them from the grip of death. Cancel the power of sin and fear. Unbind them, and set them free from the shackles of old patterns and addictions. We ask this by the power of the Holy Spirit you have breathed upon us. **Amen.**

(From [*Come to the Waters*](#), p. 119)