

The First Sunday after the Epiphany, January 13, 2013. Nigel Taber-Hamilton

On Monday I spent a good part of the day in a quest for perfection; I was looking for two orange lights – or, to be completely accurate, two amber lights. I needed to see them. I didn't want to see a red light. And, lest you think I'm talking about traffic signals (which I'm not), I didn't want no lights at all.

Two amber lights means perfection, once for all!

This (the plug) is where I needed to see two amber lights. At the moment there are no lights lit – because it's not plugged in. Were I to plug it into an electrical circuit that's not properly wired, I could get a whole host of different combinations, but not two lit amber lights, and the red light unlit.

If a circuit is correctly wired, the two amber lights come on, and the red one stays dark – perfection! So what I have here is a circuit analyzer. What I was doing Monday is putting an electrical circuit with several different electrical boxes, a switch half way through, a ground-fault-interrupter, and the wiring for several shop lights! In case you're wondering, at the end of the day I did get two amber lights, with the red one unlit!

Oh that our lives might be lived this simply! I don't mean to say that wiring an electrical circuit is simple – it isn't. Rather, what I'm thinking of is the very human wish (and, I think, secret hope) that there's a way of living that offers consistent and predictable outcomes!

Pretty much every financial advisor wants you to believe that! So does every “get-rich-quick” shyster who will tell you with absolute sincerity that – for instance – with no money down you can “own” multiple pieces of real estate!

And I would include in this category the famous (or infamous, depending on your perspective) “Protestant Work Ethic” – work really hard all your life and you'll be rewarded.

This is not a new thing. Pretty much every belief system throughout human history has believed this, to a greater or lesser extent – not just Christianity, but Islam and Judaism – all three of the great monotheistic religions, for sure.

As we gather today there's a 28 year old man named Drew lying in the critical care unit at the Indiana University Med Center with a rare form of leukemia. He almost died 3 nights ago. I've known Drew since he was 3. I presided at his wedding 3 years ago. He is a fine young man – honest, thoughtful, caring, hard-working.

Drew is living proof that as much as we might wish for it, our world does not offer consistent and predictable outcomes, that ‘bad things happen to good people’, and that there's mostly nothing we can do about that. No matter how much we might try and wire our life's circuits correctly, there's no guarantee that we'll get those two amber lights.

Of course, that doesn't stop us from trying, does it?!!

The origins of the ritual we remember today – baptism – lie, in part, in our Jewish forebears' focus on spiritual purity – and altogether good thing, in my view.

Each time I've been to the Holy Land I've visited two places that tell some of that tale: Sepphoris, only a few miles from Nazareth, and, in Jesus' day, the "big city" of the Galilee region; and the Qumran community's site on the edge of the Jordan river valley. Both have the remains of "Anyone who has visited sacred sites in the Holy Land will have seen the Mikvah baths – they were used daily – not to clean off the grime of ordinary living away – there were regular baths for that; rather they were physical reminders of a desire for a spiritual purity. Today – among other reasons, Orthodox Judaism requires all converts to go through a Mikvah ritual.

Jesus was – among other things – cautioning his fellow Jews of the dangers of understanding their lives of faith in mechanical terms – that simply performing a ritual wasn't true faith. What was required, he said (as did John the Baptizer) was a change of heart, a shift in orientation that placed compassion at the center as the engine of our lives.

Jesus' followers had a lively debate around the role of water in baptism, and ended up going back, in part, to the very beliefs that Jesus challenged. The champion of going back was Augustine of Hippo in the 4th Century, who was convinced of the presence of original sin and saw in baptism a washing away the stain of that sin. The emperor Constantine, though he converted to Christianity in his early years, wasn't baptized until he lay on his death bed, so as to avoid the possibility of sinning before dying and thus forfeiting his entry into paradise. I suppose you can say that he spent his whole life looking for the two amber lights!

The Reformation hardened Augustine's view – we are sinners walking on the very edge of a precipice to the fiery pit of hell. Only baptism into Christ can help us!

There are strong residual elements of this belief in our own day – lay people are authorized to baptize an infant if they're in imminent danger of dying.

All of which is to say that the hope for certainty, predictability, and control continue to hold our imaginations and drive our behaviors to this day.

Today I want to invite you to set aside that desire for certainty, predictability and control, that view of baptism. There's no such thing out there, no amber lights that offer us certainty and predictability, and, I suppose, safety from the realities of life.

The end of today's gospel offers us a clue as to what baptism is really about, and it has two parts: the emersion in water, and the descent of the dove.

Water baptism is a transformational symbol that reflects an individual's decision to follow God. It says that each of us has chosen to align our lives with the God we have encountered in those lives. That so many of us didn't get to make this choice is why we renew the vows of baptism on

a regular basis; we're reminding ourselves that we have chosen, promised, and continue to promise to live in a certain way. Our responses spell out what that way of living looks like.

We use the Apostle's Creed with its "I" rather than the "We" of the Nicene Creed because we're remembering the "I-ness" of the decision each of us makes.

But I said there are two parts, and the other is about the dove, the Spirit. It is the Spirit that incorporates us into a community – the new community of the Risen One. While we make our vows as individuals, we commit ourselves in them to live in the context of that community.

And so we say "we will..." in response to the four questions, not "I will".

Certainty? Predictability? No. But whatever we do experience – be it a lost love, or a lost loved one; the vagaries of fate, the randomness of illness, or anything else, we don't do it alone, we have a place to come to, and people to turn to, who share our journey and stand beside us.

In that context, we will now renew our vows.