

“New and Different Life”
Sermon by Rev. Tom Warren, Pastor
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Donna Schaper is a United Church of Christ minister, who serves a church in New York City. She is also a writer for the “Still Speaking” daily devotional which arrives in my E-mail box each morning. In her January 6 devotional, Donna Schaper addressed an issue of New Year’s resolutions, and she declared that her 2016 New Year’s resolution would be to go on a diet, specifically to go on a social media diet—that is, she pledged to cut back on her computer and cell phone time, to cut back on her Facebook time, her time spent on Twitter, and Instagram, and all that cyberspace activity. She admitted in her devotional to having a certain level of “NOMO phobia”, that is, “no mobile phone phobia”. Now, that is not a problem for me. Oh, wait a minute. It says here to check my E-mail! It is a problem for lots of people. She asked the question in her devotional (admitting to “NOMO phobia”) “What would happen if I lost my cell phone? How would people find me? How would I get anywhere? How would I know what is going on in the world or at least in the cyber world? If I lost my phone, would I still exist?”

Ministers and theologians are not the only ones questioning our electronic addictions these days. So are economists and social scientists. Indeed, the economists Angus Deaton and Anne Case recently drew lots of attention from a paper they wrote that showed that since 1999 the mortality rate of white, middle-aged Americans has been on the rise. Over about the last 20 years, white, middle-aged Americans are dying at a faster rate while life expectancy in other countries and other groups in our own nation has been on the rise. Basically, this decline in life expectancy for white Americans is because, in increasing numbers, white Americans have been killing themselves. Suicide rates are up. Deaths from drug use, especially prescription opioids, are up, and chronic liver disease from excessive drinking is up.

Paul Krugman, who wrote into the New York Times, asked the question about this phenomena. He asked “What is causing this epidemic of self-destructive behavior?” and one answer that social scientists are providing is that white people in America are losing their life narrative. They are losing their life narrative; that is, the economic certainty of the American dream for middle class and working class Americans which has always been there is no longer a given. White Americans’ privileged economic position, through a variety of social and economic forces, is being lost, so we self-medicate and look at our cell phones, searching for a new life narrative.

Today, we have moved rather quickly from the birth of Jesus just 16 days ago to His adult baptism in the Jordan. We have passed over a span of 30 years in just two weeks. He was baptized in the Jordan, according to Luke, with a whole bunch of other people. We can assume that Jesus approached His baptism with humility and, one can imagine, with lost of faith and trust. He comes to the place where John is preaching a message of repentance and forgiveness of sins and, in so doing, John calls for a return of the selfless ways of caring for the poor and the weak. John the Baptist, before he baptized anybody, said if you’re going to get right with God, if you’re going to get right with this baptism, you need to take care of your brothers and sisters who are poor.

Now, Jesus submits himself to this cleansing ritual and, in so doing, He demonstrates publicly His trust in God, His desire to live a life aligned with God’s will and, at the same time, He dies to the claims of this world upon His life. The baptism of Jesus is many things but it is, most of all, the moment in which He claims for Himself a new life narrative, and He begins to invite others to join Him in this other way of living. Baptism is about claiming a new life narrative.

Now, baptism in the American church over the last 100 years has evolved into not much more than an insurance policy against hell or, for some, it is a magic trick to assure our favored status before God and, still for others, baptism is just a nice, private family ritual.

My colleague in the ministry, Ed Zumwinkel, talks about the many emergency room baptisms that he has done—some of them post mortem for babies who weren't going to make it. As a good pastor, Pastor Zumwinkel always saw the terror in the parents' eyes and did the baptisms as an act of pastoral care. One can only imagine the terror in a parent's eyes as they watch their newborn pass from this earth, but baptism is not primarily an insurance policy or a magic trick, or even a family ritual. Baptism, based on Jesus' baptism, is about the reclamation of our lives from the earthly powers of death. Baptism is about reclaiming a different path—a path of life through which we find communion with God and with one another. Baptism is about claiming a new life narrative for the way we are going to live and we are being told all the time "24/7" about what how we should live and about what we should want out of life. Baptism is about recognizing that the life narrative that the world offers us is always fleeting, always temporary, and typically idolatrous. The life narrative of our world is believe in yourself, get more stuff because you deserve it, and in this worldly life narrative, greed, vengeance and self-centeredness are the assumed tools of survival. This is the life narrative of fear.

Jesus said again and again to His disciples and again and again to us do not fear. There is a different life for you to live, and it is the life of life. It is the life of God. It is the life of healing for you, for your soul, and for your neighbor as you share that gospel message with those whom you meet.

So, remembering the baptism of Jesus is an opportunity for us to remember what baptism means for our lives. It is a liturgical ritual, but that is not simply what it is. It is this new path that we must again and again recommit to, so for most of us our day of baptism was a long, long time ago, and perhaps we don't remember it, and if we were baptized as infants, we certainly don't remember it, but in our new day, when life narratives provided by the world no longer work for us and work for fewer and fewer of us, it is time to re-embrace our life narrative in Christ.

Adults who are baptized in the United Church of Christ, like in many other churches, are asked some powerful and stunning questions upon baptism. They are questions, at their core, about what life narrative we are going to claim, so we ask them:

1. Do you renounce the powers of evil and desire the freedom of new life in Christ? Perhaps the doctrine of consumerism isn't working for you. Here is a new path. Jesus is calling you to get on his team.
2. Do you promise to follow in the ways of our Savior, resist oppression and evil, show love and justice, and to witness to the work and word of Christ? Self-interest, as an orientation for life, is a dead end. It leads nowhere. Jesus, in his baptism, offers us a new avenue of living.
3. Do you promise (a question from our book of worship) to grow in the faith and to serve the church and further Christ's mission in the world? This baptismal pledge is a call for a life of action.

So, what would happen to us if we lost our cell phones or if we made the conscious decision to go on a social media diet? Who would we be? Would we exist? What would our life narrative consist of? Our baptismal vows remind us that we would be, and are always (because of our baptism), a beloved child of God. We are loved unconditionally, and we are called to live a life narrative of freedom, love of neighbor and service to the least of these.

So, today we are reminded that the baptismal vows we have pledged our children to and that we have pledged our lives to is the life of new life, of reaching out, of being loved and sharing God's love with others, so today we give thanks for that new life narrative through the baptism of Jesus Christ. Amen.