

The Baptism of Our Lord – 2023

Isaiah 42:1-9

Romans 6:1-11

Matthew 3:13-17

We transfer lots of things. I used to transfer buses when I was playing a tennis tournament in Seattle (most of us want to get where we're going). The Deacon transferred credits from Crafton to Cal State (he was going to the academic Promised Land). The preschool children transfer their germs to me when I shake their hands before chapel (I'm convinced that their germs keep me healthy). Samuel loves it when his mother says to him, "I'll transfer some money into your account." I get a lot of phone calls on the church line which really aren't meant for me, so I transfer them to the school. The third baseman, upon fielding a groundball, transfers the ball from his glove hand to his throwing hand before hurling it across the diamond to first base. Jones asked for a transfer from Redlands to Keller TX and DHL transferred him. Heat can be transferred from the flame on the stove to the pot to the pease porridge in the pot (nine days old).

God told Israel that He was supremely interested in a bit of transference. It was a Yom Kippur event, radically consequential. Yom Kippur is Hebrew for "Day of Atonement" and The Day of Atonement was one of God's favorite days. It was pretty straightforward, this transference. Aaron, the High Priest, was to lay his hands on a goat and then he had to do something that probably none of us would want to do. The High Priest then had to confess over the goat all the sins, all the iniquities, all the transgressions of the people of Israel. Can you imagine the litany of filth that one would have to speak in our era if this Day of Atonement rite were still in force? My beloved bride transcribes police reports for the City of Colton. There is a very grim side to humanity. Just in the City of Colton, the crime, the victims, the sociopathic inhumanity of felons – it's enough to break your heart or turn your stomach. Our policemen know. There is something raw and evil and dark to our sinful nature. It pushes unholy boundaries to achieve unholy ends. And the High Priest had to confess, to speak aloud, the filth of sin's actions.

Transference; that's what was taking place. It is as though the High Priest's hands and his voice was a conduit to take the sin off of the sinners and put it on this goat, this scapegoat, the miserable animal that would be burdened with the sin of Israel. God instituted this event, this rite. Do you believe that God can take the sin off of a person and put it somewhere else? What was He showing the ancient Israelites? I've heard of one brother giving the other brother one of his kidneys. I've never heard of one brother trading his good set of lungs for the cancer-laden set that belongs to his chain-smoking brother or one sister swapping her good liver for her alcoholic sister's cirrhosis-riddled liver. As a kid, I watched Star Trek... religiously. There was plenty of religion on Star Trek. It was mostly bad religion, really bad, except for one episode.

Some goofy aliens kidnap Kirk, Spock, and McCoy. They torture them. They torture them to see if a woman, in the same captive spot, would risk her own well-being in order to heal them. She had the ability to absorb into herself the pain, the wounds, the unseen diseases of her patient – thus taking them away from the suffering individual. McCoy is tortured to the point of death. The sadistic aliens wanted to see if the female would sacrifice herself for another. Love vs. self-protection; how well do you do in that matrix? The female was mute, beautiful, and her name was Gem. She realized that to extend herself to McCoy would take her life and she was

conflicted, torn. To give or to protect oneself; how well do you do in that matrix? St. Paul wrote this: “Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:7-8 – NIV).

After the goat had all the sins of Israel transferred to it, it was cast out, exiled into the desert where it died. The death of the goat atoned for Israel’s sins. Sin must be punished. God hates sin; it is repugnant and it is to be dealt with, definitively crushed and, guess what, your sin is your sin. You don’t have the ability to transfer it – to a goat or an ash can or into the spiritual ether.

John the Baptist was calling sinners to repentance. “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 3:2). “Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins” (Matthew 3:5-6). And Jesus comes to the Jordan. Jesus comes to John. This is God Almighty; He has no sin to repent of. He is intrinsically and thoroughly holy. Jesus is good and righteous; Jesus is divine love and divine mercy; Jesus is a living sacrifice and living innocence. John is perplexed because he knows all this. Whoa, whoa, whoa cuz – “I need to be baptized by you and do you come to me?” (Matthew 3:14). Transference, Yom Kippur wasn’t on the Baptizer’s mind. Jesus came to the Jordan not to have sins washed off but to have sins washed on. “Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness” (Matthew 3:15). So said the true Scapegoat. The eternal Son of God was made man in order to be the “sin bearer.”

Imagine being the victim of every crime committed in Colton every day. Imagine all the filth of just one city over the course of one year being placed on one innocent victim. Imagine all those crimes being judged and mercilessly punished all at once. God transferred all sin of all people over the course of all time and placed them onto one innocent substitute. Jesus submitted to this transference in order to fulfill all righteousness, God’s righteousness. God hates sin but He loves you. Sinner though you are, God loves you and is willing, determined, to die for you. He loved you not after you were cleaned up and respectable. He loved you when you still wallowed in the filth of your own pigpen. And not just you; every human being you will ever see; and all those that you will never see. After Jesus was baptized, He was driven by the Spirit out into the desert where He was tempted by Satan (Luke 4:1-13). Ultimately, Jesus was led to the wilderness of the Holy Cross where life was barren and He was alone. Your sin was transferred to Him there; the sin you committed five years ago and the sin you will commit in February. In Him, sin was judged. In Him, sin was punished; all of it.

On Yom Kippur, what did the Israelites feel? I’ll tell you what they felt; they felt relief, gratitude, joy. We’ve all heard the stories of a cancer patient whose life is genuine imperiled by a grim diagnosis who then, without a rational explanation, is pronounced to be entirely cancer free. What does that person feel? You, dear, dear friend, you have had your sins taken away. God transferred them to the Lord of the Cross; you are free. That is grace. That is Christ in action. That is why Jesus was baptized – to begin to shoulder the impossible weight of all human iniquity. “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21 – NIV). You and I, we died to sin. How can we live in it any longer? (Romans 6:1-2). Relief, gratitude, and joy lead us out into this

world where Christ's matrix of love and sacrifice leads us to give to others as Christ has first given to us. That is living; that is an elevated life; that kind of life is a delight in and of itself; that is why we gather here – to receive His life and cherish that which makes us more than the carnal nature that lives in us.

On the cross, the Lord was mute and beautiful, the gem of our salvation. The Prophet Isaiah tells us that “like a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth” (Isaiah 53:7). He took your sin. He shed His blood. That blood washed you in baptism and made you holy. His holiness was transferred to you; His life has been transferred to you. Death has no dominion over Him (Romans 6:9). Death has no dominion over us. Do you know what does have dominion over us? Love has dominion over us. Grace has dominion over us. The resurrection of Christ has dominion over us. One last word of transference: “[God] has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of our sins” (Colossians 1:13-14).