

How I Gathered at the River

by Dave Hurlbert

When I decided to join the Episcopal Church I knew I had to be rebaptized. I told the parish priest my first baptism was invalid, since it had been performed on a pretentious and deceitful nine-year-old boy, and in a Baptist church.

My Episcopal parish priest was unsympathetic. He told me that baptism is something you only do once.

"But don't you see," I explained, "the first baptism wasn't real. It was artificial. It was a Southern Gothic fantasy."

"It was real," he assured me, "as real as a funeral and a birth."

"Fine words," I thought, privately.

I was baptized when I was nine years old. My reason: I wanted to take part in the mysterious and sophisticated monthly Communion, called "The Lord's Supper."

On these occasions ushers passed brightly polished stainless steel trays around to the adults in the congregation. The trays were filled with exquisite bread pellets. Even fancier trays followed, each of these bearing elfin-sized glass cups of grape juice. You were supposed to munch the pellet and sip the juice with a delicate solemnity, then clink the little glass (just a nearly silent clink!) into a receptacle mounted on the back of the pew in front of you.

After playacting the chewing, sipping, and clinking on my own, in front of the bathroom mirror, I decided it was time to enjoy the actual experience.

This meant I had to succeed in three preliminaries: talk with the church pastor, respond to an "altar call" at church, and finally be baptized on an Easter Sunday. I was afraid of each step, but with courage that surprises me to this day, I was determined to complete the process.

The pastoral chats were thrilling. What better forum for an effeminate, loquacious nine-year-old boy? I was encouraged to go on at great length about my opinions and beliefs, which gave me the chance to practice my new Christian vocabulary. I particularly enjoyed recounting how Jesus had been persistently knocking on my heart, and how we were now engaged, just the two of us, in a cozy walk together.

Responding to the altar call presented a hazard. At the end of each church service the pastor made an appeal for sinners to come forward to the altar, renounce their sins, and turn their lives over to Jesus. The background music to this ritual was provided by the congregation and choir, who invariably sang "Just As I Am."

I had been taught, and I truly believed, that walking up the aisle during this moment would produce a profound spiritual change within me. I knew that the standard firsthand description of this event was "I am a changed person."

I was uncertain what this change would be. I suspected it would make me even sweeter and more polite than I already was, and that the meaning of my new Christian vocabulary would become evident. This frightened me. I certainly did not want some ethereal being knocking on my physical heart, and I wasn't sure I really did want to walk and talk with Jesus - I couldn't begin to think about topics for our conversations.

I walked up to the altar one Sunday, confessed my boyish/girlish sins, and turned my life over to Jesus. To my surprise, it was all rather a formality. There was no mystical moment. Jesus did not enter my heart (which was a relief, since I was beginning to understand a bit about biology). I was not changed. Either I had been seriously misinformed about this experience, or I had in some way failed.

My older brother, Donnie, asked me directly, "How do you feel now?"

"I feel like a totally different person," I said, with a smilingly aloof air.

I sensed that I was now part of a nice big sugary lie. I wanted to stop the baptism process. I didn't care any more about the delicacies on the Communion platters. I no longer believed in the food and wine they contained. But I was afraid of the shame I would bring to myself and my family if I backed out. So I went ahead and got baptized.

I hoped that during my baptism I would actually see Jesus, underwater, and become a true Christian, in spite of everything. I was uncertain how this would work itself out in the details, but I tried to hold on to what I was told was my "faith."

My church did everything they could to beautify this baptism. Since we were far from a river, an artificial River Jordan was created up behind the altar, a glass-fronted aquarium for people, complete with astro-turf grass, plastic lilies and an artificial palm tree.

This stage set filled me with dread. "God won't come here," I thought. I made the sentence into a mantra, which I repeated as my father helped me change, in a back room, into my expendable sportcoat, slacks, and clip-on tie.

On a musical cue from the Wurlitzer, I was led into the aquarium, to be greeted by the preacher, standing in the water in green hip-high boots.

I wondered what would happen to me if the preacher held me under the water for even a minute too long. I also wondered about Jesus, whether or not he would show up to greet me the moment I was dunked.

The ceremony lasted less than a minute.

Verses from the Bible were recited; I was held by the preacher, behind my head and on the small of my back, and immersed in the water for several seconds, then retrieved.

There was no Jesus.

I was led back, wet, to the anteroom, where my father helped me change into dry clothes: another sportcoat, slacks, and clip-on tie. I knew, getting dressed, that something very sad, something terrible, had just happened. It was a lie I now shared with my father, and one I would begin sharing with the rest of my family and the rest of the church, just as soon as I put on dry clothes.

In spite of this I was satisfied, for some years, by taking part in The Lord's Supper. I'd paid the price of entry. And I knew Jesus was living in my heart as well as anyone else's, which to my mind was not really at all.

I left the Baptists when I was sixteen, after sipping from the tiny crystal glasses lost its glamor. When I returned to the church, many years later, it was not to the Baptists, but to the Episcopalians. My motivation for this, as a mature adult, was that high-church Anglicanism was as far away as I could get from the astro-turfed banks of the River Jordan.

I wonder now and then if I am a true Episcopalian, in spite of my Confirmation by the bishop himself at Grace Cathedral. I have a disturbing fear that I'm simply a failed Southern Baptist. My baptism as a boy was not false; I was. It was a rite of passage that I couldn't - or refused - to acknowledge.

I didn't see Jesus underwater, but He certainly saw me. I hope He was smiling at me and my sad flaws back then, and I pray He's still smiling at us now.

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