

BORN INTO A TRADITION

Mother Church

It is a balmy Sunday evening in a quaint brick church on a hill in the center of Ashland, New Hampshire. I am just three years old, seated in a pew next to my mother, my brother Philip flanking her on the other side. My father stands erect, as always, behind the pulpit. The sun dips low in the western sky, casting a golden glow through the stained glass windows. Soon night falls, the singing stops, and my father begins to preach. My head, nestled against my mother's cushiony shoulder, rolls automatically over onto her lap. Mother strokes my hair absentmindedly, her hand pausing to caress my brow. Soon I am fast asleep, utterly secure.

Suddenly, the sermon is over, and the last hymn is being sung. Mother remains seated, honoring the burden on her lap. The sound of the music startles me to consciousness, and I begin to cry. I am sure, at this writing, that my reaction is not just a startle reflex but an instinctive response to the music which is already so "home," so familiar to me.

I still cry in church at the music. A vision sweeps over me of the heavenly throng, "lost in wonder, love, and praise." It is part of the primal vision of my life.

Cradled by mother and father, by mother church, I never knew anything but unwavering trust in the God of heaven and in these lesser gods of earth. I was a Christian; I didn't need to "get saved." It was puzzling when people asked me, "Are you saved?" Saved from what? From hell? I knew better. My Dad was a preacher, but not of the sort to preach hellfire and damnation in order to scare people into faith.

Born Into Faith in the Womb

I wasn't converted as a child, either. I used to envy people at church who told riveting stories of a life in sin until they met Christ and radically changed. I had no such story to relate.

Nor did the term "born again" register with me. I was born into the Christian faith. All my life I have felt a gravitational pull Godward. The bedtime stories my parents told me made Daniel and Joseph and Ruth and Esther and David and Samuel as real to me as my childhood playmates. It became utterly natural for me to adopt the words of the psalmist in Psalm 22 as my own:

*I have been entrusted to you ever since I was born;
you were my God when I was still in my mother's womb.*

Is My Sin Original?

Another disturbing strand appeared in the tapestry of my life quite early. Parents and teachers talked of “original sin,” making it sound as though sin were ingrained in my nature. The words of Psalm 51 reinforced this thought: I have been wicked from my birth, a sinner from my mother’s womb.

I instinctively shrank from these words, not wanting to take them in as true. My “mother’s womb” harbored a conflict: was I God’s child from birth, or desperately wicked?

My contemporary Episcopal friends escaped this conflict. They were carried into the church as infants and held over the baptismal font as the priest placed the sign of the cross on their forehead, intoning the solemn words: *“You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ’s own forever.”*

But my parents were Baptist, my father a minister, and our doctrine declared that I was born in sin and must wait until I reached the “age of accountability” to make a clear conscious choice. Baptism was not something being done to me and sponsored by my parents; I would walk into the baptismal waters voluntarily. It was presupposed that baptism was the sign of a previous personal encounter with Jesus Christ.

I wrack my brain to conjure up a memory of such an encounter, but the mind draws a blank. Rather, I must rely on my mother’s story which she has told over the years. How shall I own that which I do not remember? Conversely, why should I question that which she recalls with such assurance?

“Let Me Into the Story”

As she tells it, on an April Sunday afternoon during nap time I came into the room where she and my father were resting. I was six years old at the time. I crawled up onto the bed, crying. When my parents asked me what I wanted, I said I wanted to ask Jesus into my heart. There did not seem to be any clear antecedent to this expressed wish—like a recent punishment for something I had done wrong.

It sounds like a Samuel experience, whom God called in the night by name. Like Samuel, I had been prayed for before conception. His life growing up in the temple was not totally unlike my life in the minister’s family, immersed in the life of the churches Dad pastored.

I take my mother’s story at face value, and wonder about the resonance of the experience within my own child mind and heart. In retrospect, I see it as one of a long series of experiences in my life which speak to an inner sense of belonging to God. But to my parents, it was a watershed. For me, the ensuing ritual was etched indelibly on my consciousness. A baptism was planned for a Sunday in June—the earliest possible in that cold New England climate since baptisms took place in a lake

Immersed—in my Father’s Arms

My brother and I awoke before dawn; we slithered out of our beds, our bare feet hitting the cold wooden floor of our parsonage home. There would be no fire in the pot-bellied wood stove until later, so I hurried to get dressed. I pulled on my scratchy wool bathing suit, then Mother slid a white organdy dress over it—sign of a special occasion. I went along with the preparations cheerfully, a little excited, not fully aware of what lay ahead. The impact of entering the waters of a New Hampshire lake at six o’clock in the morning of the sixth of June had not yet registered in my six-year-old brain.

My brother and I huddled in blankets in the back seat of our ‘29 Chevy as it bumped its way along a woodland track toward the lake. We pulled into a clearing, making room for other cars which began to appear. I jumped out of the car and stepped onto the narrow beach. Soon a small cluster of church people gathered and my father began wading cautiously into the water.

My brother and one or two others preceded me. Soon my turn came. Guided by my father, I waded into the frigid waters, shivering and trembling. Dad held me in his arms and gently lowered me under the water, slowly repeating the ancient words, *“I baptize thee in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.”*

For a moment I panicked, as the water swirled over me, though I felt the strong comfort of my father’s arms. Then I was lifted clear of the waves, and I burst into tears. On the shore, my mother stood watching, as shafts of sunlight slanted through the tall pines, glinting on the surface of the lake. She was singing "Sunrise Tomorrow." Hand in hand with my father I walked back to shore, where he spoke the ritual words which were his signature at baptisms:

*Lord, it has been done as thou hast commanded; and yet there is room.
What hinders thee from being baptized? If thou believest with all thy heart,
thou mayest.*

Then Mother shuttled me into the car quickly to change clothes.

An odd detail imprints the occasion on my memory. The organdy dress I had worn for the baptism was given me by twins, so I had received two identical dresses. I now donned the second one, which was dry. At church later that morning, friends who had seen me at the baptism gasped, seeing the same dress, but completely dry. I took wry pleasure in this little trick.

The following Wednesday evening, I was received into membership of the church. This meant giving my testimony before the group assembled. I rehearsed carefully, and when my turn came, I stood up, grasped the railing of the chair in front of me and blurted out the words I had been taught, “I’m glad I’m saved,” and began to cry.

Now I would no longer be passed over on communion Sundays when the little squares of bread and cups of grape juice were distributed. It was the consummate rite de passage in the Baptist tradition, which only celebrates communion once a month, not weekly like the sacramental confessions.

I do not know what to name my experience. None of the usual metaphors seemed to fit—being converted, saved, born again. I had a foggy notion that what I needed to be saved from was my willful tendency to disobey my parents. I was too young to have any concept of rebirth. I had simply knocked on a door, asking to be let inside. I wanted to be where my mother and father were, and this seemed to be where Jesus was. All I had to do was ask, and the door had opened and I had been enfolded in loving arms. My tears tell me that it was a movement on my part that deeply mattered, but I could not have said why.