

December 15, Advent 3C (Luke 3:7-18)

I am struck by just how different my baptism prep process is from John the Baptist's.

by [Nadia Stefko](#) in the [December 2024](#) issue

Published on December 9, 2024

At the small suburban parish I serve, we don't offer a formal baptism preparation class. Instead, I sit down with a family or two at a time to discuss and prepare for the sacrament. Typically we meet in the church nursery, so the infant or toddler candidate can play as the parents and I talk.

After some introductory chat—during which I ask the parents to share why they seek baptism for this child, in this church, at this time—I have us open the Book of Common Prayer, and we read through the baptismal covenant together.

The covenant has two primary parts. First come the belief questions (aka, the Apostles' Creed in Q&A form); then follow the behavior questions: "Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship? . . . Will you persevere in resisting evil? . . . Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?" And so on.

After we've read it through, I ask them: How did that feel? What questions do you have? Are there any parts of the covenant that feel hard for you to profess publicly?

Almost invariably, at least one parent will say, in a sort of hushed, confessional tone, "Well . . . I struggle with the virgin birth part." Or "the bodily resurrection part." Or "that part about how he will come again to judge the living and the dead." Sometimes they even ask me, as if I have some sort of final authority on the matter, "Do I really have to believe that?"

We talk about those things for a while. I wonder with them what need or concern each of these historic Christian beliefs might have grown out of. We talk about theology or cosmology or biblical interpretation. We go on like this until the parents or child (or both!) get restless.

While parents' specific concerns vary, they tend largely toward the first part of the baptismal covenant: the belief questions. I rarely get asked about the behavior questions, about what it means to resist evil, to "seek and serve Christ in all persons," or to "strive for justice and peace among all people." Perhaps that's because the parents feel more confident about the latter set of questions. Or maybe they simply consider me less of an authority on them.

In any case, I am struck by just how different my baptism prep process is from John the Baptist's in this week's gospel text. For starters, there's his rather unfriendly greeting of those who come to him as "vipers," along with his pastorally insensitive presumption that he already knows why they seek baptism (to flee the wrath to come!). And from there, he turns the conversation—well, still more of a monologue—immediately to the behavior questions. (Will you "bear fruits worthy of repentance"?) John just doesn't seem all that interested in what people profess publicly to believe. He's much more interested in how they are going to live differently as a result of the baptism he offers.

Once his baptismal candidates get up the courage to ask good questions—"What, then, should we do?"—John is unsparing in his response: Share your spare coat (and yes, more than one coat counts as having a spare). Share your food. Don't extort anyone, for anything. Be satisfied with your wages. I find myself wondering how these responses would go over with my upper-middle-class suburban baptismal families. If this is how John responds to tax collectors and soldiers, how would he respond to the attorneys, university professors, marketing executives, and investment bankers who come to me for baptism? How would he advise them to live differently within the world they inhabit?

I probably won't shift my baptism prep pattern too much in the direction of John's. As someone who presented my own young children for baptism just a few years ago, I'm aware of what a countercultural move it is these days to seek baptism at all. And I don't want to scare people away (again unlike John, it seems). That's because I genuinely believe in the difference it makes—in the midst of our polarized, self-centered, achievement-oriented culture—to raise children in Christian community.

But, inspired by John, I do want to spend more of the precious few hours I have with these busy, beautiful, exhausted parents talking about the "so what" of the life we are empowered to live by virtue of the grace of baptism. Not a monologue, but a conversation. How can we proclaim the Good News with our lives and raise our children to do the same? How can we use our platforms to point the way to the

liberating love of Jesus? Perhaps I'll start assigning this text from Luke as advance reading for my baptism families, and we'll see how it shapes what we talk about in the nursery.