

Jump for Joy, Spit on the Devil  
Psalm 68:1-10, 32-35  
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Several years ago, my friend Pilar was baptized as an adult. I was so eager to be present for her baptism that I drove from Cleveland to New York to attend, and almost didn't make it due to my one and only motorcycle accident. But I did arrive, and sat near the front of the church, eager to celebrate with her this amazing once in a lifetime event, an event for her that came after more than two decades of atheism, and endless conversations about the merits of the Christian life. And so the moment in the service came...and went. Some water was sprinkled, some words were said, but I've seen more excitement and celebration when an office photocopier starts working again. Where was the victory? Where was the drama? Where was the joy? I doubt she even remembers her baptism, and I am grieved about what I do remember of it, and so, since that moment, I have tried to make every baptism a special event that reflects the specialness of the occasion.

There are so many things to celebrate about baptism that it is hard to know where to begin. Surely we celebrate God's grace that brings us into relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Truly, we celebrate the entrance into the family of God and the communion of the saints. Eagerly, we recall our own baptisms, even as uninspired as they may have been, and celebrate that they were no less powerful for the casualness of the one who sprinkled the water. Yes, there are many things

to celebrate at the time of baptism, but one of my favorites is the defeat of evil it represents, no less the evil in our hearts than the evil of the world. Baptism celebrates our dying and rising in Jesus Christ, a dying and rising possible only through Christ. Without Christ, it is impossible to die to sin, only to die in sin, and without Christ, it is not possible to rise, either from the grave, or into righteousness. It is through the power of the cross that God's enemies, the enemies of life, are defeated. That is why I chose Psalm 68 for this service of baptism, a psalm which celebrates, and calls us to celebrate, the power and victory of God over every foe that would stand against the life God gives us in Jesus Christ.

Psalm 68 is not the most pleasant of the Psalms, especially if you read the all the verses. In fact, it is quite disturbing with images of shattered heads, feet bathed in blood, foes eaten by dogs, and that sort of thing. But more important than the violence for which King David pleads is the characterization of God and the reaction of God's people to God power and mercy. In just the verses we heard we learn of David's confidence in a God who is victorious over all comers, who rides on the very clouds, who is the father of orphans and protector of widows, who provides shelter for the poor, and who causes the earth to quake, just to name a few of God's accomplishments. Now, you may not be fond of the violent and militaristic language of this psalm, but you have to admit it is nice to have an overwhelmingly superior God on your side, and one who is concerned with the

poor and helpless on top of that. And that gives us a clue about the celebratory language of the psalm, and how we might employ it tonight.

Yes, it is true that David seeks God's victory over his enemies, but I don't think that the word "enemies" needs to be limited to an advancing army, or those who would conspire to assassinate the king. No, the enemies that God's drives out like so much smoke, and melts like so much wax are also poverty, and abuse, and environmental degradation. They are violence and fear and control. They are unjust laws, and subtle discrimination, and outright racism. If you've ever wondered how you can connect with the ancient and violent language of the psalms, just recast David's enemies as the enemies of the voiceless and powerless and disenfranchised, and you'll begin to feel his outrage, and pain, but also his joy at having a God who can overcome all of that. That is something worth celebrating!

You will remember that it was this same David who danced when the Ark of the Covenant was in the last stages of its journey to Jerusalem. The book of Second Samuel tells us the ark was brought from Obed-edom with "rejoicing" and so I think we may safely assume that David was dancing in celebration, celebrating both the actual entrance of the ark, but also what the ark represented: the promises of God's covenant. It was those promises that brought God's people out of bondage and oppression to a place of blessing, in the words of the Psalm: "Rain in abundance, O God, you showered abroad; you restored your heritage when it languished; your flock found a dwelling in it; in your goodness, O God, you

provided for the needy.” Therefore, “Let the righteous be joyful; let them exult before God; let them be jubilant with joy,” to rearrange the order of the verses just a little. It is no wonder David danced, and bewildering why we don’t dance more. But that comes a little later.

It is the same divine promise of deliverance from bondage and oppression we celebrate in baptism, both the bondage and oppression experienced in our own lives, but also how they are experienced in the world. We celebrate how wonderful it is to have the almighty God on our side, while recognizing that we are called to make sure we are always on God’s side. And make no mistake about it, our sin, and the sin we see in the world are linked. But so too are linked the grace in our lives, and the hope that lives in the world. And so we commit ourselves to acting on God’s promises. In the traditional baptismal liturgy, there is a section that doesn’t get used frequently, although it is rich in symbolism and power. That section is called the Renunciations, and it typically precedes the profession of faith that those about to be baptized, or the parents of those about to be baptized, make. The words go like this, and listen for the echoes of Psalm 68:

Do you renounce all evil, and powers in the world, which defy God’s  
righteousness and love?  
I renounce them  
Do you renounce the ways of sin that separate you from the love of God?  
I renounce them

Now, in the early church, and still today in the Eastern Orthodox churches, especially in the Greek church, there is an additional part of the liturgy I think is

worth remembering. Those about to be baptized are instructed to turn to the west to offer their renunciations, the west being the location of the setting sun, the growing darkness, the symbol for the evil they are renouncing. Following the renunciations, they spit three times facing west, spit on the devil and his powers, spit on the sin they are leaving behind, spit on the death which would claim them without Jesus Christ. Then, they turn to the east, where the sun rises like the light of Christ in the world, and profess their faith, embrace their new life, and celebrate what God has done in them.

I don't know about you, but that sounds a lot like Psalm 68, with David spitting on his enemies, and jumping for joy. And I wonder if it wouldn't be a helpful image, or even practice, for us to employ when faced with, say, the morning's newspaper, or the boss's tirade, or the neighborhood bully's extortion, or the hopelessness that creeps into our lives moment by moment, hour by hour, day by dragging day, in a thousand small, uncaring ways. We don't need to wait for a baptism to renounce sin and spit on evil, and we don't need to wait for a baptism to affirm our faith and promise to be on God's side. So, why don't we give it a try? Stand up everybody! Name the evil that most scares you. Go on, name it. Now, turn and face to the west and spit on the devil and his evil. OK, maybe do that in your backyard or on the street so the Baptists don't decide we are the enemy. For tonight, give it a little spittleless ptew. But then face to the east and

affirm that God will overcome it, and that you promise to be a part of overcoming it. Then celebrate, and jump for joy and dance like David.

Tonight we have the opportunity to celebrate Keila Porras' baptism in a special way. I'm told by her mother that she loves to dance, so it is appropriate that we welcome the Grupo Danzas Davidicas de la Casa del Padre to dance to God's glory and in honor of her baptism, and indeed all of our baptisms. May this celebration be as memorable as the God who has made it all possible through the love and grace of Jesus Christ. Amen.