

Anastatic Anabaptists

Made alive and empowered to preach peace

Texts: Col. 2:9–15; Acts 10:34–43

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I invite you to engage your imaginations and join me at a great baptismal celebration as it might have happened in the early church. Some of us arrive in tattered and stained rags, spotted and wrinkled (to use the biblical jargon), others in the ostentatious glitter of self-indulgence—both uniforms of our old way of living. We have encountered Jesus, and have heard God preaching peace through him, as Peter says to Cornelius in Acts 10. We have accepted the offer of peace, and now come to be baptized.

We strip off our old clothes and enter the water, immersing ourselves or being dunked by a baptizer. In entering the watery grave we become one with Jesus in his death, and he with us in ours. We are then raised up out of this tomb of water, sputtering for air, gasping for the wind of God, eagerly inhaling the oxygen of new life. To signify our birth to new life we now put on brand new clothes, the uniform of the new creation in which we now participate with our newfound brothers and sisters. With them we have now become part of the Messiah. We are “in Christ,” or, as Col. 3:10 puts it, we have “put on” Christ, the new human created in the image of God. But let’s note carefully: in doing so we now not only identify with Christ’s death, we identify also with his resurrection. Hear Paul’s unforgettable words from an earlier letter: “So if anyone is in Christ, creation is new! Everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” (2 Cor. 5:17).

In this baptismal celebration we participate in the birthing of new creation, in the bringing into existence of a people who were

once “no people,” without hope and without God (1 Pet. 2:9–10; Eph. 2:11–22). This is an event far more momentous than a calendar shift from one millennium to the next. It is nothing less than the future breaking into the present, the new humanity taking shape in and around us. But there is more: this new humanity has been drawn into the messianic peacemaking activity of God. To be in Christ, to share in his resurrection, is to be empowered by God to be witnesses to and participants in God’s preaching of peace (Acts 10:36; Eph. 2:13–18).

I

Not many of us have had the privilege of experiencing baptism as a messy, clumsy dunking. I have. And I have come to cherish not least the clumsiness and messiness of it all. Birth is like that.

Let me invite you to shift your focus from then to now. Baptism is a core ritual among us Anabaptists. Of course not many of us here have had the great privilege of experiencing baptism as a messy, wet, and sometimes clumsy dunking, followed by trying to catch our breath and groping for a firm footing while not looking too silly. I have. And I have come to cherish not least the clumsiness and messiness of it all. Birth is like that. But I suspect not one of us was baptized, even if by immersion, stripped of all our clothing. Yet we can imagine it. And we can imagine how such a ritual would have imprinted itself on the minds of early believers who went through this dramatic ritual. Baptism is a drama about going from death to life—from the old way of living to a new way of living, from the culture of death to the culture of life, from the lordship of evil to the lordship of Christ, from powerlessness to powerfulness.

As I said, baptism is a core ritual for Anabaptists. I think it would be fair to say that for us baptism has become chiefly a rite of entry into the body of the church, a rite of induction into a community of worship and service. It is also understood to be, second, a step of obedience to Christ, an expression of willingness to take on the life of discipleship, peacemaking, and service.

All this is true, and warrants being emphasized again and again. But underemphasized, if not often entirely absent from our

celebrations of baptism, is the sense that baptism is a moment of deep identification with Christ. It is an enactment of dying with Christ. It is also—and this is of critical importance—a moment of identification with his resurrection! Being baptized means being raised with Christ through the life-giving energy of God, as Colossians has it (2:12). Not only did God raise Jesus. We have been raised together with Christ! Easter has become a reality for us, too. We who were once the walking dead are not only alive, but we have now found new footing as human beings being remade in God's image. We are standing!—standing with power to be witnesses to the resurrection, fully implicated in the messianic task of preaching peace.

How to capture this in words that speak directly to us as Anabaptists? You might think it whimsical, but why not “Anastatic Anabaptists?” Anastatic? What on earth does that mean? Why not “ecstatic Anabaptists”? We know what that means, even if it is a bit of an oxymoron. Are you sure you don't mean “antistatic” Anabaptists—“*die Stillen im Lande*,” the “quiet in the land”? Or why not just leave it at “static” Anabaptists? We also know what that means, even if it hardly makes for a sermon topic—unless, of course, we mean Anabaptists who create static, troublers of the peace. Did not Jesus say something like that? “Think not that we have come to bring peace! We have come to create static!” (cf. Matt. 10:34).

It turns out that that is, in fact, one of the meanings of “anastatic.” “Anastatic” is simply an adaptation of the Greek verb *anistēmi*, which means “to rise” or “stand up,” or “to raise,” or “raise up,” and in the extreme case, “to bring to life.” And it can even mean “to rise up” or “rebel against.” Easter should have a bit of that edge to it, don't you think? The noun *anastasis* means “rising,” “awakening,” or “resurrection.” I think we should add “uprising.”

It's true, I could just as well have used “resurrectionist Anabaptists.” Next to Conrad Grebel College on the campus of the University of Waterloo is a college founded by an order of priests known as Resurrectionists. Wonderful name, isn't it? What if, during this time of Mennonite restructuring, merging, and dividing, we had called ourselves “Resurrectionists North” and “Resurrectionists South”? Such a name you can live towards.

For today, I like “anastatic” better. It goes together with Anabaptists. Besides, I didn’t make it up. James McClendon speaks in his *Systematic Theology* of ethics in the “sphere of the *anastatic*,” ethics informed by Easter (*Ethics*, vol. 1, *Systematic Theology* [Nashville: Abingdon, 1986], 242–75). Anastatic Anabaptists are people who are “standing again,” who have been awakened from sleep, raised to new life, who in life and word are witnesses to the reality of Easter, and, finally, whose confidence and power derives from Easter and the one who made it happen. I am reminded of a fragment of what appears to be a baptismal challenge in Eph. 5:14. It may just as well be a choice bit of peace preaching—the evangel in a nutshell:

*“Sleeper, wake up!
Rise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you.”*

II

I suspect some of you are restless with this emphasis on resurrection. You will rightly remind me that the church struggled mightily in the early decades and centuries of its life with those who insisted that the resurrection had already taken place, whose life and faith were therefore in mortal danger of losing touch with reality. Furthermore, you will remind me that as Anabaptists we are more familiar with humble service, with suffering—with the cross—as the categories of faithful life between our baptism and our anticipated resurrection. We are wary of too enthusiastic an assessment of the Christian life, too idealistic a view of the church. We keep trying to figure out whether spots and wrinkles are a fashion statement reflective of our humanity or something to be removed in the interests of it.

I do not disagree with Paul and others in the early church who were decisive in their rejection of an over-enthusiastic interpretation of Easter. If only that were our problem! If many early believers had a hard time keeping their feet on the ground, *our* problem is more likely to be having a hard time getting up off the ground, learning to stand again, and then knowing what it is to walk in the light of the resurrection of Christ and the certainty

of the great uprising to come. Our problem, I fear, is not so much that we need to be reminded that we are to wear the new uniform in a still dirty world. Our problem is that we're not sure we want to hand in the old uniform for a new one at all.

III

Brothers and sisters, we need to come to terms with Easter, with what Easter means for us, now. Our witness to Christ is at stake.

Forgiveness is not the offer of impunity. To be forgiven is not to walk out of court with the sheepish grin of those who got off scot-free. To be forgiven is to be released in order to become full participants in God's reclaiming and mending of the world.

The force of our witness depends on it. The confidence with which we engage in the costly task of peacemaking is based on it. Our ability to stand up to the powers depends on it. Our ability to rise up against the powers is premised on our being raised up with Christ. Our courage to face the cross depends on our knowing in our very gut the reality of new life. In short, the great uprising in God's future is meant already now to inform our uprising in the present.

If we are not anastatic, if we are not resurrectionist, discipleship and peacemaking will be chiefly a matter of obligation, discipline, and servitude, performed with the requisite amount of self-denial. In other words, discipleship and peacemaking will be a task we undertake on our own steam. That may look very Mennonite, very Anabaptist, but it is not informed by Easter, and thus betrays our baptism. How ironic!

Yes, without doubt the cross awaits us who have been raised with Christ in baptism. Yes, Good Friday surely looms on our horizon if we are truly preachers of peace cut from the same cloth as was Jesus. But what we learn from texts such as Colossians is that Easter precedes Good Friday for those who have been brought to life with Christ. Only so can we participate in the sufferings of our Lord with confidence and hope. Only so can we participate in the conflictual preaching of peace with joy and hope. Listen to the sequence in Paul's words in Phil. 3:10–11: "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if

somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.” Do you notice the sequence? Resurrection→Suffering→Resurrection. With Paul we look to the holy task of preaching and making peace, to the cross, with the power of the resurrection on our minds and in our guts, even as we still await the coming day, the resurrection of the dead.

First, we need Easter on our minds because we need to be able to view our world from the vantage point of Easter. We need to see ourselves, each other, the church, church institutions, our

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enemies, and the structures of our society in light of the knowledge that death will not have the last word. We need to think and reflect on our world with the premise that the energy of the resurrecting God who raised Christ from the dead is giving us and the world around us new life. The savior is the creator! The creator is the savior! Learning to

think with such radical hope and openness to divine surprises does not come easily. Such Easter-consciousness will give us a witness that is rich and profound, a gospel that encompasses the fate of each individual as well as the very rudiments of culture, a gospel that speaks to and engages the world in its complex brokenness. That is why we need Easter on our minds.

Second, we need Easter in our gut because the witness to Easter and the peace it proclaims is costly. It takes guts, it takes courage to make and preach peace. We need to know in our gut that the God who raised Christ from the dead has raised us with him. We need to know the power of his resurrection in our gut in order to proclaim the good news.

IV

Our Colossians text identifies two dimensions of this good news: one relates to sin and forgiveness, the other to the powers.

In Christ we have each been offered forgiveness. As our text tells us, God has nailed the charge against us on the cross. To translate literally, we have been “graced,” a term broader in scope than forgiveness. A central element in evangelism, not? Forgiveness is, according to our text, one of God’s powerful practices.

But Easter reminds us that forgiveness is *not* the centre of the good news we preach. Being graced with respect to our trespasses and our trespassing means having God clear the decks so we can stand again as individuals and, most especially, as the people of God. God forgives us so we can rise up and learn to walk as sons and daughters of God. Forgiveness is not the offer of impunity. To be forgiven is not to walk out of court with the sheepish grin of those who got off scot-free. To be forgiven is to be released in order to become full participants in God's reclaiming and mending of the world. As Paul reminds us in that other great baptism text, Romans 6, in baptism we have not only become members of Christ in his death and resurrection, but we have thereby put our members wholly at God's disposal, as "weapons of justice" (6:13). To be raised up is to become part of the uprising against the powers that resist the creator's loving attempts to recreate the cosmos (cf. Eph 6:10–20).

In that last comment lies finally a hint of the extent of the gospel as envisioned in our Colossians text. To witness to the resurrection is to witness to the fact that God is bringing the new creation into existence in us, in the church, and indeed in the world. That is why the powers emerge necessarily at this point in the text. "Powers" is mega-language; it is meant to signify that God's love for the world extends beyond you and me and our puny sins to the very structures and forces that govern our culture of destructive and dehumanizing "-isms." Our gospel, if it is rooted in Easter, will necessarily reflect such comprehensiveness and engage the world accordingly (cf. 1 Cor. 15:23–27; Eph. 6:10–20).

We must be careful here: our being raised up with Christ in baptism is not yet all there is. If this is all we have hoped for, we are fools, Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15 (see especially vv. 12–19). Paul and his associates were not stupid. They were realistic about the conflictual nature of preaching peace in this still broken world. They were realistic also about the preachers of peace. Realism means being realistic about what we're up against and also about ourselves as preachers of peace. Our uniforms, however new, are often tarnished and stained; there is no denying it.

But, and this is a very big "but," realism in light of Easter means assessing reality in light of God's victory over death, and it

means living with faith in the energy of the God who raised Jesus, as Col. 2:12 puts it. We turn our back on Easter and we betray our baptism if we do not already now rise up in the power of God, if we do not already now stand against the powers of darkness. Yes, Colossians claims the powers have already been paraded as the vanquished in a great victory procession (2:15). But as Ephesians 6 reminds us, the life of those who have been raised with Christ is marked by intense struggle against precisely those same powers. We should not mistake the vision of a victory parade in Col. 2:15 as something other than what we read over and over again in the Bible in other conflicts, before the battle commences: “Behold, I have given them into your hands!”

Colossians represents precisely such assurance to us who have been raised to participate in the messianic task. We enter the costly and often messy struggle for peace with Easter behind us and before us.

V

I want to conclude with the words of the risen Lord to Paul as recorded in Acts 26. Echoing much of what I have been saying, they are a fitting challenge to all Anastatics: “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. But get up and stand on your feet; for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you to serve and testify to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you. I will rescue you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.”

Let me recall the words of Paul from Philippians 3, which I read earlier, and invite you to share his yearning: “We want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow we may attain the resurrection from the dead.”

So I invite you to be Anastatic Anabaptists, Resurrectionist Anabaptists, powerful witnesses, joining the risen Christ in preaching peace to the far and near (Eph. 2:13–18). Our baptism calls us and prepares us for the task.

But baptism is not our only dramatic moment of identification with the risen Lord. Peter tells Cornelius in Acts 10 that not everyone has been entrusted with the task of witnessing, but only those “who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead” (10:41). Mennonites are people of food. That should predispose us to a deep appreciation for communion. It is not only the death of Christ we recall at the Lord’s Supper. We recall that death this side of Easter. We commune with the *risen* Lord. Nothing binds us closer to that risen Lord than to have eaten and drunk with him. Nothing binds us closer to his mission than to dine and drink with him over and over again. So, I invite you as hungry Anastics to come and “break the bread of new creation” and “drink the wine of resurrection” (*Hymnal: A Worship Book*, #272). Amen.