

Baptism of Jesus
Genesis 1:1-5; Acts 19:1-7; Mark 1:4-11
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Pastor John R. Pederson
Augustana Lutheran Church
Denver, Colorado

In the 1974 comedy movie *Young Frankenstein* actor Gene Wilder plays the part of Baron von Frankenstein's grandson, Frederick. He wants nothing to do with his grandfather's legacy, which was, according to the famous legend, to bring the Frankenstein monster back to life. His distancing from his grandfather goes so far as to change the pronunciation of his family's name. He corrects everyone's pronunciation, insisting that his name is Fronkensteen. To the other characters' amusement, his eccentric pronunciation is a kind of running gag through the whole movie. In a troubled dream Frederick tosses about fitfully, "I am not a Frankenstein. I'm a Fronkensteen. Don't give me that. I don't believe in fate. And I won't say it." The misadventures of the movie are in large part Fronkensteen's coming to see that it is harder than just making a name change to create a new destiny.

With Fredrick Fronkensteen, you and I have been conditioned to believe that our lives are invented out of our free choices. It is common belief that the paths of our lives are completely self-directed. Change your name and you change who you are. Change your mind and you change your identity and your future. Who we are, what we become, the history that we leave we have come to believe is a consequence of free decisions we have made. Nothing seems to challenge the belief that each of us is invented out of sheer will. Very few of us believe in destiny anymore.

That self-invention notion has insinuated itself into popular theology as well. People speak quite freely about their "decision" to be a Christian. People routinely refer to their faith as though it has been freely taken up by their own decisions. To this state of mind John the baptizer and his baptism of Jesus will come as a curious counter-challenge. Self-invention is about as far from this Bible story as you can wander.

Some of us have lived long enough to begin to doubt that sheer self-invention is how our lives actually work. We have lived long enough to see the habits, mannerisms, and characteristics of our parents begin to show up in our lives, sometimes to our embarrassment and consternation. We have come to recognize the attitudes and judgments of certain teachers and mentors reflected in our own. A just-published study reports that good quality teachers have life-long influences and effects in the lives of children.¹ You and I are not nearly as freely chosen as we might think we are. We are

¹ Raj Chetty, John N. Friedman, and Johna E. Rockoff, "The Long-Term Impacts of Teachers," retrieved from http://obs.rc.fas.harvard.edu/chetty/value_added.html January 7, 2012.

shaped by forces, inheritances, histories more complex than we could name. Though we truly have choices in life, each of us is more accurately characterized as the current version of how all those many forces have come together in one life.

Baptism is a kind of naming of your future before you actually live it. You could think of baptism as a naming of your destiny. Baptism sets a kind of direction, a vector, our lives into motion. Baptism is a kind of adopted DNA. You can deny it, ignore it, or struggle mightily against it. But it will stubbornly yank you back to who and whose you are.

Jesus appears in the book of Mark as part of the anonymous crowd streaming out to see John. He is obscure. Here he is, “Jesus from Nowheresville.”²

The skies parted and Jesus only heard a voice from heaven. “You are my son, by beloved, with you I am well pleased.” The epiphany has surely begun. The parting skies and the voice from heaven, the water dripping down; that is all intended to show us what the direction, the vector, of God’s barging into the world through Jesus. It shows us Jesus’ life leads to surprising death on a cross. Jesus’ life will not be a story of self-creation out of his own choices. It will be a high velocity narrative of faithfulness to his calling. Jesus will be tumbling all over himself to fulfill this destiny.

With this baptism, the vector of Jesus’ life is assured. With this baptism, Jesus’ destiny is settled, his goose is cooked, one might say. That is what it is all about. For in this baptism Jesus’ destiny is set. Now he will live his life in this direction, on this vector. His life is not invented. It is lived faithfully to a mission that leads to a cross.

Frederick Frankenstein’s dream – or nightmare – continues. Sleeping, with the portrait of his grandfather looking down on him, he finally submits to his destiny. In a famous comedic section he throws his dreaming head back and froth on his troubled pillow and shouts,

All right, you win. You win. I give. I’ll say it. I’ll say it. I’ll say it.
DESTINY! DESTINY! NO ESCAPING THAT FOR ME! DESTINY!
DESTINY! NO ESCAPING THAT FOR ME!

For the rest of the movie, of course, Frederick -- quite in spite of himself -- grows into the identity and work of his grandfather.

There is little similarity between John’s baptism of Jesus and God’s baptism of you.³ Your baptisms go in different directions, you could say. If you wanted to push for some

² Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark’s Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll: Orbis Press, 1988). P. 128.

³ “It is unwarranted to assume that the first thirteen verses of Mark’s gospel which relate John’s preaching, John’s baptism and temptation are modeled after the believer’s existence, it is appropriate to see in these events the type of the believer’s life of faith.” Roy A. Harrisville, *The Miracle of Mark* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1967), p. 93.

similarity, you could say that in these baptisms destinies, futures are set. The course of Jesus' life is set. And so is yours.

God's word is powerful enough to separate the heavens from the earth. God's word is powerful enough to say the word and light appears. And there is light and darkness, Day and night. By that same word, God makes baptismal promises, wrapping you in Jesus' "clothes," binding you to Christ so closely that when others see you, they will see Jesus. These words, this Sacrament, have the capacity to name futures that have not yet happened. That, we could say, is your destiny.

And Fredrick Frankenstein has – with some comedy -- shown how silly it is to fight against destiny.

Of course there will be some self-invention on the way for both Jesus and you. Life has and will offer choices to you in which you have freedom to choose, room to grow. But in *this* epiphany, and in your baptism, the main destiny of your life is set. Now Jesus has a future. And so do you. Amen.