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## THE BAPTISM OF CHRIST A Medieval Mystery Play

- 1 More than thirty years ago I was invited to participate in the planning of a five day Youth Event for our national Church. The Event was to bring together almost 2000 young people from across Canada. And it was to be held this year (1986?) on the campus of the University of Waterloo, where I was then serving as Lutheran Campus Pastor.
- 2 The planning committee asked me to produce a Medieval Mystery Play to be scheduled one afternoon, outdoors, on the UW campus.
- 3 Medieval Mystery Plays are those brief re-tellings of Bible stories, composed by mostly anonymous poets centuries before Shakespeare, and presented in city squares and courtyards, on pageant wagons. They enact the stories of the “mystery” of God’s gracious dealings with us, from the Creation of the Cosmos to the Last Judgement, before a population largely Christian, but illiterate and unaware of their own Biblical tradition. There are more than a half dozen surviving cycles of these plays, from major European cities.
- 4 Each play is rarely more than twenty minutes in length, and over the years, I have produced and directed almost two dozen of them. If you have access to Essay 158 in this series, you can read more about them. (That Essay however is not now available at this website, after its re-design some years ago.)
- 5 The plays are little gems, in my view. And they teach the Bible stories in a winsome and winning way, to a contemporary audience fully as Biblically illiterate today as those audiences in the Middle Ages.
- 6 Let me tell you about the play I produced for that UW Youth Event many years ago. I selected The Baptism of Christ, from the York Cycle of mystery plays.

7 Months before the production itself, I had bought a second-hand Mennonite dray wagon, anticipating its possible role in just such an occasion as now presented itself. It was a handsome piece of antique farm equipment: a flat bed fully twelve feet long, with removable vertical side panels, mounted on a frame with enormous wooden wheels, and a long wooden tongue with doubletree yokes to attach a team of draft horses.

8 I painted my wagon a dark green, with red wheel spokes, and red tongue and yokes. For our use at UW, I decorated the sides with swags of plastic greens and flowers. We would pull the wagon – by a team of six sturdy post-adolescent youth! – to two locations on the UW campus, where we would stop to present our play.

9 As in Medieval days, we'd present our production twice, at two different locations, to two different audiences.

10 The play's first location was a level lawn adjacent to a grassy knoll where our first audience would gather. The second location was a campus courtyard some metres away but with similar possibilities for seating: a level lawn at a grassy berm where students could sit with fine visibility on all sides. We'd pull my wagon from my backyard with a team of six sturdy students, dressed in various Medieval-looking garments: black tights or leggings with loose white choir cottas. Some wore clown wigs and costumes and make-up. A ribboned Maypole carried by still another youth led the procession, from my back yard the few blocks to our production sites on campus. Very festive!

11 Once at our designated production site, we'd set the stage. Teams of "backstage" youth lowered an enormous bedsheet backdrop banner through brackets on the wagon's side, facing the audience, and in their full view. To taped music of recorders and a snare drum! My wife Kathy constructed the backdrop banner: Literally a king-sized bedsheet featuring a setting sun over a desert landscape in browns and oranges. The banner poles, both vertical and horizontal (through the bedsheet's top hem) featured golden wooden finials.

12 Meantime, another team of young people was laying the "Jordan River", a second banner, again constructed by my clever wife. This one was perhaps fifteen feet long, perhaps two feet high, and horizontal, featuring green and blue waves and several swimming fish. We situated this banner some ten feet ahead of the wagon, supported vertically by short banner poles inserted into pockets sewn into the banner's back. At the baptism, the actors portraying Jesus and John would simply step behind the "Jordan", in front of the "wilderness" backdrop banner.

13 Our cast featured five actors. John the Baptist was a longtime good friend, a very accomplished and experienced amateur actor. We costumed John in a fake fur kilt, with fake fur shoulder drape, leaving his right shoulder and arm exposed. Over his shoulders he wore a Jewish prayer shawl, of nubby cotton with long tassels. He walked with a staff, surmounted by a cross, in his right hand – a traditional icon for John. In his left hand he carried a real clamshell, perhaps eight inches across – another traditional symbol for John. John wore sandals on his bare feet.

14 The actor portraying Jesus was another friend, a recent Seminary ordinand, with a short haircut and a scruffy post-adolescent beard. He wore a simple white alb, with cincture at the waist, and sandals on bare feet.

15 Two Angels, one male, one female, all but completed the cast. We costumed them in alb, white chasubles, and sandals, and fitted them with home-made wings, of cardboard and real feathers, each pair of wings constructed over a wire coathanger, lowered over the actor's head, the wire frame hidden by the alb's cowl in each case. Their wings protruded from their shoulders almost four feet, on an upward angle. Very splendid!

16 We were about to begin the four weeks of rehearsals, in my backyard, when the actor portraying John mentioned an old friend of his who yearned to take part in our play. She was well advanced in years, and had developed a fine reputation in the city as an accomplished actor, with a marvelous speaking voice. After only a few moment's hesitation, I determined we could indeed use her skills and her voice, and asked her to enter at the play's very beginning, like a Narrator, to read the account in Mark's Gospel of Jesus' baptism by John in the Jordan.

17 We dressed her like a nun. Blue choir gown with wide sleeves, a long white wimple over her head, carrying a Bible, and dangling between her fingers, a rosary. She had no lines to memorize. She had only to read the Bible's account of the events we were about to portray in our play.

18 When the wagon had been rolled into position, and the "wilderness" backdrop and the "Jordan River" in place, a long wavering wail from a (recorded) ram's horn announces the beginning of our play. The Narrator emerges from behind the wagon and reads the passage from Mark. Then she retreats behind the wagon.

19 John enters, addressing the audience directly, after the manner of these plays in antiquity. He is electrifying. The audience of young people seated on the shaded slope are entranced.

20 Presently two Angels appear from behind the wagon. John kneels and covers his head with his prayer shawl. The Angels announce to John that he is to baptize his cousin Jesus. John protests.

21 Now Jesus enters, and explains to John the appropriateness of his baptism. John acquiesces, and insists on unbuckling Jesus' sandals. This gesture recalls John's expression of humility in the Gospels: "I am not worthy..."

22 Then the barefoot Jesus steps behind the "Jordan River", and partially disrobes, lowering the top of his alb, exposing shoulders, arms and torso. Jesus' loins and legs are covered by the lower alb, the cincture at his waist preventing unseemly exposure. Our recorded music begins to sound softly from behind the wagon in the background: *Es ist Das Heil*, the majestic German chorale "All who believe and are baptized..."

23 Now John at Jesus' side mimes a three-fold baptism with his shell: "...in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit..." (That's in the script of this ancient play! Hah!)

24 Jesus raises his arms and hands in the familiar *orans* posture of Jewish prayer, and gazes heavenward, as John withdraws to the audience side of the "Jordan". The two Angels appear again, the first carrying a long bamboo wand with a feathered dove at its end, which he stretches out over Jesus' head. The second Angel joins him in a unison pronouncement of the words: "This is my beloved son..."

25 Jesus shoulders into the upper part of his alb as he steps out of the "Jordan", and John proffers his prayer shawl to wipe Jesus' face and head, presumably wet with the "Jordan's" waters. Jesus retains John's prayer shawl at John's insistence, signifying John's foretelling, "He must increase, while I must decrease..."

26 The play ends with Jesus striding through the audience to the top of the grassy knoll, where he turns, smiling, hands up and out, in a wordless gesture of blessing to all. John bellows a passionate profession of faith. And the audience bursts into applause. The end.

27 The actors spend a few moments engaging members of the audience in conversation as the onlookers begin to disperse. Then the actors dis-assemble the banners, load them onto the wagon bed, and begin to move the wagon to its next place of performance.

28 I hope my description above does credit to my hard working actors and crew. It was altogether a memorable experience. Those young people, both performers and audience, will not soon forget it!

29 The accompanying photo should give you some sense of the wagon, the backdrop “wilderness”, the “Jordan”, and two of the actors. It’s a “screen grab” from an original VHS tape, transferred to digital video.



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