



Jesus Hacked: Storytelling Faith

a weekly podcast from the Episcopal Diocese of Missouri
<https://www.diocesemo.org/podcast>

Episode 102: Baptism—Getting Personal

What happens at our baptism? What it was like for the ancient Christians? How can we, today, understand our worship through the lens of baptism--and does it make a difference? It's a topsy-turvy JesusHacked podcast where producer Beth Felice interviews podcast host (current head of the bishop's appointed task force on baptism) the Rev. Dan Handschy on understanding our baptism.

Beth Felice: Welcome to Jesus Hacked, Storytelling Faith. I am Beth Felice. You don't normally hear my voice. I am usually on the other side of the production, but I have the opportunity today to interview one of our podcast hosts, the Reverend Dan Handschy, with a little bit more about the series focus this year on baptism and how that's going to impact some of our episodes. Dan, thank you so much for being here.

Dan Handschy: Good to be here.

Beth Felice: We have a really spectacular interview that you just did with Bishop Wayne about baptism. We talked a little bit about the Baptism Task Force that he set up and I know you're an integral part of that. Could you tell us a little bit about what that group is doing and where you are in that work?

Dan Handschy: Sure, When he, in his convention address, suggested forming a task force, I went, "Ooh, ooh, ooh." Probably not a good thing. I

volunteered myself to be on it, and gave him a couple of other names. What we are currently doing, this synergy with the JesusHacked, is just spectacular, because we want to get people thinking about their own baptisms, and this is a great way of doing that.

We've got an art project going on. Jeff Wunrow is calling together some artists in the diocese to do some art work thinking about reflecting on baptism. That installation will be at the [diocesan] convention, and then be available to travel through the congregations of the diocese, to help us bring focus on baptism. We're also working on a little outline for catechesis, both before and after baptism. We so often have people who come into the parish and want the baby done, and it sometimes puts the clergy person in an awkward situation to say, "Well, we need to do some catechesis." Several folks on the taskforce, said if there were this expectation that we need to do at least three sessions, it would be easier to say, "Well, you've got to come and do this." What might the content of those sessions be? What might the content of some post-baptismal instruction be? We're working on that.

We also have ready to go, a questionnaire that will be sent around soon to clergy people in the diocese, those in charge of congregations, asking them what the baptismal practices are in their congregation. What typically of catechesis are they doing? What kind of ritual surrounds baptism? Are there unique things that they're doing in their congregations that other congregations might borrow to bring more attention to that service itself? We also are looking at social media, how might we encourage people to share experiences? Both their own understanding of baptism and how baptism happens in their congregation, so that we have his ongoing enrichment across the congregation. Those are the kinds of things that we're focusing on.

Beth Felice: So you used a very specific word; catechesis. How would you define that in terms of baptism?

Dan Handschy: Great question. In the early church, people were attracted to these crazy Christians and would make an approach and say, "I want to become part of this group." And so there was a period of, it was both instruction and testing. It was dangerous to be a Christian in some circumstances, and so the community wanted to make sure that the person approaching was committed, and then there were things that the person had to learn about the life of the community, and that process was called catechesis. What we tend to now, is somebody approaches the congregation with a newborn baby and chances are that they have a tangential relationship with the church, and want the baby done. So we do our best to say, "Here's the kind of commitment being made in baptism. Both the kind of commitment you're making on behalf of this child, and the kind of commitment that the church is making on behalf of this child."

One of the most significant changes in the 1979 prayer book was the understanding of baptism. In 1928, pretty much every prayer book going back to 1549 and before then, baptism was understood as your get in to heaven card, your ticket. You had to get your ticket punched to get into heaven, and the language even says that without baptism we can't enter the kingdom of heaven. In '79 it says that the holy baptism is full initiation by water and the Holy Spirit into Christ's body, the church. The bond which God establishes at baptism is indissoluble. That has real impact on the church. Once we've baptized this child, this child is a member of the church forever. So what are our responsibilities there? And we don't, I think, do a very good job of communicating to parents and sponsors, or to ourselves, what our ongoing responsibilities are for this child.

So catechesis would look like that coming to know from both side. The family coming to know the church, the church coming to know the family, so that we can fulfill those obligations in baptism.

Beth Felice: Now, in the Episcopal church, and I don't know if this is true in other churches, whenever someone is baptized in a service where we're all together, we renew our baptismal values.

Dan Handschy: Right.

Beth Felice: And in that moment, is that a way for us to reconnect with that process? To renew this, refresh this idea.

Dan Handschy: It's a wonderful thing. In the '28 prayer book baptisms often happened outside of the main service. Now, the expectation is that they will happen in the main service, and the entire congregation will say that baptismal covenant. So we hear it again and again, and on those five days that are set aside for baptism, even if there's no baptism, we should renew our baptismal covenant. So yes, the church collectively hears again, and again, and again what we've committed to. At Advent when we do a baptism along with that recommitment, we then process the child around, everyone gets to see, and we sprinkle everybody in the church with water, as a reminder, as a connection that this person is now part of our body, that we are connected as a body because we're all getting wet. So yeah, it's a ritual teaching moment, hopefully the preaching will remind us of what's happening there, and that's an ongoing catechesis for the congregation, and if we're following the prayer book, it's happening at least four times a year in every congregation.

Beth Felice: So it sounds like a very multisensory experience, which would be great, especially because you think not everybody is joining the conversation at the same time. So there are different depths that we're going to be

interacting with these vows. If I really wanted to focus a little bit more on going deeper into my own sense of baptism, how might I approach that?

Dan Handschy: So one of the things that I think is really useful, and I know that the Society of St John the Evangelist has done this the last couple of Lents. They'll have a website and you can get a daily email, and think about your own rule of life, and we hear that phrase, "rule of life," and we think monastics, and "I don't have a rule of life." We all do, right? There are things we value, there are ways we structure our days, and one of the things that SSJE and other people do during Lent, and I think the congregation might engage in this, is to give people exercises during those 40 days to focus on how they organize their life, and how their baptismal vows interact with that organization.

Lent is the perfect time to do it, and we have those eight questions, the first three the apostles created and the following five, looking at those and saying, "How have I organized my life to reflect this particular vow?" The congregation might engage in that same work. How have we organized our life? Do you believe in God the Father? Yes, I believe in God ... You know, what's different? How do we live differently because of that vow? And that would be a wonderful way to help people think about their own baptisms, to think about what difference that makes in their life. And I think if congregations did work like that during Lent, this past Lent we did a series, we have a rule of life at Advent, which comes out of the baptismal covenant, and I preached a series of five sermons on the clauses of that rule of life, and how this changes the way we function as a congregation. So as I got really productive within the life of the congregation.

Beth Felice: Oh, do you hear that music? No, you probably don't right now, but one of the things we're going to be doing a little bit differently this season of Jesus Hacked, we're going to divide that 20 minute session that we're aiming for into two 10 minute conversations, and right in the middle we're going to have a little question about baptism, and this is our introductory music to set the stage for that. My question for you about baptism, I know that you were not raised in the Episcopal tradition, can you tell us a little bit about what your own baptism was like, that you remember or have seen pictures of?

Dan Handschy: Yes. So I was in fact baptized as an adult in the Episcopal Church. As a Nazarene I had wanted to be baptized, they did it by immersion, and I had broken my arm before the baptism, and so that didn't happen and I scheduled it five months later and broke my arm again, and so it didn't happen. God had other things in mind. I remember very clearly walking into an Episcopal Church. My understanding growing up in the Church of the Nazarene was that my salvation depended on me. I had to have this personal relationship with Jesus. It was a mental, emotional kind of thing.

In the Episcopal Church it was very clear that this was a community, that there was an altar call every week, and that everybody went to the altar, and that baptism was the way into that community, and it took the pressure off of me. I did not have to sustain this mental, emotional state that I was in fact saved. I could point to my baptism and say, "That happened. It's objective, it's real, something changed." And I began a process then of moving into that community, coming to understand what the community was doing, and that was a profound shift for me. September 4th, 1980 was when it happened.

Beth Felice: When something happens to you as a young child, it's difficult sometimes to understand it in the same way that you understand things when they happen as an adult. And I think some of the struggle that we're talking about with understanding our baptism is because it's almost that pre memory experiential thing. Does that make the case at all for baptism to be delayed?

Dan Handschy: At the Reformation, the radical end of the Reformation began to insist that baptism was delayed and that baptisms that happened when you weren't conscious of it didn't count, and that's why that group of people were called the Anabaptists, because they re-baptized. The difficulty with that is theological. It says that whatever is happening at baptism depends upon my mental assent to that, and that's a theological problem. So baptizing children avoids that problem. So the difficulty then becomes one of instruction, one of helping people re-experience that, and I think that's why it's so important that baptisms happen at the main service, and that we get the chance to renew our baptismal covenant, and we even get a little bit wet.

One is born into a family before one is conscious of what that means, and it's in growing up in that family that one learns the rules, what the obligations are going both ways. So I think it's no different than baptism. I was fortunate enough to be old enough to make my own choice and say, "This is a group of people I want to be part of." Sometimes our families of origin are not really happy situations, and I think even if we're baptized before we can remember, we can say, "This is a family of choice. I'm agreeing to these vows. I don't have to assent to them, they're not dependent upon me, but I can be part of a group of people that takes these vows seriously."

So we need to do that kind of training, that kind of... I'm a very linear, very logical thinker and do things that way, but I think other people need to feel that, to feel what's happening at the renewal of baptismal vows, is they are choosing this group of people. Even if their own baptism is beyond memory, just like their family origin, they learned those patterns, and so we're constantly learning the patterns of this group of people, this kinship that Jesus has established.

Beth Felice: That's a very natural query of anybody who's grown up doing something. Why am I still doing this, what is it about that? So I understand a lot about the focus on this idea of catechesis because it's not a slice in time, it's not a snapshot, it's always changing.

Dan Handschy: Right. The bishop said just moments ago in his own interview that God is not done with his catechesis yet, we're constantly being formed. New circumstances, new places in life call forth new responses, God has new things in mind for us, and so I think this going back to my baptism, Luther said that it was so important to remind yourself daily of your baptism, that God had saved you in your baptism, and so this was God's doing and not yours, and to be reminded daily in your daily devotions that you are baptized. I mean, we often say, "I was baptized back then." I think the more appropriate language is, "I am baptized." Right? You don't say I was married, that implies the marriage is over. I am married. I am baptized. This is a thing that started then but continues, and then the more we can circle back and remind ourselves, "Oh yeah, this has effect now." And gives us a chance to move into new spaces, new places, relying on that certainty.

Beth Felice: So that '79 prayer book really is counter-cultural in a way.

Dan Handschy: It is.

Beth Felice: By focusing our experience through the lens of the community, that doesn't fit America as we know it.

Dan Handschy: Boy, is that ever true. When we think of American Christianity, we think about getting into heaven, right? I have to have a personal relationship with Jesus, and the reason for that is to avoid hell and get into heaven. I'm saved, are you saved? And the '79 book, I was so fascinated coming from the Nazarene tradition into the Episcopal tradition with that shift, I've kind of made a study of it. I went at one point to the archives in Austin, Texas, and read the minutes of the Standing Liturgical Commission as they worked on this new prayer book, to just see what they were engaged in, and they had done a conference on baptism, in which they talked about the understanding that baptism was missional. That what was happening to the church in baptism is that the church was being engaged in mission, and there was an exchange of letters after the conference. The people who had put on the conference were surprised that no one had reacted to that big shift. They said, "It's almost as if it went over without anybody noticing."

But there's going to come a time when the church is going to react and say, "Whoa, wait a minute. What are you telling us?" And we saw it happen when the prayer book was introduced in 1979 and baptisms began to happen at the main service, and we began to talk about things

collectively. I met with the altar guild of my very first congregation, and they wanted to know why we said "we believe" in the Nicene Creed, rather than "I believe", because it said "I believe" in the '28 book, and I said, "It's because we believe together as a community." And that was really hard for them to get their heads around.

I was baptized in 1980, never knew the '28 prayer book, and so it always made sense to me that this is what we believe, and that shift to community mission was so radical, and we still haven't understood it, we still haven't lived into it.

Beth Felice: No, in fact going into General Convention, the every three years meeting of the governance of this denomination, there again is a yearning by some to revise this prayer book. All different kinds of reasons, I know that the committee that is working on looking into what that would entail, one of the options that they've offered is really to get to know a little bit more what we have. 1979 is just not that long ago, in terms of church governance, and polity, and theology.

Dan Handschy: Right. Right. I have said in other contexts to some of my students, I have said that 1979 for the Episcopal Church represents as radical a shift as the reformations of the 16th century represented for European Catholicism. So we're, what? 50 years out. That's not a lot of time to come to terms with a shift that big. The prayer book certainly has its shortcomings, the genderedness of the language is a stumbling block for many. If there were a way of correcting that without changing the theology of the book, I would be all for that. I think *Enriching Our Worship* takes a good step forward to doing that, leaving the basic theology in place. I agree that we need to address that piece of it, but we've poured old wine into a new skin? We changed the wine skin, we didn't change the wine, and it's really a very, very different wine that we're talking about, and we need to come to understand that before we start tinkering.

My big fear is that we're going to want to be the church of what's happening now, and I know that within the free church traditions there's a big emphasis on, in the Eucharistic prayers, not talking about Jesus's death, because for many people that kind of atonement theology is so troubling. Our atonement theology in the '79 book is focused on baptism, not on Jesus's death. So if we start removing that language from the Eucharistic prayer, we've taken an irrevocable step, and it's not, ooh, I just would hate to see that happen. So, no, yeah, let's live into what we've done, live into what we understand baptism in the Eucharist to be. Correct the language by all means, but don't change too much at this point.

Beth Felice: So my final question for you, is to take it a little bit more local. You've been the rector, the primary priest at Advent Episcopal Church in South

County, St Louis area for twenty-five years and that is a healthy amount of time to learn a community. What are your hopes for this new refreshed idea for the importance of baptism and catechesis in terms of the life of Advent?

Dan Handschy: So, I don't know, 10 years ago we had a number of folks come through Advent, who said to us, "You all are doing something different here." And that puzzled us. One was a priest who had been in a number of congregations and said, "You know, you walk into any Episcopal parish and they'll tell you they're eucharistically centered, and what they mean by that is they have communion every Sunday." She said, "When you all say that here, you mean something different." Well that puzzled us, and we got to pondering what that might be. We had a friend of mine come and do a series of retreats with us, three retreats, each a year apart, and we began to talk about a rule of life, and so we've written this rule of life, and we use language like divinization, and a fair number of people at Advent know what that language means. And what we mean by that is what we're doing at Eucharist is we are offering the created word, the human economy, and our common life to God for God to bless and return to us for the changing of the world.

We participate in that process by virtue of our baptism. So when we welcome a new member into Advent, we do this little service and exchange where we ask the newcomers if they will participate in what Advent is doing and then we ask Advent very specifically, "Will you make space for them to do that?" Because often a church will want to keep things the way they are, and then we renew our baptismal covenant together, so that there is a sense that when you're coming to Advent, and right up front you know, "Okay, this is what this church does, and I'm going to take my place in it."

The other thing I do, so we have a thumbnail summary of our rule of life, and that is, "We're going to be in your business." What we're offering is our common life, so if we don't know our common life we can't offer it. And so when I welcome a new member in, when the congregation welcomes a new member in, I hand them a card and say, "You're now a card carrying member of Church of the Advent." And on that card is my cellphone number, and I say, "If we ever find out after to the fact that you've been to the hospital, there'll be hell to pay. We're going to be in your business, because this is our common life." So people get that sense that in their baptism, and in that new member welcome they are joining a community that understands itself as a community. That this is not just a group of individuals that happen to get together on Sunday morning.

I have had it happen where I've gotten a call from the secretary that somebody was in the hospital, and I told the secretary to call the senior warden, the senior warden calls the vestry, the vestry calls the people on their list. I've had it happen that there were people at the hospital in the

waiting room before I got there, because these are people who matter to us. And they said to me, "We know we can't go into the ICU with you, but we're going to be here praying." That's a community that understands itself outside of that hour on Sunday morning and outside of those walls. If we can give people a sense that this is what Christianity is, that's what this focus on baptism should be about. It's by virtue of baptism that we join this larger community. Jesus, in the readings two Sundays ago, your mothers and your brothers and your sisters are out here asking for you. And he says, "Who are my mother and my brother and my sisters?" Those who do the will of God.

This is new kinship. That's what this is engaging us in, and we have to understand the nature of that community, we have to think seriously about what that looks like, and then be very clear, here's how you cross that boundary into it. And that's what I think had begun to happen at Advent, that's what I think my hope is. I'm coming to the age where in a few more years I'll retire, and I've thought about what it looks like for Advent to call their next rector, and I've had several people say to me, "All we have to do is hand him that rule of life and say, 'do you get it?' And if they get it, they can be priest here. If they don't, well, we'll look for somebody else." And that kind of awareness on the part of folks in the congregation is incredibly gratifying to me. That's what I hope it looks like, that's what I hope continues to grow.

Beth Felice: Thank you so much for talking with us. I've really enjoyed listening, and I know our listeners have too, and I'm really looking forward to this season.

Dan Handschy: Yeah, I think this is going to be exciting, it dovetails so nicely with the taskforce and what they're doing.

Beth Felice: Absolutely.

Dan Handschy: So thank you, and thanks for having me.