

January 8, 2023

Sermon: Through Water

Scripture: Matthew 3:13-17

¹³ Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. ¹⁴ John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" ¹⁵ But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. ¹⁶ And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him, and he saw God's Spirit descending like a dove and alighting on him. ¹⁷ And a voice from the heavens said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Please pray with me:

God be in our heads and in our understanding. God be in our eyes and in our looking. God be in our mouths and in our speaking. God be in our hearts and in our thinking. Amen.

The story of Jesus' birth concludes with Joseph and Mary making their home in Nazareth. It would be interesting to know what happened in the years that follow. Some have not resisted the temptation to fill in the gap. Christopher Moore tells the story of Jesus' childhood in a humorous fashion in his book entitled, "Lamb: The Gospel According to Biff, Christ's Childhood Pal." It's fun to imagine Jesus and his pals growing up, but it's all speculation, Matthew gives us nothing. The story leaps ahead 20 plus years where we find Jesus standing on the bank of the Jordan River, waiting his turn to be baptized by John.

By this time, John had made quite a name for himself. He wore camel hair clothing and had a leather belt tied around his waist, the clothing of a prophet. He ate locusts and honey, which seems like an odd detail to include, unless it has some symbolic meaning. Most of the time locusts are the eaters not the eaten...they strip and decimate crops and fields, leaving the land barren and lifeless. They overtake like an army on a mission of destruction. Honey, on the other hand, is a gift, a sign of life and blessing. The promised land was known as the land of milk and honey. It is a fitting diet for a man who shouts a message of judgement in the desert, baptizing for the repentance of sins, in preparation of the coming messiah. He believes the religious and political authorities are leading people down the wrong path, that the nation of Israel needs to repent, and his baptism of repentance was a call to turn and follow a different path. He was a radical and a revolutionary, and an irritant to people in power.

He must have been convincing. Matthew tells us that "Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region around the Jordan were going out to him." (Matt 3:5) John believed that the messiah would come with a winnowing fork in his hand and separate the wheat from the chaff. His baptism was to prepare people to be on the right side of judgement and to make way for the messiah's arrival.

And there stands Jesus, ready to submit to John's baptism. It wasn't that Jesus needed to be forgiven his personal sins and washed clean. "Stanley Hauerwas says John is calling Israel to

repentance as a nation. Those who submit to this baptism are saying, “Yes, I’m in. Forgive us our sins, the sins of the nation.”¹ And there is Jesus ready to submit. “Jesus is all about Israel turning to God, because the kingdom of heaven, where the poor are blessed, is coming.”² It is an important statement about Jesus’ own public ministry. Just like John, Jesus will challenge the oppressive systems of the nation...but not in the way John expected.

As Jesus rises out of the water, the heavens open and he sees God’s Spirit descending like a dove and alighting on him. He is filled with the spirit. And a voice from the heavens says, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

Did anyone else see it? Did anyone else hear it? Was that moment for him or for us?

It was one of those moments that would serve as a touchstone for the rest of his ministry, because in this moment, he knew who he was, and he knew that the way he was forging was the way of righteousness, the way of the kingdom of God. In the very next scene, Jesus is tempted to choose a different path, but he has this moment for the strengthening of his resolve. And throughout his ministry, there was always someone asking, “Who are you are you to say and do these things?”

- Who are you to say the poor are blessed?
- Who are you to heal on the Sabbath?
- Who are you to forgive this one’s sins?
- Who are you to eat with sinners and tax collectors?
- Who are you to teach with such authority?
- Who are you to parade into Jerusalem and turn over tables in the temple?
- Who are you that these people want to kill you?
- Who are you?

And yet, Jesus had this moment; the moment when the heavens opened, the spirit descended, and a voice spoke; the moment when his identity and sense of purpose was never more certain. He had this moment.

I was baptized at the age of eleven. The heavens didn’t open. The spirit didn’t descend in any tangible way. A voice did not speak. I certainly wasn’t thinking that I was about to embark on a lifetime of challenging religious and political authorities. I was a 5th grader. That is what 5th graders did in my church. We took a pastor’s class and on Easter Sunday we were immersed in a tank in the front of the sanctuary. One by one we made our profession of faith. “Yes, I believe Jesus is the Christ, the son of the living God, and I proclaim him my Lord and Savior.”

I wondered if I would be different after I was baptized. Did I even know what I was doing?

¹ Michael Rinehart, Christian Century, Jan. 2023, p. 24

² Ibid

One of the beautiful things about the practice of believer's baptism is that we remember it. I remember mine. I remember standing there, at the conclusion of the service, with my wet hair and soggy body, being handed a Bible, and the congregation clapping. Some told me "Congratulations," after the service.

My understanding may have been lacking, but there was no doubt it was a moment of grace and affirmation. And more than a decade later, the same people that cheered for me at eleven, laid their hands on me and prayed for me at my ordination.

I can't count the number of times I have either thought to myself or been questioned by others, "Who do you think you are?" "Who are you to preach, or lead, or speak out about God's expansive love for all people?" Those moments of affirmation, beginning with my baptism have sustained me.

John's baptism was a baptism of repentance, a symbol of a life turned in a new direction. There are many ways to speak about baptism and its meaning. Baptism is understood as a cleansing, a leave-taking of one's old ways and the embracing of a new way. In baptism we die to self and are raised into a new life of concern and love for others and for the greater good. Just as we are born from water, baptism is a symbol of rebirth, and new life, and new beginnings. Baptism is an opportunity to affirm one's belovedness as a child of God, and one's purpose as a servant of God. Baptism is a public act, we do it in community, and our voices join with God's in a resounding "Yes" as we clap our hands and offer our congratulations.

How does one prepare for such a moment? Are we ever ready? Does anyone really know what they are doing when they step into that tank?

Maybe that is why every year, the first Sunday of the Season of Epiphany, we read this passage, and we remember Jesus' baptism, and our own. Every year, we stand at the edge of that water, and say, "Yes," all over again. And our understanding of what that means deepens and grows, year after year. And year after year we hear the affirmation we so desperately need to hear: "You are my beloved child; with you I am well pleased."

Every year we have the opportunity for our "yes" to meet God's "yes" and remember who we are and who we are called to be. What matters is this moment...right now. Today we begin again.

If you have never been baptized, I want to invite you to be baptized here at FCCO. Baptism is a public and visible sign of your desire to walk with Jesus in the way of love, and justice, and forgiveness, and mercy, and compassion. It is a moment you will never forget, and upon which you will build.

And if you are not ready to make that public declaration, that is fine...it is by being in community, and breaking bread together, and learning together, and praying together, that we

sort through what we believe and don't believe and whether we want to make that decision. There is no pressure. Wherever you are on your journey, you are welcome here.

Over the years I have had numerous profound and sometimes humorous experiences with baptism. I once baptized a young man that I knew well from camp and our youth groups for kids in kindergarten through 5th grade. To say Bobby was a handful was an understatement. One summer at camp he refused to change his clothes the whole week. The pool was our only saving grace. At our weekly youth groups, he spent much of the time under a table. He was sweet and kind and could frustrate all patience from those trying to guide him.

When the day came for him to be baptized, I was delighted that he was there with his swim trunks and towel and fitted with his white baptismal robe. His dad came up to the baptistry with his camera, so very proud to capture the moment. And as he rose out of the water, everyone clapped.

After the service was over and it was time for cookies and fellowship with the newly baptized, I saw Bobby's dad with a huge wet spot on his shirt and pants. I noticed there were others with big wet spots on the front of their clothes. It wasn't until I hugged Bobby that I figured out what was going on. Bobby, instead of putting on his swim trunks and wearing them under his robe, Bobby put his baptismal robe on over his clothes. And instead of changing out of wet clothes to put on dry clothes, Bobby put dry clothes over his wet clothes so that hugging him was like hugging a giant wet sponge.

It wasn't long until all of us were marked by his baptism. And in that moment, I heard a voice that said, "This is my beloved child, with whom I am well pleased."

We don't have to have it all figured out the day we are baptized...it is one step on the journey, a step you will never forget.