

“Restoring Our Memories”

Sunday, January 9, 2022

Baptism of the Lord Sunday

Luke 3:15-17, 21-23

Watching John baptize was certainly an experience filled with drama interspersed by John’s vivid vocabulary. Without skipping a beat, John would plunge baptismal candidates under the water, while his eyes scanned the horizon, always preaching. He cried out words of justice and shouted pleas for repentance, always pointing beyond himself to one he said was even greater than himself.

Knee deep in the water, John proclaimed the coming truth of God, filling the crowd with excitement and fidgety expectation while also drowning them in questions. Still, they came. They came yearning for words of grace. They came yearning to have their identity confirmed as children of Abraham, siblings of Moses, God’s precious off-spring.

Frightened and unsure. Hopeful and expectant: they came to the waist deep waters of the Jordan.

They understood the potent symbolism of water. To those in a desert culture, water meant life. Their lives circulated around the repetitive motions of finding water, drawing deep from wells. Their children, cattle and crops all depended on the yield of water that God would give. They also understood the religious significance of water: it was a symbol of regeneration and purification. Water was used to wash hands and bodies in accordance with what God had commanded. Water acknowledged that God was the creator of all that was seen and unseen, the giver of life. The deep waters were also the places where demons dwelled, the chaos that God alone had calmed, the places where the Spirit of God hovered during creation, where the winds of God’s creative presence were always found.

And so, they came to these waters, remembering that God had led their ancestors through the waters to freedom. Frightened, yet expectant, they came, trusting in the promise God had made so long ago:

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;

I have called you by name, you are mine.

² When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you.

Jesus stood in their midst, walking toward the water, praying. Jesus joined the throng, immersing himself in their expectations and questions, their pain and suffering, joining them to be baptized in these untamed, muddy waters where John was standing.

Water figures prominently in the stories we tell each other. There was that great vacation to Florida, where we placed our feet in the warm waters of the ocean, the sand covering our feet as the tide pushed back. There was that summer on the lake, long days spent water skiing or fishing, jotting across the lake on the boat, taking in the sunshine, smiling and laughing. There was that moment when the baby was

baptized, her forehead wet from the baptismal waters and our eyes wet from tears. There were the crystal glasses mom told us to fill with ice cubes and water. We lifted the pitcher slowly, portraying an outward confidence that all the water would land in the glass, even if inwardly we were scared to death of spilling it all across the table.

Some of you may remember that time, quite a few years ago now, when the pipes burst in the sanctuary on a cold Saturday afternoon. Water came gushing through the drywall, filling the sanctuary. John Hughes, bless his soul, was here as usual, filling up the candles with oil and straightening chairs. Within minutes, volunteers joined the flood, shutting down water, moving chairs, mopping up what we could. We too were filled with expectations and questions: there was no way, we determined, that we could use the sanctuary for worship the next day.

We moved worship to the narthex, setting up chairs in angled rows. No one remembers, but the choir had been scheduled to sing “Wade in the Water” that day. We skipped the anthem that Sunday. No one complained, and in fact several said we should do it more often – except, of course, without the water. Water rises fast and damages quickly, but it also holds the promise of something dramatic, something new.

Each year in January, we read the story of Jesus’ baptism. Matthew, Mark and Luke each tell the story differently. John avoids the issue of Jesus’ baptism out of fear that some would have been confused by the mixing of his humanity and divinity. Matthew’s baptism story is clad with theological disputes and debates between John the Baptizer and Jesus. Mark, as you would expect, is fast and efficient, giving few details. Luke, however, follows a different path.

The defining feature and perhaps most curious question about Luke is that he tells us John is arrested, and then has Jesus baptized. I doubt that it means that Jesus baptized himself. Luke probably got ahead of himself in the story, but perhaps was also interested in clearing away all of the other characters so that the focus is on Jesus alone.

John is moved out of the way; the crowd is pushed to the shoreline. Jesus is baptized, and was praying, and “the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descends upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.’”

We know baptisms well; we remember baptisms clearly. But none of us has ever seen the heavens open and doves descending. We have seen water shoot through broken pipes, we have seen flood waters rise in the rivers, but this is not like anything any of us have ever witnessed.

At least not that we remember.

In the final semester of our senior year of seminary, we were herded into a speech classroom for a lesson on baptisms. It was taught by Dr. Bill Beeners, himself a legend at Princeton. Dr. Beeners had been teaching at Princeton longer than any of us had been alive. The rumor was that he might not have been present at Jesus’ baptism, but only because his flight was delayed.

But filled with wisdom and humor, Dr. Beeners arranged for all of us to practice baptizing a baby, which in this case was a rather weary-looking doll who had been passed from generation to generation of students. Unknown to us, however, was that Dr. Beeners had the room wired with microphones and speakers. A little hand signal from him and a student in a control room would push a button to make the baby cry. If the student minister tried to outwit the baby by speaking louder, then Dr. Beeners would signal for the cries to increase. You quickly learned: don't try to fight with a screaming baby.

That's what I remembered from my classes on baptism. It was useful, practical advice, but what I wonder now is why we did not spend more time exploring what it means to help people remember they are baptized. According to theological legends, when the great reformer Martin Luther would become agitated and overwhelmed, filled with fear and anxiety, he would shout back at the darkness, "But I am baptized!" He remembered his baptism, that he was baptized by God, sealed by grace, and was thankful.

Jesus' baptism reminds us of our baptisms. We may not see doves descending – I am not volunteering to be in charge of live birds in worship. But, like Jesus, we are sealed in the promise of God: you are God's beloved. The waters wash over us, reminding us that God has loved us even though we have not done a thing. Jesus had yet to perform a miracle or heal a person, but even so he is claimed as God's beloved.

Marjorie Suchocki notes, "What happens in baptism? We are made one with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus...made one with him, his person and work are now effectively joined to our lives, so that Christly possibilities are available to us through all our days."

That affirmation allows us to steady ourselves in times of difficulty, grounding us in the hope of Christ who stands with us.

The dove descends, and God's affirmation rest on us, calling us to wade deep into the waters of human need. We are sealed with God's love – and sent to serve others. Some of you have heard that this coming week I will be appointed to be a volunteer St. Louis County Police chaplain. I undertake this calling knowing that as I sit in police cars or am present at tragedies, not only does God go with me, but you go as well. We go as the community of the baptized, sent into the world to help, to serve, to worship, learn, and grow. We go remembering we are baptized.

When the pipes broke at church that Saturday, it was a potent reminder not only of the power of water, but of the power of community. It was a reminder that we are a baptized community gathered in God's love. The waters rushed over our feet, but called us into close community with each other, helping us to hear over and over again, "You are my beloved. You are my beloved; You are my beloved...in you I am well pleased."