



“The Power of Water”

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Scripture (NRSV):

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 the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. ¹⁷ And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

Sermon:

We are water; over 90% water I have read.

Our earth is covered in water, and we have that salty brine in our veins.

Water matters. Water, as tribal leaders have long declared, is life.

Talk to people in Australia, or Somalia, or Phoenix, and there will be serious urgent conversation about the importance of water.

Phoenix has been dubbed one of the least sustainable cities in America and urgently seeks to find ways to renew their Salt River waterway. They also plan to plant thousands of trees to provide cooling for their city which will have 145 days a year with temps over 105 degrees by the year 2050.

Water matters.

It sustains all life. It is a joy, and a necessity. It heals and it cleans.

The importance of water in purification is constant through ages of religion. The baptism of Jesus was no exception. Ritual cleansing baths were an important part of Jewish life at the time. In Qumran, excavations of that Essene community show multiple baths available for purification.

My 5-year-old granddaughter looked at me from her bathtub recently and wondered, “how would anyone get their hands clean without water?” Indeed.

Of course, then she had her own comeback, she looked at her hands in the bath and then said, “well, there’s always sanitizer.”

Not for the whole washing away of sin!

Sanitizer is just not adequate as a sacramental sign of washing clean from all that makes us feel terrible, sanitizer just isn’t enough to symbolize a fresh new beginning...only water will do!

And best of all, flowing water, moving water, water filled with air and sunlight both.

So dear is this image that many of us are baptized in the flowing water of river or lake or ocean shore, and many newer churches have water that flows through the church as stream or as fountain, living water for those who wish to be baptized.

So, this was what John was doing; washing people, purifying them in the Jordan, preparing them, in his words, “for the Kingdom of heaven drawing near”. He was waiting for the Messiah, he was purifying himself, and any who sought it, as together they waited eagerly for one who would “baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire”. John’s language is big and kinda frightening, that a Messiah is coming to baptize with fire, will sift humanity, the righteous from the unrighteous, sending some to eternal fire. That one coming is going to be big and loud and scary.

And water can be that way, too: huge tsunami waves that destroy; storm waters in our mighty oceans that sink even great ships, an undertow that can drag you under and out to sea. Water is powerful, water is life, water is dangerous.

So what happens to Jesus in his baptism?

Jesus goes down to be purified, washed and baptized, he will drown as one kind of human, and as he comes up from the water, he will be a new human being. The text says, “suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him.”

Was this dove seen by John? By John and Jesus? By Jesus alone?

I live in a pastors household, my husband and I both being pastors in service to local churches. We can't agree on this text.

Is John seeing the dove descending? Is Jesus seeing the spirit of God descending upon himself? Is John hearing the voice from heaven? Is Jesus alone hearing the voice from heaven, with its words of blessing, of validation?

Does it matter?

My husband says Jesus is having an awake vision, like Joseph had visions in his sleep, and the Magi had messages sent to them in their sleep.

Maybe so.

Maybe... Jesus is having his moment of spiritual awakening, his experience of rebirth, through the waters of baptism, being changed forever by a spiritual experience, an experience of God that is so real, so rich, so deep, so life-altering that it feels like a whole new life.

One life, one person going in to be baptized, going under the water...and someone else, enlivened and changed, by a sense of love and blessing and closeness so intense, that he is another person when he comes up out of that water.

During that breathless time of almost death under water, Jesus comes to the life-altering realization that he is beloved of God, a child of God, and God loves that child, is “pleased” with that child!

Such an experience of being loved, accepted, known completely... yet not judged, not condemned but treasured...well, it is life changing. And for Jesus, the message he learns and shares is not of judgment and fire, but more like the words of the prophet Isaiah that we

heard this morning...Jesus will not crush the tender reed, and he will set the captive free, bringing light where there only seemed to be darkness and death.

And John is there, confirming and affirming his awakening. I think John is a part of this awakening, a part of this profound moment of new life for Jesus. He sees, he hears, he reaffirms to Jesus the depth of reality of this experience of being known.

In our overwhelmingly individualistic society, I like to think that there is an important message for you and me:

- 1.) Blessing by God is an experience to be shared. Blessing by God is an experience that is confirmed in community. Blessing by God is not a one time, one-person thing...it is a life-altering experience that Jesus and John shared, and that we, too, can share with one another.

Yes, there is this, too:

- 2.) We CAN tell our story of wonder and of blessing. We CAN learn to trust the experience, whether in a church or in canoe, in a plunge into the waters of baptism or a plunge into relationship.

We *do* have our own stories of being changed in profound ways, and I believe one of the gifts of Westminster to all who enter here, is an openness to hearing another person's story, without judgement, without shaming.

John shared in the baptismal experience of Jesus.

We can share the experience of love and acceptance, of renewal and transformation of life. We can bring light to dark places, protect the bruised reed, the smoldering wick.

"God is like that", we will say. "Isn't it amazing", we will say. "I am glad you are here", we will look into one another's eyes and say.