

Isaiah 43: 1-7  
Acts 8: 14-17  
Luke 3: 15-22

Wading Through Water  
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The Christmas wreaths are gone, we've left the manger in Bethlehem, the three magi have come and gone, the "holiday season" is past, and we find ourselves in a strange new place, neither Bethlehem nor Nazareth. We're at the banks of a river, at the edge of the wilderness, in a motley crowd of people, watching a baptism. It's hard to imagine something more different than our usual picture of the sacrament of baptism. Here at the Norwich Congregational Church, you will see happy parents and grandparents, squirming siblings, smiling pastors, and a baby in a white dress. The people sitting in the pews have fond smiles as they welcome the new child or the new member into our community. Not that there isn't confusion about what's actually going on, especially in the minds of our children.

I remember reading about a pastor who did a baptism of a five year old. His parents wanted to wait to have their son baptized until he would be able to remember and have some understanding of the meaning of the ceremony. So, on the Sunday before the baptism, the pastor gathered the boy and his parents around the font to explain things. She sensed that the child was a little dubious about it, but she gamely kept on, opening the font, which was dry, and pretending to scoop some water out with her hand. She placed her dry hand on the boy's head and said, "Next week we'll do this with real water." He looked her straight in the eye, folded his arms across his chest, and proclaimed, "No way, lady. No way." Even though he eventually conceded and agreed to be baptized, the pastor deepened her belief in infant baptism from that point on.

Another story: a family was riding home from church on a Sunday. The 4-year old sister of the baby who had been baptized cried in the back seat all the way home. When her parents asked what on earth was wrong, she sniffled and choked out the answer: "The pastor who did the baptism said that we would be brought up in a Christian home. But I want to stay with you guys!"

And yet, churches continue to baptize both children and adults, because of what we read in the Bible. The fact that all four Gospels speak of Jesus as beginning his ministry in the waters of the Jordan, the fact that Paul and other writers of New Testament letters speak of baptism as the glue of the Christian community, means that we take it seriously. This one-time event in the life of a Christian resounds through a lifetime, remembered, renewed, and renewing.

Maybe a bit of confusion in our minds is not surprising, given the picture that is painted in our Gospel reading of that scene at the River Jordan. John has been preaching and teaching about repentance. He has also been prophesying about the Messiah, what a Messiah will be like. All this is Good News, apparently. In Luke's Gospel, there is no actual encounter between John and Jesus. It says that John was shut up in prison, all the people were baptized, then Jesus was baptized, then Jesus was praying, then the heavens opened and a voice spoke of love. We hear of repentance and unquenchable fire and judgment, then we hear about doves and affirmation. Here, at this moment of transition from Hebrew prophecy to Christian proclamation, Jesus stands, bridging different understandings of God, beginning to live a baptism-shaped life.

The way that Luke tells the story, it is a moment when Spirit meets Matter. Jesus was praying, opening his heart to divine power. We could see this as a rarified state, a stained glass window moment. But then we are brought quickly down to earth: it says “the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form.” In Jesus, the Holy Spirit is not disembodied or ethereal. We cannot separate the life of the spirit and the life of the body; the life of the church and the life of the world; the sacred and profane. Baptism allows Jesus to live out each expression of the Spirit, every expression of God’s love.

-Because the voice of heaven speaks no words of judgment, no commands, no rules. Just pure love and affirmation: you are my child, you are beloved, you are pleasing.

Immersed as Jesus was in the words of the Prophet Isaiah, we can see how this echoes the words of our first reading. In it, speaking to an entire people, all the descendants of Jacob, the Lord speaks through the prophet: “I have called you by name, you are mine....you are precious in my sight, and honored and I love you....do not fear, for I am with you.” Through the senses of touch and sight and hearing, Jesus feels in his body, in his bones, a relationship with the source and ending of all life. This is a relationship that claimed him and called him. And in baptism, we say that we are claimed and called as well.

Baptism is a physical sign that we are loved in grace, with no price to pay. In it, we acknowledge kinship with Jesus. In it, we are linked to Isaiah’s God, who forms people into a community and calls them home. It is pure grace, loving us until we feel the urge to be more loving. The Holy Spirit becomes embodied in our acts of caring as we pay the grace forward. In baptism, we understand that the power of the holy spirit is so overwhelming that it **must** be shared.

Nowadays we talk a lot about self-esteem, or, more often, the lack of it. I do think that it is important to have a strong sense of self, but we sometimes forget that it is self in relationship, a loved self by someone or something, a beloved self, that is truly healthy and holy. It is when we hear words like, you are my child, the beloved, you are precious in my sight, and honored, that we can claim our true identity. Martin Luther wrote, “A truly Christian life is nothing else than a daily baptism once begun and ever to be continued.” When we remember our baptisms each day, we know whose we are and how beloved we are.

Nowadays we also talk a lot about doing things: being an active church, having a lot of activities and programs. When we remember our baptisms, we remember that before all the doing, there is just being. The voice from heaven was well-pleased before Jesus did any particularly wonderful or miraculous or pleasing thing. All he did was wade through water and open himself up in prayer. When we baptize babies, and I say their name and say that they are a beloved child of God, it is not because they are beautiful and dear (though they are) and not because they have accomplished a single thing. It is because they are already loved, and we commit ourselves to fostering that love into a baptism-shaped life.

The theologian Paul Tillich wrote that “Salvation is simply accepting the fact that we have already been accepted.” Isaiah would say, Accepted...and claimed. In the story of Jesus’ baptism we see the reciprocity and cooperation of human and divine spirit. Because, after wading through that water, life is not the same. The same Spirit that spoke words of love also leads Jesus into the wilderness, leads him down dusty roads to preach, leads him to hillsides with hungry people, leads

him to touch the outcast and to heal the sick. The same Spirit that descended on him in bodily form transforms being loved into doing loving actions.

The theologians say that sacraments, like baptism, are visible signs of invisible grace. I might say that this is only a first step. When we leave the font or the river or the place of worship behind, then we have the chance to make grace visible in the world. We have the chance to embody the divine love that claims us, forms us, calls us, sends us. We have the chance to see the “belovedness” in all of God’s children, not just in Jesus, not just in ourselves or our small group. As we have been drawn into the embrace of God’s love – the God who accompanies us through waters and rivers and fire and exile and all kinds of hardship – we enlarge the circle, we imitate God, and we accompany each other in the same way.

So, on this Baptism of Jesus Sunday, remember your baptism, remember how dearly you are loved and live into your calling as heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ. Amen