

Isaiah 42: 1-9
Psalm 29
Matthew 3: 13-17

The Mission of the Servant
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When I was about four years old, I fell into a river. Well, not a *river* – it was Fishkill Creek. It was Spring, not summer, not the season for swimming. I was taking a walk with my mother and a couple of my siblings, and I fell in. My mother, fully dressed, jumped in after me and pulled me out. I don't remember much of this. Mostly I remember the aftermath, sitting in the kitchen, in dry clothes, in a warm place. And sensing the absolute security of rescue. My mother jumped in and saved me. That's what mothers do, I guess.

When my daughter was about 5 years old, she fell into a river. Well, not a *river* – it was the Norwich Pool, which is (or was) a dammed-up section of Blood Brook. And, well, she didn't *fall* – she was swimming. It was summer, there were a number of people swimming. I was watching, fully dressed, from the waterside. Elizabeth got into a stretch over her head that was a little too long for her. Her head started to go under, and I jumped in after her and pulled her out. Dried her off, warmed her up. Because that's what mothers do, I guess.

I love rivers. Walking along rivers, wading in, swimming, even skating. But rivers, and water, are compelling, mysterious things. We need them, we enjoy them, we fear them. They bring life, they bring death. They threaten, they console. When I was writing this sermon, I went on line to look for pictures of Fishkill Creek, since I haven't seen it since I was 6 years old. And I found pictures and read about it – it's a tributary of the Hudson River. I also found a video of Fishkill Creek taken in the aftermath of Hurricane Irene. It was amazing: the force of that water rushing down, unstoppable, powerful – a river out of control. Many of you will have similar memories or images in your minds about Irene's effects more locally, here in Vermont. In some ways, it put me back into my 4-year-old mind, when the river closed over me, and my mother pulled me out.

The ancient Hebrews had complicated feelings about water too. The desert pressed in from three sides; wells and oases were crucial. To those exposed on rugged hillsides, storms brought both the water of life and floods of destruction. The writer of the 29th Psalm celebrates the God who speaks through the metaphor of a powerful storm, totally beyond human control or comprehension. Other Psalms, like the 23rd, speak of the God who gently leads us beside still waters. I would venture to guess that there are more stories and images in the Bible involving water than almost any other element. So I'd like to take a moment to let you come up with some: dredge through your memories of Scripture and come up with one that was striking for you. And maybe you can mention whether you found it comforting or threatening.....

When Jesus was about 30 years old, he fell into a river. Well, he didn't *fall*, he chose to immerse himself in the Jordan. All four of the Gospels tell of this moment, in slightly different ways. Apparently, the early church really wanted to remember this encounter with water. And perhaps there was a slight sense of discomfort or embarrassment about it. Why did Jesus, the Messiah, need to get into that river for a baptism of repentance, offered by John? Our reading today expresses some of that ambivalence: John says, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to

me?” In other words, who should minister to whom, here? Who is in charge? Jesus seems determined to get into that river, though, and replies: “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” In other words, he was on a mission, a mission of righteousness and justice, and this dip was a step on the way.

The Baptism of Jesus is presented as the beginning of his public ministry, and he does this in solidarity with, as it says earlier in the chapter, “the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem.” He was declaring a relationship, identifying himself with all the shortcomings and faults and pains and yearnings of those seekers who had flocked to hear John. He was one of a crowd, one in the human family, our family. He walked into the waters, those dangerous and life-giving waters, and took his place beside us.

As he came up from the surface of the river, Jesus had an epiphany, a striking realization. It was visual, a sense of the Spirit flying down into him from above. It was acoustic, with the sound of a divine voice speaking over the waters. This was not the voice of the Lord that makes cedars break or causes the earth to tremble. It was another sort of voice, more like the one heard in Isaiah’s prophecies: a tender voice, like the arms of a mother pulling a child out of danger. It called and claimed Jesus, named a relationship: “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

There is no way to know how exactly Jesus meditated on his mission, but it seems likely that Isaiah’s prophecies were on his mind. Particularly when we read one of what are called the “Servant Songs” as we did today, we how prophetic words were internalized by Jesus, and by those who followed him. In the story of the baptism at the Jordan River, we hear echoes of that ancient affirmation, “Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him.” The epiphany of Jesus, standing there dripping with water, was the power of being both child of God and servant of God.

With the Spirit, with the power, comes a mission, and the passage from Isaiah is pretty clear about this. This anonymous servant will bring justice – it says this four times in the first four verses. And this mission has an interesting method. It does not seem to involve coercion or compulsion. That interesting phrase – “a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench” – implies a gentler approach, a sort of loving, tender, persuasive way of bringing about justice. This is not a default position, based on lack of power. The text makes it clear that it is the Creator of the cosmos who gives the Spirit and commissions the servant. One who receives this Spirit “will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth.”

More of the job description follows: God has “taken the servant by the hand” so that a covenant can be fulfilled and embodied: a covenant that is lived out in relationships that bring light, that heal, that liberate. And it is clearly not limited to one tribe or one community: being a “light to the nations” is part of the mission of the servant. Perhaps this passage inspired Jesus when the time came for him to minister to non-Jews as well as to Jews. The Spirit moved him to form relationships outside his comfort zone, outside his small “nation” to teach justice, healing and freedom.

That’s a lot of epiphany for one small dunk in the water. Today we celebrate the Baptism of Christ, but we need to think beyond that one event at the riverside. In fact, I suspect that, for Jesus, that epiphany about identity and mission was actually a process more than an event. I can imagine Jesus reflecting - in times of prayer, in conversation with others – about what it meant to be God’s child, about what the needs of the moment were, about how a servant behaves, about what justice

demanded. Perhaps he re-read passages from Isaiah. Perhaps he saw some new expression of **in**justice, some new arena of compassion that had not occurred to him before his travels. I find this idea (or suspicion) comforting, because it means that I have more opportunities for epiphany still coming to me as well.

In our own way, in our own enactment of the sacrament of baptism, we echo the heavenly words from the Gospel story. I say, “Name,” beloved child of God, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” The touch and feel of the baptismal water reminds us of the power and comfort of the Spirit that moved over the face creation’s waters. We remember that Jesus was called Son of God by the river Jordan, and claim the same relationship for the one being baptized. It’s an adoption ceremony of sorts.

Today I wonder, though, have we ever thought of baptism as conferring servant-hood as well? What would happen if we named each newly baptized Christian not only beloved, but a beloved servant of God, with whom God is well pleased? We would have to re-read those Servant Songs of Isaiah, I suppose, and see whether we liked the job description. We would have to see whether “establishing justice in the earth” and living life “as a covenant to the people” was really something we were willing to take on.

We might get tangled up in that word, “servant.” Maybe we’d rather be activists, or citizens, co-workers. But, in taking on the name “child of God,” we do become both family members and servants of each other. Roles may be switched at times, as when I was in need of rescue at age four, then became the rescuer when my daughter was small. Roles may be switched, as when I am the victim of injustice, and need your voice. Or we may together recognize injustice directed towards another child of God, and need to speak together to make that plain and make it change.

All I know is, Jesus was able to be both child and servant, both leader and friend. He received water at the hands of a stranger, and then fed 5000 strangers. He waded into a muddy river with a throng of sinners, and claimed them as his own family. All I know is, all that the epiphanies since my baptism show me is, he is the one to follow. Amen.

