

Isaiah 42: 1-9  
Acts 10:34-43  
Matthew 3: 13-17

That Voice Over the Waters  
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It may be apocryphal, but I read a quote this week *supposedly* from Mark Twain: “The old Irish when immersing a baby at baptism left out the right arm so that it would remain pagan for good fighting.” I think that’s called hedging your bets – or at least a less than full-hearted commitment to following a life of devotion to the Prince of Peace. If a baptism begins one’s journey of faith, if we truly believe that it marks an awakening into our giftedness as children of God, if the words spoken over the water mean anything, then even a few drops of water on the forehead will unite us to Christ’s mission and promise.

Many of you may remember the play or the film of *The Miracle Worker*. The climax is a moving scene when the 7-year-old deaf and blind Helen Keller, feels a stream of water washing over her hands. Her teacher is finally able to convey the concept of sign language to the little girl. It is a breakthrough, an awakening, an epiphany. Suddenly, with the touch of that water, the world is opened up, and Helen can discover her own gifts and strengths. It turns out that in spite of the reality of silence and darkness, Helen’s gift is expressive language and joy. Throughout her long life, she shared that gift with the world. In spite of, or because of, her disabilities and imperfections, she pierced through to some essential truths that may have escaped others. She shared some words of her friend Edward Everett Hale, which are wrongly attributed to her, but are now widely quoted and sung: *“I am only one, but still I am one. I cannot do everything, but still I can do something; and because I cannot do everything, I will not refuse to do something that I can do.”* We have sung those words here.

Each time we have a moment of discernment about the “something we can do” and the “everything we cannot do,” it is an important insight. I used the word “epiphany” (with a small ‘e’) about the scene with the flowing water. We are now in the season of Epiphany (capital ‘E’), the season of the church year that bridges the Christmas season and Lent. This year, because Easter will be rather late, the season of Epiphany is long, 8 Sundays long. It begins today with the Baptism of Jesus. For two months we are in a time of potential enlightenment, when the rush of water or the rush of wind or the flutter of a bird’s wings might wake us up to the movement of God in the world. And so it is also a time when we consider our response to those things. What gift is awakened by the movement of the Spirit? In remembering Jesus’ baptism, we are reminded of our own baptisms, when we were marked with a watery sign of hope and promise, when we were given a blessing and a mission.

Jesus, in his turn, remembered back to the traditions of his ancestors. He and his followers were informed by the prophets: prophets like Isaiah, who spoke of the movement of God’s Spirit in the world. Today we heard the first of what are called “Servant Songs.” Isaiah speaks in God’s voice about a special servant, a chosen one who receives the Spirit and brings forth justice. Nobody really knows who this servant was: some say that it was the whole nation of Israel, some say that it was a prophet. Christians have traditionally looked on this passage, and the other Servant Songs, as

a prophecy about the Messiah, about Jesus. I don't think that we need to pin it down. It is a description of whoever does God's transformative work in the world. Someone who is chosen, taken by the hand, so to speak, and given a task. Someone who is powered by the spirit.

When taken as a whole, these Servant Songs do not describe a perfect or divine being. The servant is imperfect. In the second song, he expresses despair. In the third song, he is mistreated. In the fourth song, he is described as disfigured and a man of sorrows. It is God's call that transforms this person or these people into tools of light and justice. I find this very encouraging. Our imperfect lives are the raw material for this work. It's very inclusive, in the way that baptism is inclusive.

The crowd of people by the Jordan in Matthew's Gospel was remarkably diverse. All kinds of people were coming to hear John the Baptist, all kinds of people were wading in the water. They saw this as a symbolic washing, a clean slate, a way to mark their intention to start over. There is no indication that they intended to take on the tasks of the servant songs: they were just trying to re-establish their covenant relationship with their God.

When Jesus steps up to the river though, we sense a change. John doesn't even want to baptize him. It seems that Jesus' reasons for being there are a bit different from the others. He is looking for more than just cleansing. He is ready for his ministry to begin. And he can't do everything alone. He needs someone to lead him into the water.

As he emerges from the water, he had an epiphany: a surge of certainty and self-understanding. This is described as the heavens opening up for him and the Spirit of God alighting on him. The words ringing in his ears are very much like the words of the prophets and the psalmists: he is one in whom God's soul delights, a beloved one. We do not know much about the 30 years that preceded this baptism, whether Jesus has a sense of greater purpose as he went about his daily labors. But after that moment at the Jordan River, he lives as though called. He has a mission and a focus. He serves God through justice, healing and liberation.

I imagine that there was a yielding quality to Jesus at the Jordan. He had to give in to the river, give in to the change, let it wash over him and re-define him. It was not a resigned yielding, but a courageous, purposeful, intentional act. "Let it be so for now," he says to John. Jesus actively engages with his creator in this moment, actively accepts a new future.

When I think about baptism, and particularly about it in our community, I had an insight: remembering your baptism means waking up to your place as co-creator, and knowing the "something you can do." Another word we use for that is "call." It is a concept that has been around for a long time, but usually we talk about an ordained minister's call. That isn't really scriptural. When Jesus and his followers practiced baptism, all those washed in the water received an awareness of new life and new purpose. Each one was gifted, each one would serve.

I think that it is easy for us to hear the language of heaven and doves and voices and imagine that that baptism at the Jordan was extraordinary: that it marked Jesus as unique. I think that the opposite was true. Jesus was unique, but his baptism was a pattern. Each of us can yield to God's call, letting the grace of God wash over us; each of us is God's beloved child. Jesus shifted the meaning of baptism, and we inherit all the possibility that comes with it.

God is still singing out for servants, calling each one of us to a particular area of service. Each of us: young or old; no matter what our experience or skills or education; no matter what our past successes or failures, imperfections or disabilities - God sings an individual servant call to each of us. It is a call to a life of loving and giving. We experience it as a highly individual desire to be about a particular work in the world and in the church. It is a desire placed by God in the heart of each person, sleeping until awakened by the splash of the Spirit.

As we begin the new year here at the Norwich Congregational Church, it is a good time to think about who we are as baptized followers of Jesus. I know that the work we do can seem overwhelming at times, the needs of the world can seem overwhelming. Sometimes it looks like a black hole of need, and we fear to approach it. And we fear that saying yes to even one small task can lead to an expectation of commitment that we can't fulfill. This is the time to remember the insight Helen Keller shared. Each of us is only one, none of us can do everything. The Servant's work of bringing forth justice is the work of a community, not an individual. The Servant's work of liberation is the work of a community, not an individual. But your individual gift is precious to the work. How can the rest of us stand with you to encourage, support, honor and celebrate the gift from God that is you?

I think of our children, learning in Sunday School about the Bible and the ways we help our neighbors. We hope to wake up the innate gift of empathy that they carry, to give them an epiphany about needs and service. I don't expect any of them to solve the problems of poverty in the Upper Valley or of injustice around the world. But I do believe that they can begin to take on that task of discernment. They can start down the path that we all walk, yielding to God's insistent call. I don't think that there will be any doves or wind or waterfalls in the classrooms upstairs but maybe the small thing, the one thing they can do, will be discovered.

I want to share with you a poem I discovered a few years ago. It speaks to the unique gifts and opportunities we see around us and within us. It's called

Famous            by Naomi Shihab Nye

*The river is famous to the fish.*

*The loud voice is famous to silence,  
which knew it would inherit the earth  
before anybody said so.*

*The cat sleeping on the fence is famous to the birds  
watching him from the birdhouse.*

*The tear is famous, briefly, to the cheek.*

*The idea you carry close to your bosom  
is famous to your bosom.*

*The boot is famous to the earth,  
more famous than the dress shoe,  
which is famous only to floors.*

*The bent photograph is famous to the one who carries it  
and not at all famous to the one who is pictured.*

*I want to be famous to shuffling men  
who smile while crossing streets,  
sticky children in grocery lines,  
famous as the one who smiled back.*

*I want to be famous in the way a pulley is famous,  
or a buttonhole, not because it did anything spectacular,  
but because it never forgot what it could do.*

May you never forget what you could do, and as God leads you to the water, may you be led into wisdom and service. Amen.