COME ON IN, THE WATER’S FINE!

Baptism of the Lord Sunday, a; Ordination and Installation of Officers
Matthew 3:13-17; January 12, 2014
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Prayer: Still-speaking God, as these words from Scripture are read, may it be to us as if the heavens are opening, and we see your Spirit descending on us, like a dove, revealing your love for us as your daughters and sons. Amen.

Living by the Mississippi River, it doesn’t take long to understand the power of a river. A river will eventually transform anything it flows over, or anyone who walks through it or lives by it. It can bring death, when it floods and drowns; or life, in the fertility it gives at its banks.

There is a river that runs through scripture. It is the Jordan. Found at the center of the biblical landscape, it serves as a barrier and a border, as life-bringer and death-dealer. The Israelites, after wandering in the wilderness for 40 years following their liberation from Egypt, cross the Jordan, passing into the promised land.

The prophets later speak of God’s Spirit one day crossing back over the Jordan and bringing good news to those beyond its boundaries. Isaiah writes: “In the latter time God will make glorious…the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.”

Life in Palestine then, and to a large extent now, is defined by which side of the river you live on.

For African slaves in 19th century America, the Ohio River was known as the River Jordan, because it was the crossing over point from slavery in the south to freedom in the north. Those brave men and women and children often saw themselves as latter-day Israelites, entering the Promised Land by passing through the river. God works in the water.

In the time of Jesus, the one called John spent a lot of time at the river. That’s why they called him the Baptizer. John knew the power of the water to clean or to drown, to quench thirst and to give new life. For all who went down and came up out of it, it was the sign that a new day had come, that the past was washed away. A sign of forgiveness of their sin. A sign of their welcome into a new life, made whole by the grace of God, down by the river.

One of my favorite movie scenes is from that now-classic movie “O Brother, Where Art Thou,” which happens at the river. The story is set in the deep South during the Depression. Three white convicts named Pete, Delmar, and Ulysses escape from their chain gang. The film is the account of their wandering in the wilderness, hoping to reach a sort of promised land. The sheriff, who is the devil with a badge on, is in hot pursuit.
At one point in their odyssey they are hiding in the woods, eating a meal of roasted gopher, when all of a sudden they hear around them the sound of angelic singing. Delmar, who is not the brightest fellow, stops eating and listens, “It appears to be some sort of congregation,” he says.

He’s right, and the congregation is headed for the river. Drawn by their singing, their white robes through the trees, the look of joy on their faces, the three convicts follow. Delmar is particularly mesmerized by the scene at the river. The three escapees stand there, gaping as men and women come forward to be dipped under the muddy current by the minister.

Delmar is desperate for what they are receiving. He is transfixed by what he sees. Unable to hold back, he plunges in, splashing over to the baptizer who takes him, utters the words of baptism, and thrusts him under the water. A moment later he comes up, grinning at the newness of everything. Pete, who has been taking it all in at the river bank, says, “Well I’ll be. Delmar’s been saved.”

Delmar leaps with joy in the water. “Well, that’s it, boys,” he cries. “I’ve been redeemed! The preacher done washed away all my sins and transgressions. I’m on the straight and narrow from here on out, and heaven everlastin’ is my reward!”

Delmar is beside himself with relief. “The preacher says all my sins is washed away, includin’ that Piggly Wiggly I knocked over in Yazoo.”

A skeptical Ulysses says, “I thought you said you was innocent of those charges.”

Delmar replies, “Well, I was lyin’, and the preacher says that that sin’s been washed away, too. Neither God nor man’s got nothing on me now.” And then throwing his arms up, he shouts, “Come on in, boys, the water’s fine!”

That, my friends, is one of the great theological lines in the history of cinema: Come on in, the water’s fine. What a magnificent portrayal in that scene of the power of the Holy Spirit to work through the waters of baptism to generate human life.

Now, I don’t know if John yelled to Jesus, “Come on in, Jesus, the water’s fine! The Spirit is ready for you!” But John did know that the Holy Spirit working in that water held the secret to new life, the cleansing of our past, the forgiveness of sins, a call to repentance, to turn our lives around, and a permanent welcome into the community of the redeemed.

You know, for the early church, the baptism of Jesus was a scandal. How could they explain it? Why would Jesus have to get baptized? Was he there to wash away his sins? To accept the forgiveness of God? I think even Jesus wanted to belong, to be a part of the community of those who, like Delmar, can turn to the rest of us on the riverbank and say “Come on in! The water’s fine.” Even Jesus needed to hear what all of us need to hear: “You are my beloved child”. Isn’t that something that you have yearned for in those days that you feel you’ve really blown it? In those nights when you are alone and wonder if its all worth it? Those times you have been
bullied by classmates, bosses, society? When for whatever reason you have been made to feel that you are unworthy?

I remember when I was in seminary, with loans up to my neck both from college and divinity school. Working two jobs, skimping on everything I could. Late at night I turned on the little black and white TV we had and there was a commercial for a flight from New York City to Miami. Only $99. The announcer said “Anyone can afford it!” I’m sorry, but there was no way I could afford it. It might have been subtle, but the message I got was that I was nobody.

Jesus needed to be a part of the community. He needed to hear who he was from God: My Son, the beloved one.

I once heard Walter Brueggemann talk about the power of various scripts to define us. The dominant script in our culture, as he described it, is that we are isolated autonomous beings, each one of us; that we are endowed with limitless possibility, that progress is ours, that we can live independently of one another. The dominant script is that we are capable of providing all that we need or want all by ourselves, that things matter over people, and more things matter more. It is that dominant script that determines who we are.

Baptism, he said, completely changes “the script” of our lives and of our world. Baptism, beginning with the baptism of Jesus, inaugurates an utterly different worldview. Love is introduced in a new way, a love more powerful than our desire to go it alone, more powerful than our tendency to disengage from the plight of the poor or those on the margins.

Isaiah saw it coming. Do you remember all those Advent texts? There is the script of the world, saying this is the way it is and always will be. But there is now a counter-movement, texts that refuse to give in to the way things are and have been for many years. It is the script that says life is more than just a series of acquisitions, then you die; that life demands more from us than striving for our self-sufficient autonomy and endless consumption. Baptism gets it all rolling.

It is a power that comes from beyond. The heavens open when John dips Jesus; a voice calls out, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” Every time we baptize, the same voice speaks. It is not part of the official baptismal service, but maybe we should add it, as we pour the water over the baby’s head: “This is my child, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

It is the debut of love, deep, covenantal love, a love deeper than anything we had ever known. It is full of grace and it can know you off your feet like the current in the river.

Most of the times when we have baptisms, there is a little child present, and the parents, children, and the congregation all take vows. Hopefully, years later, that child will come to know something personally about the power and love of God to transform lives. But I remember one particular baptism I had in another church. A young woman would come from time to time to our church because she was a violinist, and we would pay her to play. One
Sunday I saw her in church on a Sunday in which she wasn’t playing. She kept on coming back, and told me that she wanted what it was that she saw in the congregation.

So, like Delmar, one day she came to the river. Oh, this river was a baptismal font in the front of the church. And she didn’t get dunked. I sprinkled her three times. But she was completely overwhelmed by the power of her baptism into the community of the redeemed, so stunned by the experience that she could not go to work for several days afterward. She simply told her employer that she needed time to recover from the baptism. Her life looked entirely different. You see, her script had changed.

It was for her, as it was for Delmar, and for Jesus, and for each of us, the debut of a love stronger than any she had ever known in her life. That love has the power to transform, the power to withstand whatever the world throws at us in the end, even death itself.

I like the way Presbyterian pastor Eugene Peterson paraphrased what God said as Jesus came up out of the water: “This is my Son, chosen and marked by my love, delight of my life.” I am glad that Jesus heard that affirmation early on because there is much about life that is anything but delightful. The scripts are powerful.

Trevor learned that lesson at an early age. Unlike Delmar, Trevor is a real life boy living in a God-forsaken, drug-infested, violent-riddled part of the Bronx. Heidi Neumark, a young Lutheran pastor was assigned to serve a church which had seen its better days, which was somewhat of an understatement. She wrote, “On Sunday mornings, Trevor got himself and his younger brother and sister up and dressed for church while his mother slept off the highs and lows of the night before. On the day of Trevor’s own baptism his mother promised to come, and I believe that she meant it at the time she said it. Through the service, Trevor kept one eye on the door. I did too, but his mom never made it. I asked Trevor if he wanted to wait for another Sunday, but he wanted to go ahead. Trevor bowed his head over the baptismal font and listened to the voice of love that washed over his broken heart. “You are my beloved son with whom I am absolutely delighted. Those were words spoken at Jesus’ baptism. We read them for Trevor.”

And we read them for every child, youth, and adult who comes to the baptized waters to be reminded: You are my beloved, with whom I am absolutely delighted. Those words follow us all the days of our life, not like some magical shield, but as a new script that gives us the confidence to walk boldly into God’s future, confident that our journey of faith will never take us outside the realm of God’s delightful grace.

So, come on in. The water’s fine, and the love, powerful---powerful enough to wash us and redeem us, and welcome us, and even change us.

Thanks be to God.

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