

## COME ON IN. THE WATER'S FINE.

Baptism of the Lord; Ordination and Installation of Officers

[Matthew 3:13-17](#); January 13, 2008

Stephen R. Montgomery

*Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength, and our redeemer. Amen.*

Some of you have heard that song ["Let's Go Down to the River to Pray"]<sup>1</sup> before. We sing it at NaCoMe a lot, but many of us first heard it from one of the better movies that has come out in the past six or seven years, "O Brother, Where Art Thou." One of my favorite scenes takes place at the river. The story is set in the Deep South during the depression. Three white convicts named Pete, Delmar, and Ulysses escape their chain gang. The film is the account of their wondering in the wilderness, hoping to reach some sort of promised land. The sheriff, who is the devil with a badge, is in hot pursuit.

At one point in their odyssey they are hiding in the woods, eating a meal of 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 in 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 up he comes, grinning at the newness of everything. Pete, who has been taking it all in from 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, 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, including that Piggly Wiggly I knocked over in Yazoo."

A skeptical Ulysses says, "I though you said you was innocent of those charges."

"Well, I was lyin'," Delmar said, "and the preacher says that sin's been washed away too. Neither God nor man's got nothin' on me now." And then throwing his arms up, he shouts, "Come on in boys, the water's fine!"

It's 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 regenerate human life.

Do you suppose that one of those who preceded Jesus in the river Jordan turned and shouted a word of encouragement to him? “Come on in, Jesus, the water’s fine.” Or maybe those were the words used by John the Baptist to draw people into the Jordan. “Come on in, the water’s fine, and the Spirit is ready for you.”

It’s not recorded in scripture that way, but there are a lot of things not recorded in scripture. But I do know this: John knew that somehow, the Holy Spirit working in that water held the secret to new life, the cleansing of the past, the forgiveness of sins, a call to repentance and to turn our lives around, a permanent welcome into the community of the redeemed.

Why do you suppose that Jesus, then, wanted to be baptized? After all, it was an embarrassment for the early church, which made the claim that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of the living God, one who was without sin. So why would Jesus need to be baptized at all? Even John struggled with that question. “You’re the one that should be baptizing me,” he protested.

Jesus answered him by saying that his baptism would fulfill all righteousness. But I wonder what he meant by that. That term, of course, was throughout the Hebrew scriptures that Matthew and John and Jesus all used. Isaiah wrote “I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness. I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes of the blind, to bring out from prison those who sit in darkness. (Isaiah 42:6-7)

Maybe Jesus is saying that *can* live in right relationship with God and others; that it is the will of God for him to save the world, to make righteousness a reality through joining himself to sinners, and in being baptized, he is identifying with all humanity. He is sharing in the fullness of human experience, in order that humanity may be forgiven, saved, and made righteous.

Even Jesus wants to belong. Even Jesus needs to belong, to be 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.”

And Jesus needed to hear what he then heard as the heavens opened up and a voice from heaven affirmed but also *indicted* Jesus with news of the favor of God. “This is my child,” says God, “the beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

Jesus needed to hear that, because of what happened next. Do you remember what happened next? A champagne party? A placid lifetime of being thoroughly understood? A beautifully uncontested social and religious agenda that gets endorsed unanimously by everyone with whom Jesus comes in to contact? No, none of that. Instead, a wilderness experience. Temptation to do the expedient, prudent thing instead of the faithful thing. Then there is resistance, and fear, and turmoil and growing opposition and, at the end, death at the hands of a cowardly people; and the promise to anyone who follows after him that they will get the same treatment.

So why even follow this guy if that’s what happens when we come to the water? But people do follow him, and have since the very beginning; because the faith of the church teaches them, teaches us, that God who is with us at the beginning of life and in every season of life, waits for us at the end of life to complete what we cannot complete by ourselves.

“This is my Child,” says God, “the beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” Above all the other voices, all the noises, he needed to hear that voice.

Those of you who are taking special vows this day, vows to assume the mantle of leadership and servanthood in this church as elders and deacons: will you keep your ears tuned for that loving, indicting, frightening, redeeming, saving voice of God?

I remember reading somewhere that once, on a train from New York to Boston, George Gershwin was inspired to compose the major portion of “Rhapsody in Blue.” On a train, of all places! Not exactly where you would think you would need to be in order to compose music. Gershwin was on a train—with its steely rhythms, its click-clack regularity of sound, its bells and whistles. That where he was when he heard the complete construction of the Rhapsody from the beginning to end. He later made the remark: “I frequently hear music in the very heart of noise.”<sup>2</sup>

The record we have in scripture is that, from the moment of his baptism unto the moment of his death, through all the noise, Jesus never lost his hearing. He heard music in the very heart of noise. That music began “This is my Child, the beloved.”

Here, in the middle of this city, we hear a good bit of noise ... the noise of our own sad self-promotions, the noise of factions squaring off against each other; the noise of people screaming so loudly that they can’t be heard. We hear lots of voices, too. Voices telling us that we are what we own. Telling us that we are limited by our racial and socio-economic and gender and differences. Voices all clamoring for our attention. A future full of noise.

But there are people who come here to this place, to this church community, having come up out of the water and at some point heard that voice speak to them ... “You are my child, my beloved.” And having heard that, they resolve to live their lives with their ears tuned for the music. They’re giving their money and their time and energy to causes that build up rather than tear down; they’re making an effort to articulate their faith in the workplace; they’re opening up their lives to people they don’t know; they’re teaching Sunday school and singing in the choir and serving on committees and serving folks at More than a Meal and tutoring children, and in thousands of other ways, they’re demonstrating with their lives the conviction that the future into which we’re all living is the arena to which God comes to meet and redeem us.

What lyrics would cause them to live in such a way? How about these lyrics from our text for today: “This is God’s beloved, with whom God is well-pleased.”

“Come on in. The water’s fine.” But that doesn’t mean that all will be fine when the water dries. We’ll have to sort out all those voices that we hear. We’ll be tempted to take the easy route, to believe the myth that we are self-made people; to do what is popular rather than faithful.

But we’ve heard the music, haven’t we? We’ve heard that voice in the innermost part of our heart, the voice of the one Living God saying “This is my child....beloved.” Can you hear the music?<sup>3</sup>

And that is music to our ears ... the music of One Who redeems what we cannot redeem; who completes what we cannot complete. The music of a slow, dim-witted escaped prisoner with no future, coming up out of the water drenched in new life. The music of a blind beggar suddenly receiving his sight, like a lame man who leaps up and runs, like a prodigal welcomed home; like one who has been excluded being invited in.

So to that indicting, disturbing, redeeming One be all honor and glory now and forever.

Amen.

© 2008 Idlewild Presbyterian Church, Memphis, Tennessee

---

<sup>1</sup> The sermon began with Steve Berger singing from the balcony “Let’s Go Down to the River to Pray.” He sang several verses before I got up to preach.

<sup>2</sup> I believe I first heard this story from Ted Wardlaw when he was in a lectionary group with me. Ted is now president of Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary. He tied this in to listening to the music above the noise.

<sup>3</sup> At this point, Steve began playing the guitar and singing quietly from the back “Let’s go Down...” as I finished the sermon. Many thanks to Steve.

---

### **Matthew 3:13-17 NRS**

**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.”

[return to top](#)