

Get Out of the Water

Sermon for Epiphany 1, the Baptism of Our Lord, January 8, 2023

Readings: Isaiah 42:1-9; Acts 10:34-43; Matthew 3:13-17; Psalm 29

Sermon text: Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights. Isaiah 42:1

Life is not just a river in which we drift along with the current, feeding and fighting and multiplying, resisting or overpowered by those undertows that can drag us down—until we reach our final destination in the ocean of death

No, we are descendants of all those creatures that climbed out of the water onto land, struggling to find a niche spreading out among all the various topographies and climates of the earth, feeding and fighting and multiplying, and also eventually dying.

But there is a key difference. In this metaphor or framing picture, life is not just drifting and descent but the possibility of ascent, evolution, transformation; our destiny not the dissolving sea but the promised land, what Jesus called the kingdom of heaven.

Having started with a metaphor, let me continue our journey with a sacrament. Baptism. Now a sacrament you remember from confirmation class is an outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible grace. In the case of baptism, water is the outward sign, but what is the inward grace?

When I ask people during baptismal instruction what they think of when they think of baptism they usually reply, initiation into the family of God, the church, or, more rarely these days, cleansing from original sin. These are parts but I think the main thing is baptism as a passage to new life—a passage through the water, symbolized by Moses leading the Israelites through the Red Sea, from bondage in Egypt to freedom in the promised land of Canaan. It is empowerment by the Holy Spirit—the dove descending on Jesus, the oil sealing us in the Spirit in our sacrament's final part. It is the Spirit's power to rise from the sea, to hear and heed the call of Jesus to follow, to know with him that you are a beloved child of God and in your halting steps toward freedom and faith and love God is well pleased.

Now baptism is a stage, a necessary stop along the way but not the whole journey. Consider Jesus and his baptism, which we celebrate today. Luke tells us he was about thirty years old when he began his ministry. Scripture is scant

on his earlier years but I like to think he grew up in his old neighborhood in Nazareth, hanging with the other kids and his younger brothers and sisters (scripture mentions siblings). No doubt he learned the trade of his human father Joseph, and perhaps he took on the responsibilities of head of household when Joseph died (scripture is silent on him after the teenage years of Jesus), until when his younger brothers had grown old enough to take over the business he could follow his personal call to ministry. John, whom scripture tells us was his cousin, was preaching and baptizing down at the river Jordan, a powerful prophet proclaiming that the kingdom of heaven was near and there was one still to come who would baptize with fire and the holy Spirit. Jesus went to see him and undergo the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin. John, according to our gospel, demurred—you should baptize me, he told Jesus. But Jesus insisted. This was an essential part of the journey, a symbolic immersion into the river of humanity and its sins, and then, on rising, to see the Spirit in the form of a dove descending on him, and hear the voice of the Father saying—you are my Son, my Beloved, I am well pleased with you. Note the naming of the Trinity.

Now what happened to Jesus next? He went into the desert. He was tempted by the devil. He had to work out in his own mind and then through the steps he took in his life just what it meant to be the child of God he now knew himself to be.

He went back to Galilee, gathered some disciples and started saving the world. At the end, as he said his final farewell to his disciples on the mountain before ascending into heaven—he gave them the great commission to continue his world of saving the world, baptizing and teaching the nations in the name of the Father Son and Holy Spirit.

So that's what we as church try to do. It's not just a sacrament of individuals or single lives but of a great movement of the spirit, an evolution—halting, often distracted or off track, even stymied or reversed at times—but still moving through the world.

And what does it involve—what do we sign up for when we take the plunge and begin the journey?

Well, after this sermon I will invite you to renew your baptismal vows. And, not by accident, this expanded version of the creed spells out the main parts of the work.

First is the reaffirmation of faith in God, the three in one Trinity traditionally named Father Son and Holy Spirit, creator redeemer sanctifier. We believe this

amazing God is not a distant watcher in heaven but active in the world, immanent as well as transcendent, not just in the past but now—and always—as it was in the beginning is now and will be for ever—whether the world will end or not. By placing our faith in God and trust and love in Jesus we choose to follow the way he taught as did his disciples then.

The way is somewhat spelled out in the questions following the restated creed. The way involves at least these five parts:

1. **Fellowship.** You are not alone on this journey. You join the fellowship of the apostles, joining in prayers and worship, coming to church when able, praying at home and elsewhere.
2. **Humility**—recognizing our own limits and weakness, our need to admit when we fall and our need to be forgiven and therefore to ask for forgiveness—knowing through Jesus teaching that God will forgive a repentant heart.
3. **Witness**—not only proclaiming the good news but living it by example. For instance by calling an old friend or making new ones and not talking only about family and health and work—the river of life—but of their spiritual well-being, perhaps something you can pray on.
4. **Striving** for justice and peace—we all have to swim in the world of work and necessity but strive also for higher goods and goals—for truth and beauty as well as justice and peace—for love above all.
5. Which brings us the final part: **Respect**, respect the dignity of all human beings and indeed all living beings and earth itself, its water, land and air. It is through mutual respect and care that we weave and strengthen the bonds of the beloved community, and without this idealized community we shall find ourselves stuck, sinking in the partisan conflicted distrusting and even hate-filled world that our lower instincts of fear and greed and status seeking lead us toward.

And finally, know this hold onto this as you make your way out of the water and up to the sun dappled shores of new life, as you see in the distance the lights of the promised land, the jeweled city symbolically named Zion or heavenly Jerusalem—the place pictured in the last chapter of the Bible, our final home—heaven on earth. Know this, hold onto this: You are beloved by God, and in as you make this passage and walk on this way with you God is well pleased.

In the name of Christ, Amen.

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