

First Reading Genesis 1:1-5

¹In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, ²the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. ³Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. ⁴And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. ⁵God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

Isaiah 42:1-9

Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. ²He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; ³a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice.

⁴He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his teaching. ⁵Thus says God, the Lord, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it: ⁶I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, ⁷to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.

⁸I am the Lord, that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols. ⁹See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them.

Mark 1:4-11

⁴John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. ⁸I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

⁹In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. ¹¹And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

Swimming Lessons

Mark 1: 1-13

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In Pastor Will Willimon’s book on baptism called *Remember Who You Are*, he tells a story about taking his four-year-old son to swimming lessons. He had tried to teach him a few times but somehow, they hadn’t made any progress. He was not certain what a four-year-old could learn about swimming, but when he enrolled him in the class the teacher remarked that, “I wish we could have gotten him a little earlier. It’s so much easier to teach younger children to swim.” “Younger children?” I asked in disbelief. “Oh, we like to get them before they can walk,” she replied.

My next question was to ask her how she went about teaching babies to swim. “We just more or less throw them in, and they already know what to do. It helps to get them as young as possible because little babies still

follow their instincts and behave naturally in the water. Don't forget, a baby is in the water for nine months before it is born. Also, babies are still very trusting and will allow you to do more with them."

That night I stood by the pool and watched a skillful swimming teacher do what I had been unable to do. She coaxed our boy into the water, pulling him out until the water was over his head. He protested, but she kept tugging, gently but firmly, she encouraged him to put his head under the water. He was reluctant at first, but her firm hand pressed his little head into the water. He sputtered and sneezed a couple times, but it was not long until he got the hang of it and was holding his head under water for almost a minute. She let go, and to his delight and our surprise, he floated."

We watched in amazement at his rapid progress. "It just goes to show," I said, "that sometimes kids trust other people more that they trust their parents. Look at how much he has done with that teacher."

Today we are getting our swimming lessons from Jesus. Or maybe wading lessons. At any rate he has come to show us how to begin the journey of faithful discipleship and how to restore our relationship with God. And we do it by following his lead by coming to this water and first repenting of our sins and then being washed in holy water. This is something that God does for us and not something we do for ourselves. That long before we were even aware of it God was preparing a way for us through the life of His son.

It reminds me of a story I've shared before but one that bears repeating. It's by Pastor Tom Walker who shared a personal story about his parents and his adoption that reminded him of what baptism is all about. In his story he says:

"The overstuffed shoebox lay long forgotten in a closet in my mother's apartment. When I opened the box, out poured letters recording four years of correspondence (1958-62) between my parents and an adoption agency. Four years before I was even born, my parents were hard at work preparing a place for me. Even before I received my name, before I was baptized in our small Presbyterian church, before I could respond with the words "I love you," my parents cared for me. In that shoebox was a history of love and grace that preceded any action on my part."

In our denomination where we baptize our children this story says it all for me. That we present our children to God just as Will Willimon gave his child over to the swimming teacher, trusting that she would show him how to love the water. In a similar way we bring our children and others to the church and to the family of God trusting that they too will show our children how much God loves them even before they were aware of it. To tell them the rest of the story as they grow in faith and service.

Baptism marks us as God's own and reminds us who we are particularly in a world that is depending on our forgetting. And perhaps for Jesus as well, this is one of those moments that even though he knew he was called by God to be the Messiah, he needed this moment...he needed to hear God's voice...to be anointed in the waters of life...to both affirm and confirm that this was truly God's call on him.

We see a similar experience on the mount of transfiguration where Jesus and Peter, James and John hear the voice of God again say, "This is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased." Just before Jesus begins the last days of his ministry and life as he walks into Jerusalem to his crucifixion. And just as Samuel anointed Saul and David as they began their kingship, so John anoints Jesus with the water of life as he begins his.

We all want these experiences...to hear God's voice...to be reminded as Jesus was that we too are God's beloved daughters and sons...His beloved children, and by our baptism with and in Jesus we too are called into ministry. That it is His voice we are listening for to affirm who we are.

According to Professor Lamar Williamson, “In Mark the baptism of Jesus establishes his identity. And Paul says in Gal 3:26-29 and Rom. 6:3-11, the baptism of believers establishes our identity. Jesus is who God says he is. So also we are who God says we are, and in Christ Jesus we are sons and daughters of God, “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.” (Gal. 3: 26-27)

And in our gospel story this morning we find ourselves participating along with John and Jesus at the river Jordan. A river which serves as a symbol for many of the other waters that the Jewish community would remember. The waters of creation which we heard in our genesis passage this morning, the waters of the flood, the waters of the red sea, the waters of the sea of Galilee, the water that was turned into wine as well as many others. And another water reference that we should make is the universal experience of birth, when waters break and new life emerges and perhaps that is closer to what baptism is like than any of the others.

And in many of these stories there is a crossing over. Particularly in the red sea and the sea of Galilee which is a recurring theme in many stories about new beginnings and sacred stories and songs, and for John and Jesus and his followers and for us, this is a crossing over story too...a washing and signing/sealing story...a sacrament that marks and anoints the beginning of Jesus’ ministry and ours as well, even as children, as we bear the seal of water.

Carolyn Winfrey Gillette, penned these lyrics to the tune *Praise to the Lord, The Almighty* which I found so rich and meaningful today. And I invite you to sing it with me. The words are on the insert in your bulletin.

Down By the Jordan/Praise to the Lord, the Almighty

Down by the Jordan, a prophet named John was baptizing,
Preaching a message the people found bold and surprising:
"God will forgive! Show that you'll change how you live!
Surely God's new day is rising!"

There by the river, the crowd came with great expectation:
"Are you God's Chosen One, sent here to rescue our nation?"
"No!" John replied. "He who is mightier than I
Judges and offers salvation."

Jesus, you went to be baptized along with the others,
Taking your place among sinners, God's lost sons and daughters.
Then with great love, God's Spirit came as a dove!
Your work began in those waters.

Here in the Church, we are baptized and filled with God's Spirit.
Freed and forgiven, we're welcomed with joy! Can you hear it?
This is God's sign! This is how God says, "You're mine!"
Let's take the good news and share it!

This is how God says, “You’re mine!” I love that, don’t you? Some of you may remember an episode from the old Andy Griffith Television show, in which the Women’s Historical Society discovered that a living descendant of a Revolutionary War hero was living right there in Mayberry. The news generated excitement and curiosity throughout the town as people made plans for recognizing the hero’s relative. Barney Fife, of course, twisted his own family tree to the point that he put himself in line for the honor. The rest of the townspeople felt special just because someone among them was related to a hero.

However, everyone was shocked when the person was finally revealed. A careful analysis of the genealogical records determined that the hero's descendent was none other than, Otis Campbell, the town drunk. Despite suggestions to find a "substitute Otis" for the presentation, the real Otis showed up for the ceremony true to form. When the ladies finally give him the plaque, Otis holds it in his hands for a moment, and then decides instead to give the plaque to the town. He tells them, "Just because you're the descendent of a hero doesn't make you one too. So, I would like to present this plaque to the town of Mayberry, to which I am just proud to belong."

Well, aren't we all? Aren't we all just happy to belong, to be included! That's what happens to us together in baptism, we all are included with Christ and with one another. It's the gift of relationship, of belonging, of recognizing we are all in this together – together with Jesus and with one another. We are stuck with one another, like it or not!

As we begin this New Year, full of new beginnings and with surprising new opportunities in front of us for ministry and service let us, just like Jesus, come to the water. Be reminded again of our names. Be reminded again, who we are and to whom we belong. To be obedient to God's calling in our lives. And I thought it would be timely and appropriate, and I know for myself very necessary, to revisit and reaffirm our baptismal vows this morning. To remind us once again that we belong to God and that we are his beloved children and that we are called to serve and love His Kingdom. Our physical baptism may happen only once, but living out that baptism is something that takes a lifetime to finish. And so, we return again and again in our journey of faith, to grow deeper and more fully into our baptism.

So, I invite you to join me as I lead you back to the water and the covenant of baptism so that you can once again make your vow to the Lord. For those reading the sermon today the following comes from the Book of Common Worship.

Hear these words from Holy Scripture: (1 Cor. 12: 12-13, 27 & Eph. 4: 1-3)

Just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. Lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

Profession of Faith

Sisters and brothers in Christ, our baptism is the sign and seal of our cleansing from sin, and of our being grafted into Christ. Through the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Christ, the power of sin was broken and God's kingdom entered our world. Through our baptism we were made citizens of God's kingdom, and freed from the bondage of sin. Let us celebrate that freedom and redemption through the renewal of the promises made at our baptism.

I ask you, therefore. Once again to reject sin, to profess your faith in Christ Jesus, and to confess the faith of the church, the faith in which we were baptized.

Renunciations:

Trusting in the gracious mercy of God, do you turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world.

I do

Do you turn to Jesus Christ, and accept him as your Lord and Savior, trusting in his grace and love?

I do

Will you be Christ's faithful disciple, obeying his Word and showing his love, to your life's end?

I will, with God's help.

With the whole church let us confess our faith using the Apostle's Creed.

(After the Creed)

Let us pray: Eternal and gracious God, we give you thanks. In countless ways you have revealed yourself in ages past, and have blessed us with signs of your grace. We praise you that through the waters of the sea you led your people Israel out of bondage, into freedom in the land of your promise. We praise you for sending Jesus your Son, who for us was baptized in the waters of the Jordan, and was anointed as the Christ by your Holy Spirit. Through the baptism of his death and resurrection you set us free from the bondage of sin and death, and give us cleansing and rebirth. We praise you for your Holy Spirit, who teaches us and leads us into all truth, filling us with a variety of gifts, that we might proclaim the gospel to all nations and serve you as a royal priesthood. We rejoice that you claimed us in our baptism, and that by your grace we are born anew. By your Holy Spirit renew us, that we may be empowered to do your will and continue forever in the risen life of Jesus Christ, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be all glory and honor, now and forever. Amen.

The minister may place his hand into the water of the font, lift up some water, let it fall back into the font, and then make the sign of the cross over the people, while saying: "Remember your baptism and be thankful. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." Amen.

As we sing our hymn of response I invite you to come and visit the water of baptism. It is always appropriate to touch the water and make the sign of the cross on your forehead or just linger at the font and remember. Please come as you feel led by the Spirit.