

“Waters of the Jordan”
 August 14, 2016
 Thirteenth Sunday After Pentecost
 Matthew 3:13-17

Island Heights UMC, Island Heights, NJ

Introduction

So, how about this heat? I have consulted with quite a few people, and it’s official—it is HOT out there. Joan and I knew a man a long time ago, someone we worked with, Curtis, who would say. “Whew! This is the kind of day you could lose your charisma.” It’s the kind of day we look for relief, and our human instincts draw us to water. We drink it, we shower in it, we swim in it. Anything to get some relief.

These past few days a song from the eighties by the Talking Heads has been playing in my mind:

Take me to the river, dip me in the water

Before the Talking Heads cover, there was the original by the Rev. Al Green in the seventies:

Take me to the river

And wash me down

Won't you cleanse my soul

Put my feet on the ground

And before that there was the 1864 hit song “Shall We Gather at the River,” by Robert Lowry.

Yes, we'll gather at the river,

The beautiful, the beautiful river;

Gather with the saints at the river

That flows by the throne of God.

They all sound good when the heat of the sun gets as brutal as this. We need to get to the river and be revived and be refreshed. And today’s passage from the Gospel of Matthew fittingly takes us there. And it’s there we experience some much needed relief.

The Power of the River

There is power in the river. If you have ever stood in a river you can feel there is power in its deep current moving as if pulled by an unseen force. Like many things in nature, you better not underestimate the power of a river. Similarly, there is power in the message of John the Baptist. John who is standing and baptizing in the Jordan River for repentance of sins. His message is clear: *“Repent! For the kingdom of heaven has come near.”* Turn from you sins and get right, or re-aligned, and closer with God because God’s kingdom is now coming near.

But the Gospel of Matthew tells it that, *“Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him.”*

The baptism of Jesus?! The one who had never sinned, the one who would never sin, the one with no need to repent still comes to be baptized. *John would have prevented him. He says, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?”*

This is the first thing Jesus does before any of his ministry begins. Before he is tested in the wilderness by the devil, before any of the miracles, before any of the

healings, before any of his preaching and teaching, he first has some business at the river.

Baptism matters. As a sacrament of the ancient, the present, and future Church it signifies our initiation into the body of Christ; the world-wide community of faith. When we are baptized we embark on a spiritual journey. With the mark of God upon our lives we set out and travel together with family and friends, sisters and brothers; lifting each other in prayer and looking out for one another. There is power in this ancient sacrament and we are drawn by its strong current connecting us to all believers through the ages.

A River of Grace

And have you ever just stood on the banks and watched a river flow by? How different things float past, carried by the current. What flows down this mighty River Jordan but an endless supply of God's grace?

Baptism is an access point of grace. Grace. That unmerited gift from God to us. Think of grace as the ongoing activity of God in our lives. And consider baptism as "prevenient grace;" what theologians refer to as "that which goes before." Or, in other words, God's way of reaching us before we even start looking for God. This is why infant baptism gives us such a powerful picture of God's grace. Something has taken place here that young Cora had no effort in. Grace has found her this morning, even before she has starting searching for God.

Grace continues to function in our lives. It's grace that causes us one day to come to faith in Jesus Christ. That's also a gift from God.

Grace then continues to work through the rest of our life, as the Holy Spirit perfects us in God's love and transforms us into God's righteousness.

And so, even though John is reluctant to baptize Jesus, *Jesus answers him, 'Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.'*

We heard Dawn read from the prophet Isaiah earlier, *"Thus 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; I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you.*

God's grace has always been destined to reach humanity, and in Jesus, the full righteousness of God in the flesh, it has happened.

Of course John agrees to baptize him, so that all righteousness is fulfilled. And on that day the river flows with grace.

Life in the Water

Water flows all through many stories of the Bible and the history of God's people. We hear this in the liturgy of the baptism service. We remember the waters that covered the earth at the beginning when the Creator was forming our planet, and then again at the great flood. We recall how the waters of the Red Sea parted when God's people were delivered out of Egypt. Then after forty years in the wilderness, the people of Israel

crossed through the Jordan River into the promise land. And then we hear of Jesus's baptism in the Jordan.

There's continuity in the water. All water from the beginning of time interacting atmospherically through countless weather systems, continuously cycling up and down and around the globe. We all share the same water. The water that flows through local streams is what flows into the Toms River and the Barnegat Bay and into the Atlantic Ocean and finds its way around the globe. The water that evaporates into the air today is the water that falls somewhere else in the world tomorrow. The water in the baptismal font this morning is the water that at some time flowed in the Jordan.

Water sustains the planet. Our life depends on it. There is a quenching of deep thirst in the water. There is healing in the water. There is cleansing in the water. There is life in the water.

Something Happens in the River

This is why water and baptism will never be separated. Water is a living reminder of God's grace and power. Baptism is more than a rite of passage. Something *happens* in that water. There is a shift in the spiritual realm when John baptizes Jesus in the Jordan. The same shift occurs every time a baptism is performed.

When Jesus was baptized, Matthew writes, 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. What a spectacular picture of Trinity in a rare Scriptural moment in which all three persons of the Holy Trinity appear at once: The Holy Spirit of God descending as a dove and landing on Jesus, the Son of God. And then the voice. The voice from heaven. The voice of God the Father.

A voice from heaven saying the words we all long to hear from a loving parent, *"This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."*

And this is good news for all of us. Today as you stand on the banks of the Jordan and deep within your soul remember your own baptism, hear the words of God echoing back to you off of the river, the words that are spoken over *your* life, "This is my child, the one I love, with whom I am well pleased."

Sending Out in Mission

This is what is spoken over Cora today. We have taken vows as a community to remind her of that as she grows up. This is a responsibility we all have to each other.

Please take a moment now in silent meditation to remember and consider your own baptism and how the Spirit of God has moved in your life. And then decide two things: 1) How you will move closer to God this week, and 2) Pick a person you will encourage this week in their journey of faith.