

Come To the Waters

Ezekiel 47:1-12

Psalm 29

Matthew 3:13-17

January 9, 2011

Baptism of the Lord Sunday

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I

Ezekiel is shown a vision of life! After visions of death and destruction, this priest and prophet from Jerusalem, within whose lifetime the great City of God was captured and left in ruins, its Temple destroyed, its inhabitants slain or driven into Exile, including Ezekiel himself, now Ezekiel is shown a vision of life. Fresh water bubbles forth from beneath the altar at the center of the Temple in Jerusalem. It flows in ever increasing measure on toward the East and the Dead Sea. As the little stream flows the water deepens, first ankle-deep; just a little trickle, then knee-deep, a little creek; then waist-deep, something you could walk through; finally a mighty river too deep and too wide to cross other than by swimming. By the time it reaches its destination at the sea, there is a roaring river flowing of living water.

“See the streams of living waters, spreading from eternal love,
Well supply thy sons and daughters And all fear of want remove.
Who can faint while such a river ever flows their thirst to assuage?
Grace, which like the Lord the giver, never fails from age to age.”ⁱ

The river of fresh water flows on east from Jerusalem to the Dead Sea, that lowest, driest most arid place on earth, whose waters are lifeless filled with extreme saltiness which allows no thing to live in those stinging salty waters. And yet in the vision Ezekiel sees,

“Wherever the river goes, every living creature that swarms will live, and there will be very many fish, once these waters reach there. It will become fresh; and everything will live where the river goes.”ⁱⁱ

As the river flows it gives life to everything in its path. As the river enters the sea it gives life to even that Dead Sea with people actually catching fish - many kinds and varieties of fish. Along its banks all kinds of lush trees grow and produce fruit, fruit for every season, something always available. On top of all that, salt, which is of course also needed as a preservative, as an enhancer, only just not in the quantity present in the Dead Sea normally, now with the living water flowing into it, the salt is still available in the swamps and marshes in proper amounts. These do not become fresh but are left for salt.

Here, in other words, is a picture of perfection, a beautiful picture of renewal, and restoration, and reconciliation, and redemption after destruction. Here is the Garden of Eden restored, that state of perfection with which the whole Bible begins. Here is the New Heaven and the New Earth, that image of perfection with which the whole Bible

concludes. In Revelation, Chapter 22, we read of the “river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Here then is a vision of God’s overall purpose from cover to cover in the Bible; renewal and restoration of his people, starting out from Jerusalem, and through them, flowing forth bringing life to places of death, unto the ends of the earth. Here is God’s grace and love overwhelming and overflowing, and inviting you and me is “Come.” “Come to the waters.” “Come and experience the refreshing healing and cleansing found in the water that comes from the presence of God. Come take a drink.

II

In our New Testament Lesson from Matthew 3 we have moved in just a few short weeks from the unprecedented birth in Bethlehem now to this full grown Jesus. That is how the Bible tells it. We have the account of his birth, told in different ways in three of the four Gospels, not mentioned at all in Mark, and then, except for one brief story at age 12 in the Temple with the teachers, jumping ahead to age 30. Now this grown up young man Jesus comes wandering down one day from his hometown in Nazareth to the Jordan River. Here he gets in line with fishermen and farmers and housewives and shopkeepers from little villages that dot Galilee, all of these undistinguished, unnamed, unimportant people- so far as the world counts importance, and all of these sinners. And Jesus, who at that point of sin is utterly different, for he has no sin, and yet he presents himself there before his cousin John for baptism for repentance from sins like all the rest.

A number of you have taken part in the Kairos Retreat Weekends out at Donaldson State Prison. Many of you have baked cookies and made placemats for the weekends. I have participated in a number of these amazing four day events where convicted criminals who reside in that prison serving 10, 20 year and life sentences, are brought to the prison chapel for four days of overflowing grace as they experience God’s love and grace through real people. Many of them experience love and grace from real people actually caring about them, for the very first time ever.

Well although we who take part in these retreat teams do our best to identify with these prisoners, there is still a marked distinction between those who live there and we who visit there. We are given a long list of instructions about what we can and cannot take into the prison with us, no pens, no pencils, and no cell phones. And what we are to wear. No white pants and no white shirts. You see the prison uniforms are all white. Those we spend time with there are sometimes referred to as the “men in white.” And the prison officials, for very practical reasons, do not want us to look like, to become confused with the prisoners. There is a definite line of separation between them and us.

But not so with Jesus that day at the river. He who had no sin, who needed no baptism, comes to begin in baptism a work that will for all time remove sin from every one of us. He goes down into the water with the worst of us. He does it to identify fully

with us. We celebrated at Christmas, that God took on human flesh, born in Bethlehem. Now fast forwarding 30 years, God in human flesh of Jesus goes down into the waters with us. He shows us how closely he identifies with us. And as he does this he experiences the Holy presence of God as never before. Father, Son and Holy Spirit are all here. As Jesus the Son comes up out of the water he sees the Holy Spirit of God descend like a dove and land right there on his shoulder, and then, even more dramatically he hears with his human ears the divine voice of the Father, saying, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

Ever since his death and resurrection and ascension, those who have followed him have been so baptized. In this sign of beginning our life of faith and our entrance into the community of Jesus’ followers we go down into water with whatever mud and dirt and grime are on us, and we come up fresh, clean, new, and forgiven. Ever since the beginning, baptism has been regarded by all branches of the Christian Church as the essential sign and symbol of our identity with Jesus Christ in his suffering and death, in his victory and resurrection. Baptism signifies that we have died to our old selves and come alive to our new selves, as Children of God. Our new name is always spoken in baptism, “our Christian name” “Tom, Mary, Bob, Susan, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”

In baptism we are given a name and an identity. We are told who we are and whose we are, and how greatly we are loved. But then, and this is the kicker, we spend the rest of our lives living out that identity. We spend the rest of our lives being loved greatly by God and saying thank you to Him who loved us from before our conception, who loves us now, and will love us finally into his eternal keeping when we pass from this earthly life in a flash to eternal life with God forever. That is to say; this baptism, brief, simple as it is, is a big deal, and lasts for a lifetime.

III

Do you remember your own baptism? Did your parents tell you about it? Sometimes we forget. We run and hide and act like we’ve never heard of God or Jesus or the Spirit. But the fact remains, we have been washed, we have been claimed, we have been loved from before the foundation of the world. Jesus discovers at a new level the day he is baptized exactly who he is, the Father’s beloved Son. Each and every one of us who are baptized are given that same sense of love and acceptance and welcome and identity. We are marked, tattooed indelibly! Each and every one of us are then responsible before God and one another for living out this new identity we have been given.

Ann Lamott is a writer who went through a time of forgetfulness. She lived through difficult and hard experiences. She wandered far from the God who loves her. But she found her way back home through a little Presbyterian congregation in Marin City, California, and she wrote about her experience, using outrageous, salty language in a delightful book called Traveling Mercies. Interviewed by an evangelical magazine about her conversion she said,

“I try to share my resurrection story with people in the hopes that some of them who have left churches who have been kicked out because of their beliefs or sexual orientation will find something in my words or humor that makes church safe for them again...

I never said I am a good Christian. I just know that Jesus adores me and is only as far away as his name. I say, ‘Hi, Lord,’ and he says, ‘Hello, Darling.’ He loves me so much he keeps a photo of me in his wallet. If I were the only person on earth, he still would have died for me.”^{iv}

What I hope you will see afresh today, what I hope you will claim, firmly and rejoice over, what I hope you will experience in a very personal way today and throughout this year 2011, is the profound difference that has come upon you when you lay claim to your baptism and all it signifies; your new identity as a child of God, your cleansing from your sins, and your acceptance as one loved greatly by God. I hope you will experience as we say in the Baptism liturgy, that

“Through baptism we enter the covenant God has established. Within this covenant God gives us new life, guards us from evil, and nurtures us in love. In embracing that covenant, we choose whom we will serve, by turning from evil and turning to Jesus Christ.”^v

You may note that we here are trying to catch up with the Baptists in our abundant use of water. The amount used is really not important, but the more we use the more vivid the sign and symbol that this is a real bath in deep water and not a dry cleaning. Paul writes to the Romans, this is a death that involves a burial, and this is resurrection. “We have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.”

Twenty four years ago, our family gathered with Gayle’s little sister Julie and her husband Mark as they presented their first born son Will at the baptismal waters of St. Henry’s Roman Catholic Church in Nashville. Will’s baptism was a beautiful ceremony, and reflected one of the remarkable points of unity across denominations, that Baptism in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit is not denomination specific, but Christian specific. In fact just recently the Presbyterian Church USA, along with three other Reformed denominations in the United States, entered into a formal agreement with the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops on mutual recognition of each other’s baptisms, a major ecumenical breakthrough.

You can imagine how much that remembrance meant 22 years later, almost two years ago now, meant when at the end of spring break, Will was killed in a tragic automobile accident. As we gathered at his family church in Nashville his coffin was covered with a white cloth, a pall, signifying the completion of his baptism, of his welcome into his heavenly Father’s presence. Will’s death was and remains such a sad

and tragic and unnecessary event. He did not have his seat belt on and he had been drinking a few beers and then driving in the early morning hours too fast on a wet country road. But in the midst of that tragedy, that loss, also the sure and certain knowledge that God knew Will's name and welcomed and received him instantly into his living loving presence. For Will had been claimed by God in baptism, and Will had claimed his baptism by faith. Will believed.

At the darkest and lowest points in his life, and there were many of them for Martin Luther who suffered severe bouts of depression, he used to write in Latin on his slate, "Baptizatus Sum" and then slam his fist down on his desk and shout, "I am baptized. I know who I am and whose I am."

May each of us know the same. That "Wherever the river goes, every living creature that swarms will live." In claiming our baptismal identity again and again, and with it all God in Jesus Christ has done for us because of his great unlimited love for us, may we know how greatly we are loved, how strongly we are held, and how certain we remain that no dark days, no failure, no sickness, no sadness, no addiction, no job loss, no rupture of a relationship, and no car wreck is strong enough to undo God's love for us, or to break God's lock-hold on us.

"Now thus says the Lord, he who created you... Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior."^{vi}

"In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."^{vii}

Friends, trust confidently that you are loved like that. You are somebody! You are God's child. You are baptized! Come to the waters! Amen!

ⁱ The Presbyterian Hymnal, "Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken", p.446

ⁱⁱ Ezekiel 47:9.

ⁱⁱⁱ Revelation 22:2

^{iv} Ann Lamott, interview referenced in a sermon by John Buchanan, at Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, "Grasped by the Power of Love," 1-11-04.

^v Book of Common Worship, PCUSA, Sacrament of Baptism, p. 12.

^{vi} Isaiah 43:1-3.

^{vii} Romans 8:39.