

January 11, 2015
Pastor Donald Shenk
Reflections
Theme: "Grounded in the Water"
Text: Mark 1:4-11

It's not a repentance sandwich!
I know; it seems to be.
Three weeks before the birth of Christ
We heard from John the B.
And now it's three weeks on, and he
Appears around the bend;
Good God! With Christmas, didn't such things
Meet a joyful end?

But Jesus, now grown up, just smiles,
And to the water walks
To show that we've abused this word
With our religious talk;
It's not that you've been bad, and must
Be good, for goodness' sake,
But can your pride, your ego and
Your fear, you finally shake?

Repentance, I am glad to say,
Is never the end game,
God doesn't groove on all our sin,
Our failures or our shame.
Inside us all, our essence is
The grace by which we live,
Such grace, the Spirit still proclaims,
Such grace, this voice still gives.

That's a rather cheeky poem from the Reverend Scott L. Barton, a retired pastor who loves to write a poem each week based on the lectionary text. I have a feeling we'd enjoy each other's company and share a chuckle or two.

In looking at our text for this week, I found myself being overtaken by the water so in evidence and so primary to our story for today. It's not quite the same thing as being drowned by the water, but it did feel like that sometimes as I was awash in the many ways in which water figures into our lives both physically and spiritually.

Mark writes the shortest of our four gospels and, supposedly wanting to get right to the heart of the matter, starts out by skipping the birth narrative entirely.

Instead, he opens bing, bang, boom with a voice calling in the wilderness, “Prepare for God’s arrival! Make the road smooth and straight!” as *The Message* tells it. Then we launch right into the ministry of Christ beginning with his baptism by John the Baptizer and a voice from above accompanied by a dove and the words, “You are my child, chosen and marked by my love, pride of my life.”

And Christ’s path is set. His choice to receive baptism and step into His calling symbolized by the water rushing over him and dripping off him as he emerges, cleansed by the Jordan and ready to begin his ministry not as an earthly king, declaring edicts and lopping off heads, but as our spiritual king, leading by example, showing his oneness with all humanity and receiving the blessing of God through the symbol of peace and Spirit as a dove descends and a voice proclaims the divine lineage.

I wonder how many of us felt our lives changed through our being baptized. In the denomination I grew up in, baptism was considered a primary step in one’s life and served as a kind of bar or bat mitzvah ceremony when at 12 or 13 it was pretty much required of a young man or young woman to attend confirmation classes and then be baptized as an “adult” believer in front of their congregation one Sunday morning. In my day, that meant it usually looked like a kind of Moony convergence as there were so many of us late stage baby boomers crowding the floor in front of the pews and kneeling to be sprinkled.

But here’s the thing. Even though I knew it was a very important thing to do and that it meant a lot to my parents and my church, I still didn’t really know what was happening, other than I was doing the “right” thing and assuring my eternal salvation, whatever that meant. It’s funny that in a fully Anabaptist (which means “re-baptism”) church, we were still participating in a ritual that for me, at least, was just about as meaningful as if I had been a baby being baptized instead of a supposed “adult” and participating in a believer’s baptism which was at the heart of our denominational belief system.

I knew that baptism was a tremendously significant ritual and was intrigued by the water being sprinkled over my head by my dad, but at the heart of things I didn’t see how it really changed anything in my life other than making my hair a little wet.

Looking at Christ’s baptism, however, I see a fully cognizant man, realizing he is ready to begin the ministry and the life he has been called to, stepping into the river, and allowing the waters to course over him; choosing to become one with the flow of God and Spirit, thereby changing not only his own earthly life but every life that will be touched by Him forever.

“Unlike the other accounts, Mark doesn’t portray John and Jesus debating as to whether Jesus needs to be baptized,” Rev. Robert Cornwall writes in his article, “Up

From the Water.” “We don’t find John suggesting that Jesus baptize him. In this account, Jesus comes to the river as one of the sinners, seeking baptism along with the others...Jesus understands his calling. From that day on, whether he knew it before or not, his mission in life was God’s mission for the world.”

What is it that changes the course of your life? Often, it’s a choice made. Though, sometimes, we THINK it’s a choice we don’t make for ourselves. Do we choose to direct the path of God’s spirit-filled water running through our lives or do we blow up the old inner tube and float along, allowing the flow to carry us where it will?

I was intrigued this week as I thought about the ways in which water moves throughout our lives and throughout the world. My father is always completely fascinated by our Los Angeles River (show slide) and the way it courses around its concrete curves as it meanders through this major metropolis, fed by trickling tributaries along the way. It’s hard to believe that this was once a free-flowing body of water, providing sustenance to the Native American Tongva people prior to the arrival of the Spanish centuries ago. Wikipedia tells us that our “LA river was originally an alluvial river that ran freely across a flood plain that is now occupied by LA, Long Beach and other townships.... Its path was unstable and unpredictable, and the mouth of the river moved frequently from one place to another between Long Beach and Ballona Creek.”

For, as we know, this is the way of water. It flows where it will, and in its path, new mouths are opened and life flourishes or fails depending on that flow.

And so it is with the Spirit of God, yes? Moving and flowing freely through our lives, we find new paths opened to us, new ideas, new relationships and, depending on our cultivation and the Spirit’s movement, some will flourish and some will fail. The Spirit, as the water, keeps moving, keeps coursing through our lives and across the land, encouraging growth in some places and cutting off sustenance to others.

I am convinced that, as in everything else in God’s kingdom, we must live in the paradox this water symbol creates for us and be open to the movement and flow therein. For, as much as we need to make choices and decide for ourselves where we will go, we must also be open to the sudden changes and the ways in which the Spirit will move us to consider different paths and alternate visions.

Being baptized by the Spirit means grounding ourselves in the foundation of our faith so that wherever and however God’s water flows, we know we can move with it and, not knowing where it will take us, be assured of God’s love and faithfulness - whether we’re filled to overflowing or down to our very last drop.

“Inevitably, life has a way of "wringing us out," and we forget that God dwells in and among us” Barbara Sholis writes in her article for the Christian Century, “A Watery

Solution.” “We forget our "beloved" identity. Laurence Hull Stookey labels our forgetfulness "spiritual amnesia",” she writes, “but adds that baptism is what counters our amnesia. The touch of water upon our lives helps us recall our place in the biblical story, and reminds us that God’s creative force is still birthing us, claiming us, renewing us.”

Can we, like the Army Corps of Engineers, control the flow of God’s water in our lives? Isn’t it tempting to lay down concrete channels in your life so that you know how and when the water will flow and where God will take you next? Allowing water to wend where it will is frightening as we know it won’t be obeying our ideas of what should grow and what shouldn’t.

But that makes me wonder... when we set a channel in place, and demand that the flow go one way and our way only, what are we cutting ourselves off to? What if there are things in our lives that are supposed to die? What if there are things along our path waiting to grow, but don’t have a chance because we’re directing the flow elsewhere and not allowing God’s water to flow where the Spirit wills?

Opening ourselves to God’s leading and looking for the ways in which that Holy Water wants to take us, we open ourselves to that which is most productive and most fulfilling and allows the full flourishing of God’s abundance.

“To know us better, God becomes ordinary; as water,” Michaela Bruzzese writes in her article, “Claiming Our Inheritance” for Sojourners Magazine. “God claims us, and as Spirit, God commissions us. Jesus, too, looks among the “ordinary” to do the extraordinary task of building the new reign of God, starting not from the centers of power but with the powerless—ordinary people without special qualifications besides enough faith to leave everything and become “fishers of people.”

Where will the water of God take you in this New Year? What channels have you put in place whether in thought, belief or practice that dam up the flow of God’s river and keep you from fully experiencing the joy and fulfillment that God’s loving cup is offering to you? Can you take a risk and step into the current, knowing that where it takes you will be the right place even though the ride may be unknown and scary?

“In Genesis, the Spirit of God is there in the beginning of time, hovering over the waters of a world still forming, where there is not yet land and sea, or any living creatures,” Rev. Todd Weir writes in his essay, “Baptism, Mystery and Creativity.” “This Spirit blows and brings order to the earth, creating what we know to be our world. The first act of God is commanding the waters, which connects us to the ritual and power of Baptism. Water symbolizes the Spirit, the life-giving and creative action of God. The Spirit that speaks to Jesus in Baptism continues to move through the act of baptism...The Spirit creates the world in Genesis, the same spirit creates and calls Jesus the Beloved in his baptism, and the Spirit continues to move and speak among

the baptized...this means you are the people whom the Spirit continues to move...
Therefore listen and live by the creative Spirit."

"THOU ART MY BELOVED"
a Meditation by Suzanne Guthrie
shared "At the Edge of the Enclosure":

Here I am, back at the Jordan. I was here in Advent -- lost, clutching at straws, impressed by a mere reed shaken by the wind, broken and empty. I met a prophet in the desert. Turn toward the Holy One, he said. Repent. Accept the forgiveness of your sins and begin a new way. Come into the River, he said. Prepare the way of the Lord, he said.

And now, in Epiphany, at that same river, the prophet baptizes the One who was, who is, who is to come. This One, this man, is manifested in absolute ordinariness. Is this the Good News he speaks of? Utter ordinariness? The sacred unfolding in the mundane? Can hope live in my broken life, raw-fleshed with loss?

A Voice hovers over the face of the waters - as if the man in the river, just like me, must be reassured of this hope also. Beloved. You are my Beloved. What losses await this One manifested so fully in the human condition?

Let me hear the Voice above the waters whispering 'Beloved'. Baptize me into your unseen hope. Call me to go with you into sacred spheres of ordinariness. Heal my poisoned flesh, my diseased soul.

I ask, Where are you staying?

He says, Come and see...

Namaste.