

Stories About Water

Mark 1:9-15

Rev. Jim Zazzera ~ 16 September 2018 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

9 In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. **10** And 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. **11** And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

12 And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. **13** He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

14 Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, **15** and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” (Mark 1:9-15, NRSV)

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What if you had just one last thing you could say? Your son is leaving for college and you want to offer some last words of advice. Your spouse is traveling to a military assignment in a country far away. Your friend is on her deathbed. You are leaving the town that you have lived in for decades. What would be that “one last thing” you would say?

Or what if you were a pastor with one more sermon to give? What wisdom from would you offer from the Bible? Would you remind people to obey the Ten Commandments? Would you have folks think about the “steadfast love” that God offers through prophets like Hosea? Would help people see that peacemakers and mourners really are blessed? Would you philosophize like Ecclesiastes and tell people that there is both a time for war and a time for peace? Would you paint the picture of a king who declares people righteous when they give the hungry something to eat, offer hospitality to a stranger or visit those in prison? Would you ask people to praise God like the Psalmist or to grieve like Jeremiah? Would you challenge people to consider what the Lord requires or would you assure them with God’s amazing grace?

There are just too many things. There is so much that I would love to say. But I know that anything I leave you with today will feel partial, will feel truncated, will feel limited, will feel inadequate. Still, I have to say something. So let me tell you a few stories. Let me offer you four stories about water.

Story number one. Sixty-three years ago Esther and Nick Zazzera brought their baby boy to be baptized at our Lady of Mount Carmel Church in Carbondale, Pennsylvania. Esther & Nick, along with Godparents Aunt Benadette and Uncle Gib, brought James Gilbert Zazzera to God. There, at the baptismal font, near the entry to the church, with only a few people gathered the parish priest declared, “I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,” and proceeded to wet this baby with the waters of baptism. What followed at little Jimmy’s home was a “christening” celebration, with plenty of great Italian food, lots of joy and laughter, and no small amount of drink.

So what happened in that moment in 1955? What was that occasion about? What did that water mean? Today’s reading gives us a clue. You see, Jesus too was baptized. And through history his baptism has served as a model and guide for our understanding of our own baptism. Listen again to the words spoken from the heavens as Jesus emerges from the water.

You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.¹

You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased. If baptism is anything, it is about God’s love for us. It is God speaking to us. You are my daughter, the beloved. You are my son, the beloved. When was the last time you heard words of love and really believed them?

When we are infants, we have no real control of our surroundings. We are totally vulnerable. And in our vulnerability, God comes in love to us. Before we are able to reach out for God, God reaches out to us. Before we are able to commit to anything, God commits God’s self to us. As the Presbyterian Book of Order reminds us,

¹ Mark 1:11, *NRSV*.

The baptism of our young children witnesses to the truth that God claims people in love even before they are able to respond in faith.²

Baptism is not first and foremost our “yes” to God. It is God’s “yes” to us. That is what little Jimmy Zazzera experienced as an infant. That is what we all experience even now.

Story number two. The day after my high school graduation, in the summer of 1972, I climbed into a rainbow colored Volkswagen Van with my friends Matt and Pat. Our goal was to spend the summer touring and camping across the United States before we started the next stage of our lives. One of our stops along the way was Boston, where we stayed at the home of Matt’s uncle Abe.

As it happens, my good Jewish friend Matt knew that there was a performance of a new and somewhat strange hippie rock musical about the life of Christ called “Godspell.” Though this retelling of the Gospel of Matthew is now familiar to many of you now through endless revivals and high school performances — few had experienced anything like this play when it was in its early days at the Wilbur Theatre in Boston.

What I remember most is one of the opening scenes where a voice sang the haunting line “prepare ye the way of the Lord,” over and over. Do you remember it? Ultimately the song broke into a joyous, loud rock tempo, the lights went up and a counterculture John the Baptist ran up and down the aisles with a bucket full of water and a huge sponge—splashing us over and over with the waters of baptism.

I still remember it as one of the most joyous moments of my life. I’m not sure why. Maybe it is because I was a working class kid who had never experienced a Broadway quality production before. Maybe it is because it liked how it seemed so improper to drench the audience in a stodgy old Boston theatre. Or maybe it is because I was touched at a deep level by the joyful power of God within me. To this day, when I think of my baptism, I often think of this as the moment.

From that moment on I associated faith in Christ with joy. From that moment on I knew that the somber experience I remembered growing up in the Roman Catholic Church wasn’t all there was to Christianity. From that moment on I knew that faith could be experienced at personal and deep level.

Remember the first thing that happened when Jesus came up out of the waters of baptism? Today’s passage tells us that before Jesus heard God’s voice,

he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him.³

Not only is Jesus God’s beloved, but the Spirit is deeply connected to him, You could even say that the Spirit comes into him. Again, this is a model for our life in Christ. Not only does God love us, but God comes to us. God enters our very being— and that brings us life and meaning. I love how an ancient theologian describes this divine union in a kind of mystical poem:

*We awaken in Christ's body,
As Christ awakens our bodies
There I look down and my poor hand is Christ,
He enters my foot and is infinitely me.
I move my hand and wonderfully
My hand becomes Christ,
Becomes all of Him.*

*I move my foot and at once
He appears in a flash of lightning.
Do my words seem blasphemous to you?
--Then open your heart to Him.
And let yourself receive the one
Who is opening to you so deeply.
For if we genuinely love Him,
We wake up inside Christ's body
Where all our body all over,
Every most hidden part of it,
Is realized in joy as Him,
And He makes us utterly real.*

*And everything that is hurt, everything
That seemed to us dark, harsh, shameful,
Maimed, ugly, irreparably damaged
Is in Him transformed.
And in Him, recognized as whole, as lovely,
And radiant in His light,
We awaken as the beloved
In every last part of our body.⁴*

“We awaken as the beloved.” Or as the apostle Paul says

...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. For if we have been united

³ Mark 1:10, *NRSV*.

⁴ from Symeon the New Theologian, Hymn 15, <https://cac.org/symeon-the-new-theologian-2015-07-13/>

² *Book of Order 2019*, W-3.04, PCUSA.

with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.⁵

We are united to Christ. That is what I experienced that night in Boston.

Story number three. A few weeks ago I attended worship with a small informal congregation in our Presbytery called “Eventide.” I was there because during the service we were celebrating the 60th Anniversary of a couple I knew from Cordova Presbyterian Church. As we gathered around tables to worship and share a meal I looked around I began to realize that there were many people I knew in that congregation.

One of the delights of the evening for me was reconnecting with a young man named Paul. When we greeted each other, the very first thing he said was, “you baptized me.” You baptized me. Paul is now in his mid 20s, but then, at the age of about 7, Paul asked his mother if he could be baptized, and on top of that, he wanted to be baptized in the river.

It was my first and only time baptizing someone in the river. On that day, in my bright Hawaiian shirt, I didn’t much resemble the rough clothing of John the Baptist. But what I do remember is being stuck by how this young boy really wanted to be baptized. I remember how clear he was about wanting to follow Jesus. I remember how right it seemed to be honoring God’s kingdom in this way.

Today’s reading tells us that Jesus was baptized, pushed by the Spirit out in to the wilderness for a time of testing, and then he began to preach. His words were clear and powerful,

The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.⁶

This little boy knew something about the significance of these words. The young Paul knew that God’s kingdom was there for him, that it was near. Somehow he knew that for him part of following Jesus was getting dunked in the cold water of the American River.

We can know today, in this moment, that God’s kingdom is not limited to a particular group of people, or to a particular church, or to people of a particular age. But that Jesus takes the reign of God out into the world—and people respond. People come to Jesus,

sometimes for reasons we don’t even comprehend. Paul came to Jesus on that day.

Story number 4. A few years ago, some of us from Faith Presbyterian Church took a travel study trip to Israel & Palestine. Many people visit this “Holy Land” as a kind of a Christian theme park, to see all the sites where people like Abraham and Sarah, Rachel and Rebecca, Mary, Joseph, and Jesus walked and lived and loved.

What we did on our tour was a bit different. We, of course, visited sites like the Garden of Gethsemane and the Western Wall, but we also spent lots of time listening to the voices of Israelis and Palestinians, to Jews, Christians and Muslims. We heard stories of injustice and fear, we were invited into both dreams and nightmares, we ate hummus, we visited mosques, we shared a Shabbat meal, we listened.

One of the places we visited was the Jordan River, the very same river in which Jesus was baptized. Now, we did not “re-baptize” any of our group members, there was no need for that, there is no special magic in the Jordan River. Yet, it did seem like a good place to remind ourselves of who we are.

And so, I invited any who wanted to—to stand in the Jordan River. I stood beside them, touched the water, and made the sign of the cross on their forehead. I spoke words to them which included this phrase, “remember your baptism and be thankful.” Here we were in a land that many see as a place of chaos, war, violence and fear—and there we were called to remember our baptism, to remember who we are. To remember God’s love for us.

It has always been interesting to me what follows the story of Jesus’ baptism in Scripture. Not a party. Not a celebration. Not a beautiful vision. Not a religious ritual or even a great sermon. Here is what the Gospel writer says,

...the Spirit immediately drove [Jesus] out into the wilderness.⁷

Notice it wasn’t Satan that drove Jesus into the wilderness, but God’s Spirit. It is as God is telling us that the first step after baptism is to enter the fray of life. To face a world that often seems like a wilderness. To confront the hard stuff.

That is why it meant so much to me that our group in Palestine and Israel had that special time by the Jordan. We were reminded of God’s love and presence, but we

⁵ Romans 6:4-5, *NRSV*.

⁶ Mark 1:15, *NRSV*.

⁷ Mark 1:12, *NRSV*.

were reminded of those things right in the middle of it all—the confusion, the injustice, the violence, the differences, the passion, the joy. In the midst of this land of troubles we knew we could assert Christ’s power. So too, in the midst of our own troubled nation we can assert Christ’s power. In the midst of our personal lives—sometimes torn apart and broken—we can claim Christ’s presence. At the heart of our challenging world, we are not afraid, because God is present and active.

Thirty-two years ago, when I was applying for a pastoral position at Cordova Presbyterian Church, I wrote these words in my application:

I long to lead a people who believe God is alive and active and working among them.⁸

Today I know that my longings have been fulfilled. We are all part of God’s kingdom work. God’s love and justice are fabulously relevant to every issue, every movement, and every concern in our day. That is what it means to remember who we are. God is present and we are thankful.

So water has many meanings. The waters of baptism can touch us in many ways. This font, this water, is where God says yes to us, where we are reminded that God loves us. In this font, this water, we are joined to Christ and all that he is. This font, this water is where God’s kingdom begins to spill into the world. In this font, this water is where we claim that Christ transforms our beautiful, troubled world.

In the now legendary Broadway musical “Hamilton,” the musical story of Alexander Hamilton and the founding of our nation, there is a scene that includes a song called “One Last Time.” I love the sentiment of the lyrics.

In this scene, George Washington has decided not to run for a third term in office. He has decided not to run against the politically powerful Thomas Jefferson, though Washington would be lovingly accepted by the nation. And though his colleague, speechwriter, and friend Alexander Hamilton tries to discourage him, Washington will not be deterred - he is done - he is going home.

As he urges Hamilton to write his farewell presidential address, it is striking what Washington tells his faithful scribe. It is a heartbreaking coda to his presidency...(I wish I could sing it)

*One last time
The people will hear from me
One last time
And if we get this right
We're gonna teach 'em how to say
Goodbye
You and I.⁹*

I don’t really know how to say goodbye to all of you. There are too many years, too many memories. We have been through too many things together. So for now it seems right to return to the beginning. And for Christians the beginning is always baptism. It seems right to return to that which we share most profoundly. And for those of us gathered here today it is our faith.

And so one last time, let’s celebrate how much God loves us. One last time, let’s claim that we are in Christ and he is in us. One last time, let’s proclaim that God’s kingdom is alive and active in our world. One last time, let’s have the courage to face everything we see around us and believe that God is truly transforming our world.

Thank you so much. May you know God’s love and grace and peace as I have known it with all of you.
Amen.

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⁸ From my *Personal Information Form* for the PCUSA, June 1986.

⁹ “One Last Time,” *Hamilton*, Lin Manuel Miranda.

The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Have you ever needed to say just “one last thing” to someone? What was that like? What did you say?
2. Read Mark 1:9-15 again. What do you notice? What does this passage tell us about who Jesus is? What might the text suggest about who we are?
3. What do you think baptism is? What does it do? What does it communicate to you?
4. We regularly remind people in this church that, “you are God’s beloved.” What gets in the way of you believing that?
5. Jim talked about seeing a production of the play Godspell as “one of the most joyous moments of his life.” What was your most joyous moment? How was God involved in it?
6. One of the apostle Paul’s favorite ways of thinking about Christian faith was thinking of Christ as “in us.” (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:17) Does that make sense to you? What does it look like to “awaken in Christ’s body?”
7. What does it mean that God’s “kingdom is near?” How are people (even children) drawn to that kingdom?
8. Where do you see God “alive and active and working” in this world? In the church? In politics? In the poor? How does God make God’s self known in the “wilderness” of this world?
9. How would you say goodbye after 15 years?

Table to Table Question

A question for kids and adults to answer together

What is the most important thing
you can say to someone?
What is God saying to us in baptism?