

“When You Pass through the Waters”  
January 16, 2022  
Scripture: Isaiah 43:1-7; Luke 3:15-18, 21-22

What does baptism mean to you? The Christian journey in many ways begins with baptism, at least it represents an important beginning. We trace our celebration of it to this moment described in the gospel when Jesus was baptized by John. All the gospels tell us about John’s ministry. Three of them narrate the moment when Jesus is baptized, only the Gospel of John omits it. But none of them really says what it meant to Jesus. Why does he make his way to the water?

I think to fully appreciate that we need to look more closely at what John is doing. If we think of baptism as a sort of ritual cleansing, then it’s not all that unusual. There were many mikvahs, or ritual baths, available in Judea. Most of the people who went out to see John would have been familiar with that and would have probably used them from time to time, especially there in Jerusalem where the temple was located.

But John seems to be calling them to something different. He’s out in the countryside of Jerusalem, at the Jordan River, telling them to come and be washed clean there. It’s not enough, apparently, simply to enter the bath at the local synagogue or near the temple. Why the river, why do they need to pass through these waters? A river often represents a boundary. In many parts of our country a river separates one state from another. I grew up near the banks of the Wabash that separate Illinois from Indiana. The beautiful, wide Niagara River separates the U.S. from Canada. We use rivers to mark territories and provide natural boundaries.

But the Jordan River is more than a natural boundary; it’s also a spiritual one. When the people of Israel, after their long sojourn out of Egypt entered the Promised Land, they crossed the Jordan. But before they did, their leader Joshua had them stop and reflect; he had them think about who they were about to become. Would they stay behind and continue following the gods of Egypt, worshiping the ways of Egypt, of expansion and constant production to fuel armies for destruction, or would they devote themselves to the God of Israel who led them out of the darkness of slavery and into freedom. Passing through the waters of the Jordan was their liberation moment; they put the past behind them for good and embraced God’s future.

That’s what John is calling the people to do again. Only this time, he says, they’ll be led into the ways of God by another who would baptize them anew with fire and the Holy Spirit. Jesus passes through the waters of the Jordan to become God’s Chosen, God’s Beloved. It’s not a cleansing but a transformation.

Baptism has many, many layers of meaning for us. But at the root of it is this transformation, this movement from the old life to the new. Paul talks about “dying and rising in

Christ.” For him, we die to the old life and are raised to the new. The ritual around baptism that early Christians practiced enacted that passage.

What Paul understood, what Jesus experiences, and what we embrace when we come for baptism or bring our children for baptism is the promise of God’s presence in our lives announced by the Prophet Isaiah. Isaiah assures the people, “when you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you.” Something interesting to note about these verses, that’s lost in our translation, is the “you” being spoken to is singular. God is speaking one on one in these words. It represents what the great Jewish theologian Martin Buber called an “I and Thou” moment. We are, each of us individually, addressed by a God who promises to walk with us and never leave us. So we carry no fear when we enter those waters and make that passage. God promises us that nothing will separate us from God’s presence, no matter how arduous our transformation might be.

But again we want to be aware of the layers of meaning in this passage. Even though the Hebrew grammar is singular, the one being addressed is Jacob or Israel. The life of Israel is embodied in the whole people. In a wonderfully subtle way the prophet communicates the unity of Israel as a people. While each of us individually might pass through the waters of difficulty or hardship to die and rise, we also are transformed collectively. Communities and whole societies at times must pass through the waters to be transformed. That’s what Isaiah anticipates. The people, if they are to become the new creation God longs them to be, must die and rise together.

Over our history as a country we’ve had to pass through the waters to be transformed many times. In his book *The Third Reconstruction*, the Rev. Dr. William Barber II describes the movement back and forth our country has gone through since the Civil War. At the end of the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln, in his second inaugural address, spoke of the price our nation had paid for the sin of slavery, he wrote: “Fondly do we hope--ferverently do we pray--that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn by the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said, "The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.”” But we have continued to pay the price by allowing every attempt at reconstruction to fall apart; every time we start to make the passage from white supremacy to multiracial democracy, we turn back. We allow fear and hatred to overwhelm us and our baptism remains unfulfilled.

Tomorrow we celebrate the life of the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., a leader who lost his life trying to secure a better life for us all. King understood the obstacles that stand in the way of equality, all of them rooted in an irrational fear and hatred of Black people by white people with power. He understood that our society must die and rise by passing through the deep waters of transformation. We’re still struggling to make our way through. We still live under the threat of drowning in past hatreds and bigotries. King held onto the promise of making our way through, but he never underestimated the struggle it is to get there. Passing through the waters will always

be a challenge for us, but what waits on the other side is the Promised Land of becoming what King called the Beloved Community.

We're in yet another phase of that struggle right now. As leaders in our country attempt to incite fear and capitalize on hatred by allowing democratic principles to wither and backsliding on efforts to broaden access to wealth and education and healthcare, the waters are threatening once again to overwhelm us. And God is calling us through the prophets of our own time, once again, to persevere, to keep moving toward change, to see the Promised Land that lies on the other side, to become God's Beloved Community. It is a baptism of fire and the Holy Spirit. But we must pass through it. We must let the old life of white supremacy and privilege die so we can be raised to new life of multiracial, multicultural, multireligious democracy, a community of compassion, justice and joy.

Our hope lies in hearing God's voice, once again, speaking comfort: "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you. You are my own child, my Beloved; in you I am well pleased!"

Amen