

“The Power of Water”

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Water... it's a recurring symbol throughout both the Old and New Testaments. “In the beginning,” Genesis tells us, “When God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.” (Genesis 1:1-2) Rivers flow in Eden, even before the first man is formed. Jonah is tossed into the ocean and swallowed by a whale. The Red Sea parts to give the Hebrew people freedom, and closes again over their enemies. Water flows from a rock in the desert. The disciples are caught in a storm at sea until Jesus calms the waves with his voice. Jesus walks on water... so many stories and images. Today's readings give us two very familiar ones: Noah's Ark and Jesus' baptism.

It makes sense, of course, that water is a powerful symbol. It's what makes life on this planet of ours viable. No living thing can survive without it. It is said that a human can live for several weeks without food but only days without water.

Look at any map and you will see that most towns and cities grew around waterways. Water has always been necessary for survival. It was once also necessary for travel and for movement of goods.

We use water constantly every day. Here, in this area, we take it for granted. You turn on a tap and it's there. Of course, those of us who live in the country and are on a well are familiar with what happens when the power goes out – no electricity, no lights, and no water. No water to drink, or cook, or wash, or even flush a toilet. We can compensate with bottled water for a while. If we know the outage is coming, we can fill up pots and

even the bathtub. It's not this simple everywhere in the world. We know of places where women and children walk miles every day to carry enough water to their families to survive. Fetching water becomes a more important and time-consuming task than going to school or working in the fields to grow food.

We know of places in our own country where the water isn't safe to drink or even use for bathing. Can you imagine living next to a river or lake and not being able to use that resource without being poisoned?

Water is a powerful thing – a source of life and a symbol for life.

The story of Noah's ark, is a familiar one to us. Children love it! There is so much to imagine with a boat being built that was big enough to carry two of every incredible creature on the earth, and the weeks of that floating menagerie being tossed about in a never ceasing rainstorm... no sun for forty days...

Well, the story tells us that God had a plan. The sun came out at last and a dove brought evidence of land and of life – a green, growing branch. They were able to step off that ark into a fresh clean world – a fresh, clean start for all of creation. All that water had washed away the dirt and grime of a sinful world. The sun was shining, the future looked lush and full of possibilities.

So, let's turn then to our gospel reading from this morning.

It's interesting that the book of Mark begins here. There is no birth narrative in this book, no stories of Jesus' youth. It begins with John the Baptizer on

the shore of the Jordan River, calling for the people to repent. He has been baptizing folks for some time, telling them that God is about to do something new, to send them someone powerful, much more powerful than himself, who will baptize, not just with water but with the Holy Spirit. He entreats them to repent of their sins, to turn their lives around and be ready. There is so much symbolism here – John, a wild character, standing in the Jordan River – the dividing point between the wilderness and the Promised Land... the literal washing away of sins... the sense of re-birth as someone is held below the surface of the river and then bursts up again into the open air. Quite a contrast to our Baptism ritual today! It must have been a powerful scene and I'm sure it would have had a profound effect on the people taking part.

And in the midst of this, on this day, Jesus comes to the riverbank.

Mark doesn't tell us that John took any particular notice of Jesus that day. In this version of the story, Jesus is simply one of the crowd. We aren't told that John saw this baptism any differently from the hundreds he had already performed. We don't hear that the crowd drew back in awe or fear when the heaven was torn apart. No angel voice came to tell them not to be afraid...

This story, this experience, belongs to Jesus alone.

“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. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

And, in just two more short verses, the very next two verses, Jesus was driven into the wilderness for forty days.

I don't know if it's just because I am reading the Bible in a different way now that I am a minister, but this is suddenly a very different story from the one I remember from childhood.

I have always pictured this scene taking place on a beautiful summer day. Jesus enters the water and comes up to a beam of light, a dove descending slowly toward him, and a gentle voice assuring him – and telling the world – “Here is my son, the one I love the most! He is my pride and my joy.”

But it doesn't seem that way to me anymore. Today when I read this story, I see a restless young man, upset by what he sees in the world but not sure what he can do about it. He has a sense that he needs to do something.... But what...

Somehow, John's call to repent, to turn your life around, strikes home with him this day.

We think of “repenting” as being sorry for our sins and making a commitment to be a better person – but it doesn't have to mean that. It seems odd, in fact, to imagine Jesus needing to confess sins and do better. To repent is a call to turn around – to turn your back on the life you've been living and to set out in a new direction. And I believe that's what happened

with Jesus that day. This was the turning point in his life, the moment when he stopped being “one of the crowd”, when he laid down his carpenter’s tools, left his home and family behind and headed off in a new direction. He went down under that water, left his old life behind and came through the surface ready to start anew.

This time when I read this story, I hear something a little less romantic and a great deal more passionate – and, frankly, more real somehow. I imagine that Jesus had been struggling to fully understand what he was being called to do. I can almost feel him searching for clarity, some clear message – and then finding himself on this particular day on this particular shore, listening to the very message he needed to hear at that moment. He took the steps into the water, went below the surface, and rose again into the daylight to a clear message from God – You are my Beloved, you’ve got this!

As far as we know, the day continued in its usual fashion for everyone else present.

John would have looked to the next person in line, perhaps someone offered Jesus a hand to help him back up the riverbank...

but for Jesus, everything had changed – so profoundly that he left the crowd and, rather than turn toward the comfort of home or celebrate with others newly baptized, he headed out into the wilderness.

I answered a call to ministry a few years ago. Maybe that’s what has changed my perspective on this story. I can remember a “wilderness time”

that happened to me when that call started to get loud and persistent. I was full of doubts and questions. Is this really what God is asking me to do? Am I even capable of doing that – now? At my age? What would following this call do to my family? Have I got the energy for this? It sounds like a lot of work! Can I make this big a commitment? Can I even think about saying no?

Mark tells us Jesus was tempted by Satan out there in that wilderness. I think I get that too.

I wonder if Noah was tempted when he was called to build the ark? Even when he could see those dark heavy clouds forming...

Why me? Why now? What have I gotten myself into? Maybe I can get someone else to do it... Maybe there's another way to save us that wouldn't be so labour intensive ... and seem so crazy to my neighbours.

Imagine how poor Noah must have felt being tossed about, week after week, in that never-ending rainstorm. Noah and his family must have wondered why on earth they worked so hard if it meant floating around like this endlessly. They had saved the animals and themselves, but for what?

I think of Jesus in those final weeks in Jerusalem – after years of preaching his message of love and justice, to be stopped in his tracks by the fear of a powerful group who saw him as a threat. His baptism in the Jordan River sent him on a long and arduous journey, away from home and family. He had changed the hearts of many, but for what?

For both Noah and Jesus, this trial by water changed everything. After forty days of struggle – being tossed on stormy waters or lost in a hostile wilderness - the lives they knew before they were washed were completely gone – impossible to return to. This washing provided the kind clarity that comes when a stormy sky suddenly gives way to blue skies and sunshine... the blessed clarity of heavens opened and messages received loud and clear.

For Noah, God sent the message that God would never take such a drastic measure to clean things up again. The rainbow is the sign of that promise – a reminder to God, and a reassurance to all of us – that we are all on the same side.

For Jesus, the message was that he needed to start the change needed in the world – and to lead that change for others to understand that we all need to take part in making it happen – that we are all on the same side.

For both, the message began with the assurance, “You are my Beloved. In you I am well-pleased.”

The water changed everything. For both of these men, there was no turning back, no way to resume their former lives.

Water has the effect of making us stop in our tracks. As we go below the surface of feel water splashing our faces, we hold our breath and close our eyes... It gets our attention!

I wonder if the water of our own baptism has the same power. As a symbol of our commitment to follow Jesus, it certainly should. Do we stop long enough to see the sky opening? Do we allow ourselves to be still enough to watch the Spirit descend? Are we ever quiet enough to hear the voice of God?

Our baptism ritual in the United Church doesn't include that full immersion experience, of course. We wouldn't put our babies through that. Sometimes I wonder though, if we miss the shock of that cold, wet wake-up call as adults. We are welcomed, comfortably, into this family of faith. And that's a wonderful thing! We work together to hear God's message for us. We work together to take that message out into the world. And I hope, that we also take time out of the busy-ness of our lives to stop, to be still, and quiet and listen to what God is expecting of us all.

As we receive that water of baptism, we, too, receive that same message from God – "You are my Beloved. In you I am well pleased!" We are welcomed into the family – welcomed and beloved. And even that little sprinkle of water should change everything.

Thanks be to God! Amen.