

Sermon – January 12, 2020

“Immersed in Grace”

Text: Mark 1: 4-11

The curtain is up. The two main characters of the play are on the centre stage. One named John the Baptizer – we met him last Sunday, who called everyone from all walks of life to repent and take a bath in the Jordan river. The other character is the grown-up adult Jesus, whose birth we celebrated at Christmas. Jesus came to be baptized as the Holy Spirit inaugurates him to his earthly ministry. According to the gospel of Luke, they are cousins—John and Jesus. Their mothers, Elizabeth and Mary, pregnant at the same time, were relatives and close friends. John and Jesus were close in birth, born just months apart. They grow up, vigorous, strong-minded young men. And they come together in this baptismal scene.

Let's go for a moment and witness this drama - to the banks of Jordan River where Jesus is being baptized. Here he makes his first public appearance on the stage of human history. The baptismal account of Jesus was the opening act in the book of Mark. Mark introduces us to Jesus as a thirty-year-old something, and we don't have a clue as to what happened prior to his baptism. One day Jesus heads south and finds his cousin John the Baptist, standing in the muddy Jordan River proclaiming a baptism of repentance. Jesus gets in line and waits his turn. He wades out into the water, right next to repentant baptizands. John and Jesus stand hip-deep in the river. Jesus leans back into the water believing that God is calling him to a different kind of life. When Jesus stands up, the waters of the Jordan dripping down his face, he saw the heavens torn apart. Torn apart! Mark uses a form of the Greek verb *schitzo* – the same root we find in the word *schism* and *schizophrenia*. It is a more violent and dramatic word than just the word “open”. Its message tells us that through Jesus' baptism, God 's presence and power are on the loose in the world, nothing will be the same again. And Jesus is the one in whom that presence and power are operating. And tearing the heavens apart was not the only visible image in that particular event. There was also the Spirit descending like a dove that rested upon Jesus' soggy head. The Spirit comes, not as an all-consuming fire of judgment, but in a form of a dove, with the flutter of hopeful, unfurled wings, the symbol of *shalom* – God's vision of peace. And

a voice from heaven addresses the crowd: “You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.”

On the shelves of his office, the Rev. Stan Hall, keeps an unusual assortment of bottles. It's his water collection. Containers of various shapes and colors display. There's a plastic bottle of spring water blessed by Pope John Paul II. There's a bright blue flask of caffeinated water. There is even a tin of dehydrated water. One piece in Rev. Hall's collection is a clear medicine bottle in which tiny clusters of green algae float suspended in a murky-looking liquid. The hand-printed label simply reads "Jordan River Water." His intention was to use its muddy contents to add authentic flavor to his liturgical practice. You see, every time Rev. Hall would perform a baptism, he would contribute a precious drop of Jordan River water to the baptismal font. Why? Well, as rational beings we know that there is nothing magical about water from the Jordan River. But for Rev. Hall, it has special properties. A drop of this muddy, murky water connects the baptized with Jesus' baptism.

The waters of the Jordan River run through the land and history of biblical times, giving its waters a spiritual significance that sets it aside from other rivers. It is significant for Jews because the tribes of Israel under Joshua crossed this river to enter the Promised Land after years of wandering in the desert. The OT prophets Elijah and Elisha also crossed the river and the Syrian general Naaman was healed of leprosy after washing in the Jordan at Elisha's direction. Modern Christians are still being immersed in the waters of Jordan River because they believe that in these waters of baptism they are connected to Jesus, to God, to their community, and to all of salvation history.

Today water, whether taken from the tap or from the ocean or river is used as a symbol of baptism. What is this water? Why do we use it for baptism? Since ancient times, water is a symbol of cleansing, healing and renewal. Water, as we know, is one of the most powerful elements on the face of the earth. For the past weeks we have witnessed the magnanimity of the bushfires that have engulfed many places in Australia. Millions of people were praying for rain to come down and help snuff these fires that consumed forests, wildlife, people and billions of animals. The flow of water over the ground for an extended period of time will result in a

riverbed and possibly, over a significant enough period of time, a river valley. Water is important to livelihood, industry, fishing, recreation, crop irrigation, and transportation. In homes, water is used for cleaning, bathing, and preparing meals. Our body weight is made up of about sixty percent water. Our health and survival are determined in many ways by water and hydration. Science and experience have shown us that a person can survive without food for about three weeks. But humans can only survive approximately three days without water. We need it for life. Water is powerful and fragile at the same time. Seventy percent of the earth is covered by water and it is one of the most important natural resources we have. The lack of availability of clean water is one of the causes of poverty and diseases in the world today. Care for the Earth's water supply is essential to the continued survival of the planet. In celebrating the baptism of Jesus, we remember our own baptisms and give thanks for the water that gives us life.

For most of us, one thing that brings us to church on Sunday is the fact that we were baptized through the symbol of water. But many people do not have a clue as to why baptism is an important sacrament that we still do. Let me share you a funny story. Before celebrating a baptism, the minister approached the young father and said solemnly, "Baptism is a serious step. Are you sure you're prepared for it?" "I think so," the man replied. "My wife has made appetizers and we have a caterer coming to provide plenty of cookies and cakes for our guests." "I don't mean that," the minister replied. "I mean, are you and your wife prepared spiritually?" "Oh sure," came the reply. "I've got a keg of beer and a case of whiskey." Kidding aside, how many of us really understand the meaning of baptism?

Some people believe that baptism is a necessary requirement in receiving God's grace. I don't think so. I believe that whether one is baptised or not, everyone is welcome in God's love. Everyone is God's beloved child. Deep in my heart, what I believe and strongly vouch for is that through baptism, we are provided with the opportunity to commit ourselves to live a life of being in right relationship with God, with others and with ourselves. Baptism offers us to become a member of a faith community with a commitment to follow the ways of Jesus Christ to guide us in making life's choices. Parents profess their faith on behalf of their children with

the hope that their children will later profess their faith after undergoing the rite of confirmation. I strongly believe that with the waters of baptism, we proclaim that our lives can be transformed and renewed over and over again. Water is the visible symbol of God's grace reminding us that we are affirmed intimately in a relationship of love - a love that is not distant, but real, alive, tender and completely present in that very moment. The waters of baptism call us to look beneath and beyond the ordinary surfaces of our lives, and discover the extraordinary.

In the United Church tradition, infant baptism is the primary baptismal practice, but we certainly encourage adult baptism as well which we sometimes call "believer's baptism". We sprinkle candidates with the baptismal water. Other traditions utilize pouring or immersion. This reminds me of a facebook illustration entitled: "Babies' Perspective on Baptism". The photo shows a toddler on the phone talking to his friends. The toddler with his big "I'm not kidding you" eyes said: "So today at church, a man wearing a suit dunked me in the water trying to drown me! No! I am not joking! My family just stood there taking pictures!" While sprinkling is part of our United Church tradition, whatever the practice or mode, no matter how much water is used, and regardless of the location of the event -- the Spirit, like the dove descending on Jesus in Mark, is present in the act of baptism and infusing the baptized with the possibilities of a new beginning to follow Jesus and do God's will. And that is more powerful than any flowing water on the face of the Earth.

There is no magic when we practice baptism. The challenge is always before us. Look again. Look harder. See freshly. Cling to the possibility of surprise. Baptism is deep water — you can't stand on the shore and dip your toes in. You must take a breath and plunge. Baptism promises new life. Listen. We are God's own. God's children. God's pleasure. Even in the deepest water, or a sprinkle of water on our foreheads, we are immersed in grace. We are Beloved. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Sources of my sermon:

Debbie Thomas, Thin Places, Deep Water. <http://www.journeywithjesus.net/>
Karyn Wiseman, workingoreacher.org
Rev. Dr. Scott Black-Johnston, Sermon "How's the Water?" Day1.org.
Facebook illustration