

IMMERSED IN THE WATERS OF LOVE

Matthew 3: 13-17

Prayer: Spirit of Life, as you have filled Jesus with your Holy Spirit at his baptism, fill us with a spirit of openness to hear and receive your story of love in the Jordan River. Amen.

Before celebrating the sacrament of 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 young man replied. "My wife has made appetizers and we have a caterer coming to provide plenty of sandwiches and desserts 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." How many of us really understand the meaning of baptism? Let me take you to the heart of Matthew's version of Jesus' baptism.

On a warm sunny, clear day around the year 30 CE, people filled with expectation came to the banks of Jordan River. For some, it must have been a week-long journey, walking with thin sandals or barefoot on dusty, muddy trails. For some, it meant sacrificing a few days' worth of work leaving their fields and flocks untended. They did not come to swim the river from end to end. They came for one sacred purpose: to undergo a ritual of cleansing, perhaps a bath of new beginnings. They came the way people have always come to the water, intentionally, knowing they can't live without it. From their ancient roots, they have learned that water nourished their fields and crops, cleansed and refreshed their bodies, and satisfied their physical as well as spiritual thirst. These people who came to the river had drunk deeply of the stories of their faith. They knew about the waters of creation and the dangerous waters of the flood. They knew about their ancestors' story of how the waters of the Red Sea parted as God's people escaped towards freedom. They came filled with expectation that stepping into this water would wash them clean and new again, and would somehow satisfy their thirst for God.

Baptisms for the first century Jewish people were essential, according to Brian MacLaren[1], because pilgrims who came from distant lands to the Temple were understood to be unclean as a result of their contact with people of other faiths and cultures. Bath places were constructed

around the Temple so that pilgrims and worshippers would be able to ceremonially wash off their contamination and present themselves to God as “clean people.”

Can you imagine how shocking it must have been for father Zechariah to realize that his son, John, would perform the cleansing ritual not in the baths of the Temple but out in the countryside, along the banks of Jordan River? Can you imagine the risks John took in confronting those in power by disrupting the rules of the Temple? Through his actions, John took a risk and made a clear political and religious statement. He introduced a new kind of baptism – a baptism of repentance and called people to rethink everything, to turn around from their ungodly ways through a symbolic immersion in the flowing waters of Jordan not in the enclosed comforts of a Temple bath. John took the risk and his subversion from the religious system of his day, his protest movement, would have cost his life in the end. But he took the risk nonetheless.

On that same day, Jesus came, among the crowds, to the waters of Jordan, filled with expectations, too. Most likely, Jesus had identified himself with John’s protest movement in the Galilean countryside. In all of the gospel accounts describing the baptism of Jesus, some questions remain unanswered. Why was Jesus baptized? After all, according to John the Baptist, baptism is for the purpose of repentance and the forgiveness of sins. What did Jesus need to repent of? And what did he need to be forgiven for? Why then did Jesus undergo baptism? Did Jesus know what he’s getting into? Is he willing to take the risk?

I think Matthew has the answers. It was not about forgiveness that Jesus was baptized. It was about receiving God’s love and empowerment, to inaugurate him for the work in building God’s reign on earth. Jesus’ baptism was an awakening moment for Jesus which drove him to accept God’s call to serve people. Matthew’s account of Jesus’ baptism was dramatic. As Jesus came out of the water, people heard a rumbling sound from the heavens. They saw something – perhaps like a smoke descending from the sky in the form of a dove landing on Jesus’ head. Then a thunderous voice of God saying, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased.”

The Greek word for baptism is *baptizo* which means: "To dip, to immerse, to submerge—and the best one for me—to saturate." Someone even said “baptism is like a marinade. Jesus was marinated with water, with light, with God’s grace and blessing.” Jesus began his ministry on

earth after his baptism! He went about doing good as the song says – healing the sick, affirming the marginalized, teaching the Good News, socializing with his friends, spreading God’s love wherever he went.

The ritual of baptism is a sacrament of new beginnings. Perhaps, Jesus submits himself for baptism because in his young adult life, he must have at times questioned his call and he longed to immerse himself in the holy depths of his Abba-Father’s love. Jesus relies on the Holy Spirit to awaken him, to nudge him - to lead him to doing works of kindness, justice and compassion; to be in solidarity with a world in need of healing and justice. When Jesus stepped into the waters of the River Jordan, he was stepping into the whole flow of human story. He plunged himself into a life of servant leadership, a life of risk-taking as he acknowledges his oneness with the story of his people, the story of people who thirst for something, who thirst for God’s love.

Today, this sacrament is still very much alive in our church life. We profess that baptism is a revelation of God’s grace and abounding love. It is a sacrament through which we become part of the family of faith. The symbol of water becomes the tide that sweeps us into God’s love; that washes us in to receive the nurture and support of a Christian church, and then washes us out to do the work of Christ in the world. This water tells us who we are. It tells us that we are affirmed by love and immersed in grace - that we belong, and that we are connected. It tells us who we might become.

Some people believe that baptism is an exclusive privilege and a necessary requirement in receiving God’s grace. I don’t think so. I believe that whether one is baptized or not, everyone is welcome in God’s love. Everyone is God’s beloved child. Through the ritual of baptism, we are provided with the opportunity to commit ourselves to live in the right relationship with God, with others and with ourselves. Yes - 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. But it is more than that. The apostle Paul’s letter to the Galatians encourages us to look at a deeper meaning of baptism. Paul says that “In Christ Jesus, you are all children of God through faith. For as many of you who were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.” Obviously, for Paul, baptism is a sign affirming our identity and relationship to Christ. Putting

on Christ literally means to “clothed yourself with Christ.” Be like Christ to others – no matter who they are. Jesus taught us to be a loving neighbour to both friend and stranger beyond religion, colour of the skin, language, race, status or sexual orientation. Paul went on to say that our baptism makes us all brothers and sisters – siblings in faith.

Dear friends, baptism is not just a sentimental ritual that we perform because it makes for Kodak moments. Baptism is a human, physical ritual to remind us of the divine transformation soon to take place in us through our connection with Jesus’ baptism. Theologian and preacher Walter Brueggemann wonderfully capture this connection in his book, *Prayers for a Privileged People*. This is what he says: “We become aware, out of Jesus’ baptism, of a new world, a world of grace and goodness, a world of freedom and opportunity, a world of justice and mercy and forgiveness, all from that moment of water . . . and the dove and the name and the power. And we remember our own baptism when we were named and claimed, and called to newness.”

Baptism does not protect us from the harsh realities of life. Like all human beings, we will pass through the waters of life's difficulties. We will cross the rivers of life's pains, and we will walk through the joys and challenges of being human. But we also recognize that God’s love journey with us, and call us by name as God called Jesus that day of his baptism. The prophet Isaiah proclaims:

“When you pass through the waters, I will be with you.
When you pass through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you.
When you walk through the fire, the flame shall not consume you.
I have called you by name, and you are mine.”

Matthew, writing to the Jewish people, emphasized Isaiah’s words. “You are my child, my beloved; with you I am well pleased.” We need to hear this affirmation over and over again. Jesus heard them and his life was changed forever. They will do the same for us. We are affirmed by God’s grace. We are forever immersed in God’s love. Thanks be to God! Amen.

[1] Brian Maclaren, *Seeking Aliveness*.