

Stories about water conjure up a variety of images. Anywhere from glassy seas, to raging waters to rippling brooks. Water is necessary to sustain life. Water creates an environment where fish and other creatures provide us food and nourishment. Water enables travelers to sail from one continent to another and here in West Michigan and other parts of the world, water contributes to much of our recreation. But water also brings to mind devastating floods, tsunamis and death. And as much as I love listening to the rhythmic waves of Lake Michigan on a breezy day, I have crossed it during a storm...which battered the boat, tore the mainsail, and created havoc in the cabin. My crewmates became violently ill and I seriously wondered, if we would make it to the shore alive. (And) for the ancient people, the sea was full of dangers, greatly feared. It was thought to be a dark and chaotic wasteland. In fact, the writer of Genesis portrays God as one who brings order *out* of this chaotic wasteland and new life emerges.

And while writing a “baptismal sermon,” I reflected on some of the stories in the Bible associated with water - stories with varied images and outcomes and the imprints they make on the life of faith. I sometimes ask students what biblical stories they associate with water, and the number one response is: Noah (certainly not the happiest story about water). The list also includes the waters at creation, the parting of the Red Sea (good for some, not good for others, and the story of Jesus turning water into wine (someone this week mentioned this was perhaps, one of the happier narratives). And then...there is the universal experience of *birth*, when waters break and new life emerges - not a typical story found in the Bible under the “water narratives,” but in essence, it is closer to the baptism of Jesus than any of the other stories.

You know, our personal stories involving water and the stories in the Bible about water, even at its best, have a kind of power and risk and drama as they unfold into our lives. There’s just somethin’... somethin’...in the water...The water we are called... to wade in. And not just getting our feet wet,

but immersing ourselves in the life-giving waters of baptism. And sometimes...those waters are troubling and the fear of drowning in them - getting too far over our heads - keeps us from *living into...our baptism*.

Today, we celebrate the story of the Lord's baptism. We hear the story from the gospel of Mark this year, and unlike other gospel accounts of the story, Mark's narrative is very short and to the point. Jesus came to the river Jordan like anyone else, seeking baptism. And the baptisms that John the "Baptist" was performing. were those which provided people with a means to repent for the forgiveness of sin. In other words, the people were seeking renewal, restoration and recovery.

Repentance, not a pass for all the things we didn't get right or thoughts that were not helpful to others and ourselves, not that these things don't matter, they do. But the people who were seeking baptism by John, were hungry and thirsty for God, and anxious and eager to experience a new day. You see, there was a new sheriff in town, God, through the incarnation of Jesus, was about to trouble the waters.

No longer would those who were oppressed, marginalized, and overpowered by the empire and the religious legalists define who they were as a people. You see, taking a U-turn, going into the water and emerging from the waters of baptism...gave.. the people.. hope. They yearned to be a part of this movement, to live into a new identity.

So as Jesus draws near to the river Jordan, John and him do not debate as to whether Jesus needs to be baptized. John dips Jesus beneath the waters of the river, and Jesus... hearing the voice of God up above, claiming him as God's beloved Son. Then a sweet dove, the Holy Spirit, hovers above the water. And this revelation, in Mark's story is a private - one might assume - experience. The simplicity of Mark's account of Jesus' baptism, conjures up, at least for me, a comparison to what I, or perhaps you, too, experience in baptism, today.

There is this moment in time where the water from the font makes its connection to the skin, and something, deep down inside of me, stirs my emotions and oftentimes, tears cascade down my cheeks. The moment God, in all his

heavenly glory, bends down and touches the earth. It happens... every, single, time. And I wonder, how will this child or teenager or adult live into their baptism? How will the water - which sustains all life - be a defining moment when their life unfolds and the water is raging around them? When life is not quiet, and the river is deep with pain and suffering and heartache? How will our identity as children of God impact our lives - both when the water is calm and in a stormy sea where we're in *way over head*.

Today marks the beginning of Epiphany, a season where we are suddenly aware of something, usually initiated by some simple, or commonplace occurrence or experience. Epiphany, the ancient Greek is: *epiphanea* - *something that manifests itself in an experience of sudden clarity, or realization*. In other words...those “aha” moments that come to us when we least expect it. (leave space here) A baptismal story, which takes place in the muddy waters of the Jordan river, accompanied by a rather rugged prophet named, John - whose dress and diet would hardly fit into most “respectable” places. A collection of people - outside of

Jerusalem, outside the temple gates, out in the wilderness, looking to make “U-turn,” and be renewed. Seeking a new name, a new claim, a new identity, down at the water’s edge.

But I think the story of Jesus’ baptism is meant to unsettle our comfortable assumptions and stir our imaginations. John felt he wasn’t worthy of baptizing Jesus, but the radical reversal of roles which Jesus’ baptism represents provides us with a glimpse into what his ministry...and ours...is all about. It connects us to a water story that has been seeping into our lives for a very, long, time. But in all honesty, I wonder if John’s account of Jesus’ baptism may not have come in a quiet way. I mean, can you imagine what a “torn apart” sky would look and feel like? Or what a “dive-bombing Holy Spirit” who swoops on the scene and a voice...a voice from heaven cries out, “You are my Son, my Beloved, with you I am well pleased!”

The voice of a God who not only continued creation by separating the heavens and the earth, called light into being and swept over the face of the waters - continues to bring newness to every generation. And as the psalmist writes:

the resounding voice of God is the one who not only continues to create, but who controls creation, too. A God who sits enthroned over the waters, who gives strength to his people and blesses his people... with peace.

Jesus baptism was an act of “solidarity” with the rest of the community in the spirit of John’s transforming mission. Jesus’ baptism - regardless if we read it as a quiet, little ceremony with a few witnesses and water - or through the thundering voice of God - not just opening the sky - but tearing it apart, allowing newness to descend and grace abound. The power of God’s spirit in the waters of baptism ushers us into a new place and purpose - and often found on the margins of our communities.

While the ritual of baptism may seem like an exclusionary ritual. In fact, (my seminary story - can’t commune w/out being baptized) blew me away. I couldn’t fathom that line of thinking and I wonder sometimes if we take a ritual executed in the wilderness, with God’s ripping apart the heavens to get to God’s son, to get to God’s people, whom God loves, and create every possible

restriction. You see, I trust in the Lord's table - where everyone is invited. And there is something, through the waters of baptism, that connects us to a bigger story. A story of remembering and renewal, a story that exemplifies power and risk and... belovedness. A story reminding us that the Spirit moves in and out of our busy lives. A spirit, whose hovering presence, beckons us to a different order, to a new creation. Baptism, you see, is God's doing, not ours.

This summer we baptized a baby (EVA Van Dyken?) and I remember she screamed at the top of her lungs throughout the entire ritual and I remember Pastor Bill saying, "Eva, this is what it means to be baptized." There is nothing tame or complacent or orderly about baptism at all. Rather we are plopped in the middle of the wilderness and the heavens are ripping apart before our very eyes and we are invited into a new identity.

We live in a time and place where we identify with so many names and identities: Democrat, Republican, conservative, liberal, American or foreigner, gay or straight, rich or poor, black or white or Asian or Arab, Muslim or

Baptist, honor student, drop out, married, divorced, single; addict, alcoholic and...and...a beloved child of God. Our name. Our identity. And our calling, which comes to us when we wade in the water and trust in the life-giving spirit of God.

If we ever wonder how or why our baptism matters, we need to remind ourselves and each other that we are baptized into something. Into something much bigger than our struggles, our fears, and our flops. And we are called to live “into it.” Our baptismal ritual here, calls us to continue in the covenant God made with you, and you and you and... in holy baptism. To:

live among God’s faithful people;

(Evangelical Lutheran Worship, pg. 236)

hear the word of God and share in the Lord’s Supper;

proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed;

serve all people following the example of Jesus; and

strive for justice and peace in all the earth?”

Response: We do, and ask God to help and guide us. AMEN.

Oh, wait a minute, there’s one more part to this “water call” - you see, this wading into the water.. is a communal thing. Seven years ago I had breakfast with Bishop Eaton at a synod assembly. It was at a time in my life where I was trying to discern whether or not I should leave my teaching career and

enter into ministry full time. And I asked her, “What does one do when you think you are getting a call from God.” And she replied, “ You pick up the phone.” But it is the next thing she said to me that has stuck with me every day since. The Bishop said, “Go, and live *into* your baptism.” I didn’t quite know what that meant at the time...but I do now. As I gaze out over this assembly and as I think deeply about my aunts and uncles, and family members, the Nassar family, and other Palestinian Christians and all who have loved and encouraged me - I realize that entering the waters of holy baptism is not a one and done event...nor is it a solo flight. Baptism, you see, connects us all to the voice that says, “You are my Beloved.”

People of God: Do you promise to support and pray for one another in your life in Christ?

Response: We do, and we ask God to help and guide us. Now, it’s **AMEN.**

Beginning with Beloved Jan Richardson
A Blessing

Begin here:
Beloved.

Is there any other word
needs saying,
any other blessing
could compare
with this name,
this knowing?

Beloved.

Comes like a mercy
to the ear that has never
heard it.
Comes like a river
to the body that has never
seen such grace.

Beloved.

Comes holy
to the heart
aching to be new.
Comes healing
to the soul
wanting to begin
again.

Beloved.

Keep saying it
and though it may
sound strange at first,
watch how it becomes
part of you,
how it becomes you,
as if you never
could have known yourself
anything else,
as if you could ever
have been other
than this:

Beloved.