

“THE DEEP WATERS OF BAPTISM”

Matthew 3:13-17

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People who've visited the Jordan River say that it is not very impressive as rivers go – narrow, muddy, polluted, shallow in places because its water has been diverted for various uses. Not a place that looks like anyone's idea of a holy site. Undoubtedly it was less polluted in Jesus' time, less affected by conflicts over water usage. But it never was a very big river and was probably always kind of slow and muddy.

But Jesus begins his public ministry by stepping into this muddy river, to be baptized by John. All four gospels tell this story, which gives us a clue to its importance. Matthew's version is unique in that it includes an acknowledgement of the question which has nagged at many Christians over the years: why does Jesus come to be baptized at all? John has been baptizing people who wish to repent of their sins, but this doesn't fit with what we understand about Jesus. John voices the concern, but Jesus insists: “To fulfill all righteousness,” is how the NRSV translates his words, which seems a little cryptic to me. One suggestion is that Jesus is affirming his intention to be obedient to the will of God in everything. This makes sense to me.

Then too: in coming to the Jordan, Jesus also acknowledges his connection to the history and the faith of his ancestors, for this river plays a role in their story. After escaping slavery in Egypt and wandering the desert for years, the people of Israel crossed the Jordan, into the promised land. Prophets preached beside its waters. Healings took place there. I would guess this is why John picked this spot for preaching and baptizing people. For that same reason it's a most appropriate place for the beginning of Jesus' public life; it underlines for us the understanding (shared by all the gospels but especially emphasized by Matthew) that Jesus fulfills the hopes and expectations of that history.

There is a sense of community, of “belongingness,” about this baptism, as about all baptisms. Stepping into the Jordan, Jesus declares his solidarity with the people who came before him – whose story was as messy as the river was muddy. He declares his solidarity with those coming to the river in need of repentance and rebirth in their lives. He declares his solidarity with those who will come after him, those he will call and teach and heal and forgive, those who will try to follow him and often fail, even those who will betray and accuse him. He declares solidarity with all of us who spend the vast majority of our lives in places that don't seem likely spots for encountering God.

We see something here about the nature of the life and ministry that Jesus is about to take up: a life of service, obedience, and justice (which is the meaning of the biblical word “righteousness” ... connoting a sense of “right relationships” more so than a religious piety or uprightness). A life and ministry, moreover, that takes place not on some exalted spiritual plane, but in the mud and messiness of the real world in which we live.

In this place, in this muddy river, God's presence is made known, and there is this sense of great clarity of both identity and purpose. "This is my beloved Son," says the voice. It's not just what Jesus is called to *do* but who he IS, who he is called to BE. Everything he says, everything he does, every story, every act of healing, feeding, truth-telling, blessing ... flows out of his identity as God's beloved child. The community he calls around him is called into that same identity, that same sense of chosenness, belovedness, belongingness. And it's from that identity that purpose flows. This is what Jesus' baptism portrays for us. This is what baptism is always about.

It seems fitting to me that we read this story of Jesus' baptism early in a new year, because this is a natural time of new beginnings for us. This is a time we often reconsider our lives and our priorities. And that makes it a good time to remember our baptism – and to remember that baptism is more than a symbolic cleansing from sin and membership in the community of faith. It is – for us as much as for Jesus – about identity and purpose.

In one sense, every time we remember our baptism, we are – or ought to be – recalled to the same truths: We are beloved, and we belong to God. Our purpose is to obey God and follow Jesus.

But in another sense, baptism is a deep and flowing and ever-changing river in whose movement we are carried. Because, you know, as much the fact that we belong to God never changes, in other ways our self-understanding *does* change. We learn, we grow, we repent of some things, we change our minds; experiences good and bad change us; we develop new strengths or new vulnerabilities. We are in some ways not the same people we were a year ago, or five or ten years ago. We may be able to hear God's voice in different ways, appreciate more deeply what it is to be "beloved."

And while our calling to be followers of Jesus doesn't change, the specifics of that call are changing all the time. Our abilities and resources change. Our circumstances and responsibilities to our families, our friends, and our church change. New relationships change our lives, as does loss. Work is different from school; retirement is different from work. The culture and world around us challenge us in ever-changing ways. Pressing needs confront us. We find ourselves compelled to concern and action about issues we were not aware of before. Opportunities we never expected to have come our way.

So when we remember our baptism, when we renew our baptismal promises, we rest again in God's love for us. We say "yes" again to Jesus. We touch the water, sign of the Spirit's presence. But let us also take this opportunity to reflect on the evolving nature of our identity and purpose. Ask, "who am I now? what does it mean to me to belong to God? what is the gift of who I am now?" Ask "how am I supposed to follow Jesus now, in this season of my life? what is my purpose in this new year? what particular need or calling or passion is tugging at my heart?"

It may be that the places we find ourselves don't seem likely spots for encounters with God, that our lives seem more ordinary than holy. But baptism is the promise that God is with us, that we are beloved, and we discover both our identity and purpose in Christ. Thanks be to God. May we renew and rediscover our baptismal identity and calling in this new year.

Amen.