

Isaiah 42:1-9
Matthew 3:13-17

“Words in the Water”
First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, AL
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Baptism of the Lord

Today we baptize young Olivia Evans; next week we will baptize Jane Earnhardt. This is as important as anything the church can do. It is one of the two sacraments of the Presbyterian Church. Sacraments are sacraments, at least in our denomination, for a couple of reasons. They involve some basic element which represents Christ for us in a larger way, and they are something Jesus left as a commandment for us to do (“Do this and remember me...” or “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them...”) Our Christian baptisms is a different sort of baptism than the one offered by John. His was a baptism of repentance, for the remission of sins. While ours contains elements of that, it is more an entry into the community of faith, an engrafting into the Body of Christ.

There is a natural question raised, though, by our Gospel lesson. Why was Jesus baptized? Earlier, the text has told us that John came with a baptism for repentance of sin, and yet elsewhere we are told that Jesus was like us in every way except without sin. So why was Jesus baptized? I believe there is an answer to that, which is – he was becoming like us to draw us to God. He submits to a baptism of repentance because that is what humans needed.

John the baptizer did not want to do it, and said, “I need to be baptized by *you*. Why do you come to me?” Jesus said, “Let’s do it this way for now, to fulfill all righteousness.” Perhaps that act fulfilled God’s will in the way he identified with us sinners, establishing that relationship with us. So his vocation as Messiah was born when he joined us in the Jordan River.

One of the meanings Christians have always given to baptism is that of dying to the old life and rising to new life. Passing through the waters, Christ’s vocation as Messiah was to bring us into new life, and he acted that out. A.J. Conyers wrote: “‘Vocation’ is distorted by two disastrous misunderstandings: a secularized idea of ‘career’ and a monastic concept of the religious life. Both are less than the Biblical idea of vocation. Vocation is about being raised from the dead, made alive to the reality that we do not merely exist, but are called forth into divine purpose.”

Two things happened when Jesus was baptized. One was, the Spirit of God descended on him. The Spirit which alighted on him identified him as the Messiah. It should remind us of God’s words through the prophet Isaiah, in chapter 42 – “Here is my servant, my beloved, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him.” The Servant described is one who, though powerful, does not raise his voice, and “a bruised reed he will not break and a dimly burning wick we will not quench.”

The bruised reed and dimly burning wick are Old Testament metaphors for the poor and the helpless. What God spoke this way is language of great tenderness and gentleness, the way you would teach a child to live graciously on the earth. God sent that servant to bring justice on the earth – not by brute force pounding on evildoers, but loving, carefully. The Servant’s mission goes beyond Israel, beyond the faithful, to be “a light to the nations” – that is, the Gentiles. His mission went beyond those who would have been *expected* to be in the community of faith. Hold that thought for a moment.

The other thing that happened when Jesus was baptized was that a voice sounded: “This is my son, my beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” Agapetos – αγαπετος - beloved. What every child wants to hear, and some hear far too little, and some hear not at all – “You are my beloved child, and I am so pleased about you.” What about a world where that was true for every child born?

Some of you may know what a Hush Harbor was. Slave owners used Christianity as a way to subdue Africans, by stressing scripture passages that emphasized submission to authority, submission to masters. They didn’t let them hear about the Exodus from Egypt. But a whispered tip from one slave to another, “Hush Harbor”, was the signal to meet at the secret worship place. The Hush Harbor was a remote place, hidden, where black people couldn’t be overheard conducting “unauthorized” worship.ⁱ It may have been out in the swamp, deep in the trees or the cane breaks, behind wet blankets hung to muffle the sound of voices. According to one source I read, the preacher would speak into a pool of water, natural or in a tub, speaking directly into the water, whether to amplify the whisper or muffle the voice I’m not sure.ⁱⁱ

The Hush Harbor was a sacred space, cradled by water, in which the language of identity – who they *were*, as followers of Jesus, could be practiced. The Hush Harbor was a space, but more than a space. It was a metaphor for hiding in plain sight.ⁱⁱⁱ For being truly Christian against the odds. For believing in the liberating text that was the Scripture, the emancipatory promise, words of grace – and doing it with the community that mattered. Speaking the words into the water that that foretold the day when Israel would come out of Egypt into the Promised Land...

Normally I don’t think much of white preachers appropriating African American traditions when they don’t fit. However, I think there is something brilliant and universal about speaking those words of freedom into the water. Because that’s what it means to be baptized. In baptism we are claimed by God and called “beloved”, αγαπετος.

Maybe that isn’t what the world at large told you. Maybe the world told you that you had to earn your right to even be here, told you that you were old and in the way, told you that you were too young to matter or understand, told you the world was too busy to tend to what’s troubling you, told you if you weren’t a celebrity you sure weren’t newsworthy, and even gave you hand signals at the stop light to comment on your driving.

I understand that the great Reformer, Martin Luther, in times of frustration and despair, would repeat this mantra to himself: “I am baptized. I am baptized. I am baptized.” Life can get difficult. But we come to the task blessed, and we come to it baptized. There is what the world says you are, and then there is what the One who *made* you says you are. This is my child, my beloved, in whom I am so pleased. Our job is to help Olivia understand that and believe it.

These are the words we speak in the water: Grace, Peace, Forgiveness, Mercy, Joy, Hope, and most of all – Love. We speak those words into the water, and then we pour it over the heads of our children. And if we keep speaking, it will surely take.

Who are you? “I am a beloved child of God!.” Believe it.

ⁱ Cnaan, Ram, The Other Philadelphia Story, University of Philadelphia Press, p. 127

ⁱⁱ Berry, Christina, “Echoes From the River”, sermon at Faith Presbyterian, Silver Lake, MN

ⁱⁱⁱ Nunley, Vorris L., “From the Harbor to Da Academic Hood: Hush Harbors and an African American Rhetorical Tradition”, in African American Rhetoric: Interdisciplinary Perspectives, SIUP 2004