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First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
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Healing River
Matthew 3:13-17

They can hear the river before they see it, burbling and splashing over rocks, lapping at its banks as it rushes by. It gradually begins to come into view as they walk, sparkling through the trees – a wide, shallow expanse of water sloping down to a perfect swimming hole.

When they reach the riverbank, the kids cannot get their shoes off fast enough, racing to jump into the cool water after a long, hard hike.

The grown ups are a little slower. They carefully pick their way over the rocks to the river's edge, looking for a flat place to sit while they ready themselves to take the plunge. With age comes caution, and a greater awareness of sweat and cellulite and the various imperfections of our bodies; all the things that make us more reluctant to disrobe and dive in with abandon.

A young father crouches down, unshoulders the pack that's carrying his toddler daughter. He helps her take off her shoes and kicks off his own as they slowly wade into the stream. She's unsteady on her feet so he holds her hands in his, hunching over as they walk to where the water reaches her knees. Her laughter rings out like a bell over the shouts of her sister and cousins as her dad sweeps her up out of the water and splashes her back down again and again and again. When they are both breathless, he stops and picks her up and holds her close, walking farther out into the river. He wipes the droplets of water from her face and hair, and says, I love you, precious child. I love you.

There is something about a river. Something about splashing into water on a hot summer day that absolutely cannot be matched. It cools us off, refreshes our souls. It may even heal a part of us we didn't even know was broken. Religious rituals have long made use of water to symbolize a washing clean, renewal, rebirth, and transformation: In Islam, people wash hands before prayer; in Judaism, Gentile converts would be baptized like John was offering in the Jordan; and obviously, in Christianity, we baptize.

We can't know what the day was like when Jesus met John by the Jordan. I imagine it was hot, the sun beating down on the crowds that gathered to hear the baptizer preach, so hot that people were eager to splash into the water when it was their turn. Can you see Jesus making his way through the crowd – politely, carefully walking down to the water's edge? Picture him stooping down to unlace his sandals and take them off, setting them neatly side by side in the sand before stepping into the water. I wonder if he was already waist deep before John looked up and saw him and said – hold on, what are you doing? I can't baptize you! You should be baptizing me!

Or maybe John stopped Jesus on the riverbank among the reeds and rocks to work out the propriety of who should baptize whom. Jesus wins the argument because, well...

It should not surprise us that this exchange between Jesus and John is recorded by Matthew, because Matthew is the gospel writer most concerned with the proper observation of Jewish law. He's the one who refers back to prophetic tradition most frequently. Matthew seeks to show Jesus as the messiah who was promised, the fulfillment all the prophecies – in the words of Isaiah, the chosen one, the one in whom God delights.

Much ink has been spilled trying to explain or justify why Jesus, who supposedly was without sin, was baptized. Nevermind that theology around his humanity and divinity didn't really develop until hundreds of years later. The great preacher Fred Craddock tells us all we need to know is encompassed in these four words: "And Jesus also went."¹ *Jesus also went* to be baptized by John in the Jordan. Jesus was baptized, whether he needed to repent or not. Jesus came alongside the residents of Jerusalem and all of Judea to seek a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Jesus comes alongside us: he is truly, God-with-us.

To repent means to turn around, so maybe he was just reorienting himself, turning toward a new phase of public ministry. Maybe he was washing away his own self-doubt, or reluctance to enter into the fray of conflict with Rome and the Jewish leaders. We can't know. But I imagine when John plunged him down under that green water, and then drew him back up, dripping, into the sunlight, everyone was shocked by what happened next:

The heavens split open, a dove descends, and a voice booms out, saying for the whole crowd to hear: "This is my Son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Clarence Jordan's Cotton Patch Gospel translates it as: "This is my son, I'm proud of him."

God calls Jesus "son," and says what every child longs to hear from their parent: "I'm proud of you."

This is part of the mystery and miracle of baptism:
that when we are baptized,
we are made members of the body of Christ, by water and the Spirit,
and joined to Christ's ministry of love, peace and justice.

That means in baptism, God also claims *us* as children, blessed and beloved, precious and worthy of pride. No matter who we are, no matter what we have done or left undone, no matter the mistakes we have made or the shame we carry. We are loved, and we are

¹ Noted in the Salt Project's lectionary commentary on Epiphany 2, "The Way of Love: Salt Project's Lectionary Commentary on Jesus' Baptism," January 8, 2020, <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2020/1/8/the-way-of-love-salts-lectionary-commentary-on-jesus-baptism>.

forgiven. It's what we remember and reclaim in confession each week, why we share the words of forgiveness from the font.

Baptism is often portrayed as an individual commitment, a personal act of conversion. But in our church, it's a mutual public commitment between an individual and the wider worshipping community. The community pledges to support and teach the baptized, the baptized renounces evil and pledges to be part of God's healing work in the world. This is work we do together.

Baptism is the beginning of our common ministry. In scripture, as soon as Christ is baptized, the Spirit drives him out into the wilderness, to wrestle with and be tempted by the power of evil. This happens right away, while the water is still dripping from his clothes! So in baptism, we commit again and again to follow him, to wrestle with evil in the wilderness places of our lives and our world. The Spirit leads us to where people are hurting, where there is need and suffering, to share the truth of God's love, and to work for healing, justice, and peace.

These are difficult days. The world feels so broken. We cannot seem to stop waging war on one another, cannot find a way to love one another as we ourselves wish to be loved. Earthquakes and tornadoes and fires today, I'm afraid to wonder what comes next.

But if you look closely, you can almost see the river sparkling through the trees, right there, right down front. It makes me want to take off my shoes and splash right in. Can't you hear the children laughing and feel the mud between your toes? Can you feel the thrill of being swept up, up, into the air and then splashing down, up, and down again and again, water dripping on your face and down your hair, can you hear the voice say – I love you, my precious child. I love you.

These are words we all need to hear. Truth of which we all need to be reminded, truth which strengthens us and enables us to do the hard work to which we are called. And so we are going to remember and reaffirm our baptisms this morning. We'll affirm our faith together, and then you'll be invited to come forward to the font if you want to, to touch the water, and to take a token with you to remind you of God's love.

As we come forward, we're going to sing an old Pete Seeger song called Healing River that I learned not too long ago. It's a song he sang in Meridian, Mississippi in 1964 while giving concerts as part of the "Freedom Workshops." These were classes to educate people about voter-registration requirements, part of the larger movement to win the vote for African Americans at that time. He was in the middle of a concert when he learned of three civil rights workers who had been killed and had to share that news from the stage. Healing River is the song he sang.

This is particularly poignant for me, because on Thursday night I was with around forty or fifty other folks at a church in the West End, gathered by Faith in Action Alabama to plan how to move forward a voting rights restoration campaign in this state. 15% of African American men in Alabama cannot vote because of a felony conviction, even if

they have served their time and completed their sentence. They pay taxes. But they've lost their voice in government.

In his memoir, Pete Seeger said, "The right to vote is the crucial thing. Better schools, jobs, and housing will flow from this. And, if we believe this is one country, the United States, then we must be concerned with a part of it which has for so long lagged behind the rest of the country. How long will it take?"²

How long will it take? I don't know. I do know that the work for justice and liberation continues. And we are called to be part of it, as the body of Christ in the world. After all, we are loved, not because we are good, but because God is good. That is the promise and healing we embrace in baptism, and which we are called to share with the whole world.

² Seeger, Pete, "Folksinger's Field Report, August 5, 1964" in The Incomplete Folk Singer, quoted by Ken Bigger, on Sing Out! Blog, <https://singout.org/2012/06/13/folksingers-field-report-august-5-1964/>