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### **Water**

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22; Acts 8:14-17

My grandfather grew up at the beach in Sarasota, Florida. He and my grandmomma moved back there when he retired, which meant my family got to visit them each summer in Siesta Key. It's a beautiful beach, the second whitest sand in the world. We loved it there. I adored my grandfather, and he would point out important landmarks from his youth as we drove around town – the bench where he first kissed a girl; the palm tree by the high school where he smoked his first cigarette.

They lived at the beach, and he loved to walk on the beach, but he never went into the water. I didn't understand why he wouldn't swim with us, until one day when my mom told us this story.

When he was younger, he used to go skiing with his brother out in a little motorboat in the bay. One afternoon, the water got choppy and the boat got away from them, leaving them way out in the Gulf. They had to swim to shore, so they swam and swam, and began to get tired – especially his brother, who wasn't a strong swimmer. They agreed that granddaddy would carry him for a while to let him rest, but he began to get disoriented and scared and started to fight and flail in the water. Eventually, my grandfather had to knock him out to carry him to shore, or else they both would have drowned. He avoided swimming in the ocean after that, and never went on a boat again.

Water is the stuff of life. Water makes up 60% of our bodies; it cushions our spinal cord, it held us in our mother's wombs. We need it to live. Water coaxes plants from the earth, it washes us clean, cools us off, slakes our thirst, refreshes us.

Yet water can be deadly. As sea levels rise, island nations and low-lying communities grapple with perpetual flooding. Hurricanes wash whole towns off the map. Any parent knows that the pristine blue of a swimming pool is dangerous, especially to a child who cannot swim.

Water is a central symbol of our faith. Baptism is one of two sacraments we celebrate, the ritual that binds us together as the Christian family – where we all are named and claimed as children of God.

Baptism is a little mysterious. So is communion. How do the sacraments convey God's grace? Do you remember the scene in the Wizard of Oz, when Dorothy and her friends the tin man, the scarecrow, and the lion finally get an audience with the great and terrible Oz? As they cower in front of Oz in the great hall, Toto the dog pulls back a curtain to reveal a man, an ordinary man, a snake oil salesman, pulling levers to conjure the illusion.

The sacraments are not like that. There's no magical hocus pocus<sup>1</sup> that transforms the water we use in baptism. The water in the font is sacred because of how it is used, not because it has been transformed into something that it is not. In baptism, ordinary water conveys God's blessing with words that echo through the centuries as God's people are named and claimed as blessed and beloved children again and again. Other traditions take baptismal services outside, to lakes and rivers, so that believers are fully immersed in God's redeeming love. I'll never forget Jonathan Sexton's story of falling into the baptismal pool over at Southside Baptist, and nearly taking the preacher with him, he was so eager to be saved.

There's no trick, no hocus pocus to baptism, and yet there is a mystery and a miracle all the same. It's why we return to the font each Sunday to confess our common brokenness and be reassured of God's grace.

The mystery is that somehow, the words and water used in baptism *are* a means of God's grace. The ordinary water, straight from the tap, from the Black Warrior or the Cahaba River before that, washes us clean and transforms us into God's new creation. Because try as we might, we cannot escape the grip sin has on us; we fall short of the goodness God intends for us over and over again. The miracle is that each day gives us a chance to try again, to turn back to one another with love, to resist and dismantle systems of oppression, and to build God's new creation.

Sacramental theology says that baptism is a kind of death – we die to all that separates us from God and are united with one another as Christ's body, raised to new life to do Christ's work in the world. It makes sense, then, that water is both life-giving and deadly. A potent symbol of the daily work of discipleship, the cycle of living, dying, and rising that is the Christian experience.

Baptism confirms that God's grace *is for us!* It reminds us that God creates us and calls us good. The life and ministry of Jesus tell us that God's love and forgiveness will never let us go, no matter what, no matter who we are, no matter what we've done or left undone. Jesus worked with and reached out to some pretty troubled folks – prostitutes and tax collectors and a guy so crazy they kept him chained to a rock. Sick people and broken people and those left outside the city gates- these are the ones Jesus came to heal, and to save, and to bring inside the fold.

There is something strange about the story Luke tells about Jesus' baptism. and it's not John with his hairshirt and his locusts preaching hellfire and brimstone out in the wilderness. It's not the crowds of people eager to repent. It is, as Fred Craddock points out, that Jesus went to be baptized in the first place.

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<sup>1</sup> It's interesting to note that the phrase *hocus pocus* probably has Christian origins – when the bread is blessed for communion in the Latin mass in the Catholic church, the priest says – as we do – “hoc est corpus meum” *this is my body*. Jugglers and magicians in the early 1600's started to say hocus pocus as a sham Latin invocation, because whatever happens to the bread to transform it, as Catholics believe, into the body of Christ at that moment seems a bit magical.

The text says, when all the people were baptized *and Jesus also* had been baptized...

He who was without sin.

He who was God's presence among us.

He whom the angels sang and the wise men travelled from afar to worship.

Jesus also went and was baptized by John in the Jordan.

Do you know what that means?

Jesus gets it. He gets *us*. The one who was fully God, was also fully *human*. He came to walk alongside us, to experience the depth and breadth of human life.

That means Jesus understands how well intentioned and yet confoundingly weak willed we are... he knows what it's like to wake up on January 1 determined to do better in the year ahead, to exercise more and to wake up early and to eat less sugar and to stop drinking or start reading or *whatever*... and two weeks later to have left all of those resolutions behind ...

He understands what it feels like to be treading water, exhausted and scared, worried whatever it is you're up against might just pull you under. So when depression or despair or addiction or cancer or conflict or grief threaten to drown us, somehow, we aren't alone in the water. The Spirit is there to keep us afloat... maybe even to carry us back to dry land.

See, when Christ is baptized, the Spirit rests upon him, enabling him to begin his ministry. Later, in Acts, the disciples bear the power of the spirit when they baptize in Christ's name. Listen to this passage...

ACTS 8:14-17 Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. The two went down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit (for as yet the Spirit had not come upon any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

The spirit enlivens and enables and empowers their ministry...

And so it is with us!

The Spirit rests upon us in our baptism, and stays with us, enabling our ministry in the world! As we seek to love one another, and to love and serve our neighbors, and to stay afloat in a wide sea of obligations, the Spirit, by God's grace, is with us. We are not alone.

So today, my hope is to remind each of us of two things:

One – you are a blessed and beloved child of God. No matter who you are, no matter where you come from, no matter who you love. You are worthy of love and belonging.

Two – God’s Spirit is with us, within us, enabling us to accomplish far more than we might think or even imagine.

Our church is at the end of a season of transition. Shannon retired fifteen months ago. We said goodbye and thanked Catherine Oliver for serving as Interim Associate Pastor last Sunday. In a few weeks, we will welcome our new pastor, Terry Hamilton-Poore, and celebrate the start of her ministry among us. In the past year, we have worshipped on the street and on rooftops, in parks and here in this sacred space each Sunday. We built a turquoise table and put it on the front lawn and met and served our homeless neighbors in new ways. We are working hard to open our sanctuary during the week to provide spiritual counsel and sacred space in the heart of downtown. We have grieved the deaths of Sandra and Jeanne, Evelyn and Drew, and Bettye Jo, even as we welcomed new members and new babies. We have spoken truth to power, working to regulate payday lenders and welcome immigrants and demand gun control and some of you darn near got one of our members elected to the state legislature. Giving is up, with almost \$45,000 more in pledges this year over last year.

So let us look to the future with hope,  
and live with joy in the present,  
because we are God’s beloved, and the Spirit is within us, holding us up,  
enlivening our ministry,  
and giving us new hearts with which to love.

If you want to be reminded of this truth,  
I invite you to come forward as we sing the next hymn. Touch the water in the font.  
Receive a blessing if you wish. and take a token to remember the blessing of your  
baptism. Thanks be to God.