

In the Deep End

**A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on January 10, 2021
Friendship Presbyterian Church**

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." (Mark 1:4-11, NRSV)

Those of you who tuned into our Midweek Devotion this past Wednesday at noon on Friendship's Facebook page are tuning in today and expecting to hear a sermon on the baptism of Jesus, and by extension, the meaning of our own baptism.

Then, Wednesday afternoon happened. We were all shocked – if not necessarily surprised – by the scenes unfolding before our eyes. We witnessed an insurrection in progress. We witnessed an attempted coup by a mob incited to violence by shameless, constant lies and baseless conspiracy theories. We witnessed the power of reckless words to pour gasoline on the flames of lawlessness and to undermine the rule of law itself.

It was – to borrow the famous words of FDR – a day which will live in infamy. It was a day which revealed and laid bare the fragility of democracy. It was a day to mourn that which has been lost and may take a long, long time to recover.

For all these reasons, I almost decided to choose another scripture text and write a completely different sermon. What does the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist in the River Jordan have to do with what we're facing, what we're living through right now?:

- Political chaos which threatens to tear our social fabric apart ...
- A raging pandemic made many factors worse by reckless selfishness that poses as "freedom," by ignoring or denying science, and by the free traffic in disinformation ...
- So many reasons for fear and anxiety, and apparently so little solid ground to stand on.

But after praying about it, I felt led to stick with it, because I believe that our baptismal identity is exactly what we must re-claim and embrace right now as we seek to live faithfully – as disciples of *one* Lord, Jesus Christ – in these troubled times.

To get at why, let me tell you about the first time, you could say, I had no solid ground to stand on. I was a 5-year old in swimming class at the YMCA. I dreaded going, because I was only comfortable in water if I could feel the bottom. Swimming is hard if you have your feet on the ground!

But then one time, for fun, another class member thought it would be hilarious to catch me unaware and push me into the pool on the deep end. I went under the water, then came up and stretched my legs to stand up, and I *couldn't*. I couldn't stand up! My feet couldn't touch the bottom. For a few harrowing moments, I tensed up and thrashed about.

How many of you have ever taught a child to swim? What's *always* the biggest hurdle? Getting the child to relax ... getting them to *believe* you when you say "It's OK, just relax. You *will* float, it's OK."

I panicked at first, but then I heard my mother's voice, calling out to me to remember what I had learned – to relax and simply let the water bear me up on my back, so that my face wasn't in the water. And it did. My feet weren't touching the bottom, but I was *floating* ... and soon, I was *swimming* – doing the backstroke, no less!

Kierkegaard once said that real Christian faith is like that: That it's like letting go and learning to float, even if 70,000 fathoms of water are below you ... *That faith is trust in the buoyancy of God.* And over many years, I have come to know, deep in my soul, that this is true.

This is what must sustain us now. At one time or another, we have all found ourselves thrown into the deep end – maybe or maybe not in a pool, but *certainly* in life. We have found ourselves under water, in the *deep* waters where we can't stand up.

And yet, we may also perceive that these times are occasions for authentic faith to come to life. And this, in a nutshell, is why *Baptism* in water is the foundational symbol of what our life of faith, our life in and with God, is ultimately about.

In today's gospel reading we encounter John the Baptist again. It seems like we've encountered him a good bit in the last few months. He was the focus of some lectionary gospel passages during Advent. We recall him as a camel-hair wearing ... locust eating ... Jordan River baptizing ... fire and brimstone preaching ... authority rejecting Wild-Man who warned the masses of the wrath of God to come, and so urged them to repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins.

And the people listened! They came to him in droves from the whole Judean countryside and Jerusalem itself to confess their sins and be forgiven, and so be ready for the coming of the Kingdom.

And then, with no fanfare or warning, we're abruptly told that *Jesus* came from Nazareth and was baptized by John in the Jordan. There is no attempt to explain why Jesus would do this, or

why he felt he needed to, or how much he knew or didn't know concerning his Messianic identity.

We're only told that he *did* go to John and was baptized, and was thrust beneath the water, and as he came up, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." With these words, it all began.

This is why baptism in water – Jesus' and our own – was and is the perfect way of being initiated into this turbulent, unsettling life of faith. For you see, water as a symbol in the Bible is more than just about cleansing. It's also about something else.

Think about this: A few minutes ago, did you wonder for a moment why we read the first five verses of the Genesis creation story? Did you wonder how it might relate? Recall that in those timeless words, that in the beginning, all is a "formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters." And it is out of this turbulent, watery chaos that the Spirit of God calls all things into existence. *The turbulent, watery depths are the womb from which new creation springs.*

Our baptism in water hearkens back to this. To be ritually immersed in the waters of baptism is to be ritually thrust into the deep water ... where our feet can't touch the bottom and we feel all about us the disruptive unsettledness of things ... but also where, in faith, we can be borne up, and emerge from the water, and experience the buoyancy of God ... the transformative creativity of God ... which calls us into newness and life.

In his own baptism, Jesus rose out of those waters and his life's mission began, driven by that divine wind which moved over the depths at the dawn of time. And we arise from those waters marked as Jesus' own – as those who are meant to know and walk in the power of that same Spirit, to be a people of truth who work patiently and creatively for the healing of the world.

That's why today, here at the beginning of a new calendar year and facing challenges that can seem overwhelming, we are going to take a moment to re-affirm our baptism. In this reaffirmation, we turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world. We re-affirm our allegiance to Jesus Christ, to him alone, and his way of love, compassion, truth, and justice. We remember and reclaim who we are and what our faith is finally about. At the beginning of a new year, and especially in a time such as this, there's nothing we could do that is more important.

Why this is so may not be obvious. In fact, we may still not see it ourselves. I can understand how one could look at what we do here ... hearing and reflecting on scripture, singing hymns, re-affirming our baptism ... and ask, with all the insanity around us, what difference any of this makes at all. So much seems to be falling apart, and this is what we're thinking about?

Yes, this is *exactly* what we are thinking about, because this alone is what can keep us grounded and faithful to Jesus' call as the storms rage around us.

The storms and struggles we face take many different shapes, but whatever shape they take, still Sunday comes, and we gather (for now, in this online space), and we try to hear the scripture, and pray, and be confronted with words of hope and challenge. And we say that because of our baptism, we must not despair, but cherish truth, work for peace with justice, and care for one another.

And then we will face the world again and work with a whole new set of challenges, and then return the following Sunday to hear and pray and sing and re-affirm once more. And then the next, and then the next. It is a holy calling we have, and yes, sometimes what we do here can seem ridiculous, but just maybe we *need* to continually call ourselves back to the truth of who and whose we are. In our baptisms, we were marked as Christ's own forever, and nothing will ever change that. This is the gracious good news that bears us up.

It's like what we heard when we were children learning to swim: "It's OK, just relax. You *will* float, it's OK. Remember what you have learned." In these days, may we all in our own lives learn to let go and float, borne up by the gracious buoyancy of God, and in those waters, be *re-*created and renewed.

May it be so – to the glory of God! Amen.