

“C’mon In! The Water’s Mine!”
+ Baptism of our Lord C+
Isaiah 43:1-7; Acts 8:14-17; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22
January 10, 2010

Grace, mercy and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! AMEN The text for this morning’s message is the Gospel for this day.

Appearances can be deceiving, but sometimes they are right on, which is where I want to get started with the Gospel today, appointed for “The Baptism of our Lord.” There is a tiny little clue hidden in these verses that open them wide enough to include every one of those baptized by John as well as every one of us who has been baptized into the Christ who suddenly appeared that day at the river Jordan.

The Gospel of Luke says that “the people” were filled with expectation and were questioning in their hearts whether (John) might be the Messiah. And then later on, Luke mentions “all the people” who were baptized the same day as Jesus and were witness at least to that act. Whether or not they saw the dove or heard the voice is a matter open to some dispute. But the point is this: who were those people?

Not their names, obviously, but because of where they were at the Jordan, the vast majority had to be Jews. Now it’s true that the Jews, including Jesus, practiced ritual bathing (mikvahs), as for example, before entering the Temple, but as a people they did not practice a baptism of any kind, except what was called baptism of the proselytes or the converts.

Apart from those touched by John’s preaching, no god-fearing Jew would be baptized because to do so was to lower himself to the level of the Gentiles who were so nasty as to be in need of a godly cleansing even to be touched. Seriously, they were not so fondly known among the Jews as “dirty dogs.” I say this not to incite a race war, nor to perpetuate distorted stereotypes. You should not rewrite history to make it more palatable or politically correct and the Jews loathed the Gentiles. Like the whites in Choctaw County, Alabama where we lived in the 1980’s and discovered they’d filled in a brand new public swimming pool when desegregation came, no self-respecting Jew at the time of Jesus would put themselves on the same level, let alone in the same water with the “uncircumcised.” So the Jews baptized Gentiles to make them clean, but never themselves, because they “didn’t need it.”

All of those people who answered John’s call to repentance, who looked with eager anticipation to the arrival of the “more powerful one” who was coming, had to begin by identifying themselves with and as the scum of the earth. Repentance means, as you know, a complete turnabout, and when one does that turnabout, there stands between them and a loving, forgiving Father, a boulder of guilt and shame which every sinner must embrace and own before they can release it to God.

In the Old Testament the people of God were taught that every sin sacrifice brought to the altar, before it was slaughtered, had the sins of the offering-bringer transferred to it by the laying

on of hands; the idea was you cannot give something away (good or bad) unless you first possess it/own it/identify it as being yours.

There in those muddy Jordan waters stood God's chosen people, having been brought by repentance to the lowest common denominator; sinners like everybody else born of Adam. Then Jesus showed up – identifying Himself with all the rest intending to be baptized by John and John, according to the Gospel of Matthew, wouldn't do it. He wouldn't baptize the one person in Israel (and in all of human history) who did not need to be cleansed from sin.

That's not so hard to understand is it? If some Sunday morning, a better preacher than I shows up at church, don't you think I'd try to step aside and offer him the pulpit, partly out of humility and partly, let's be honest, because I'd rather be humbled than humiliated by comparison. Generally speaking, all of us step aside in the presence of someone better than ourselves.

John recognized that and more than that: not just that Jesus was a cut above all the rest, but as he later bore witness, he knew he was standing in the presence of the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. And yet, because Jesus chose to be identified with you and me – with all of our sins and all the sins of all humanity of all time down they went together into the muddy Jordan, sullied with silt and sin, making Jesus the only one ever baptized by John who emerged not cleansed but contaminated. He did so, again from Matthew's Gospel, to "fulfill all righteousness." That does not mean simply "to do the right thing at the right time and place." No, "to fulfill all righteousness" means that Jesus waded into the water to Himself, become the bridge between the guilty and their God.

All of John's preaching about the purifying baptismal "fire" the Messiah was to bring or "the winnowing fork in His hand to separate the wheat from the chaff," is not about dividing good folks from bad folks; it is a forth-telling/fore-telling of what Messiah Jesus would suffer as He, Himself, would fulfill all righteousness. He had to get dirty with us. He had to grasp our guilt with His innocent hands. He had to touch our shame before offering Himself as the sacrifice.

Ours is not the baptism of John; ours is the baptism of Jesus. We come up out of the waters standing cleansed and whole, with all the righteousness we'll need for eternity, standing on the other side of the bridge among God's people, repentant, certainly, and undeserving eager awe-filled recipients of God's grace. We come to be named "Christian." In ages past, children did not receive their names until baptism so that they would be known to God and to all, still dripping with the soggy grace of Word and Water brought together. In ages past, people baptized later in life changed their names so as to tell the world that in the Christ, they were new-born beloved sons and daughters of God.

Those words, "You are my Son," are an echo of Psalm 2 (7) written centuries before and sung whenever Israel received a new king. They are also the words by which orphans were adopted and made heirs of a new family. We are that different when we have passed through those waters and our old identity as dying, desperate sinners is drowned by grace.

Five hundred years before Jesus was baptized, the prophet Isaiah promised that those whom God has redeemed and called by name will never pass through those waters alone. The waves may frighten us but they will not overwhelm us; they are held back by the hand of God. And that fire John said was coming—all of us who have been linked to Jesus pass through the firestorms of our lives with Him. “With Him!”—that’s the crucial difference.

You know all of us have words and ideas of which we are afraid. One of mine is the word “alone.” Not like being home alone, but alone alone, disconnected, aimlessly drifting. Even God doesn’t like to be alone—that’s why He created man and also why “it was not good for the man to be alone.”

We are created to be connected to each other and to our Creator. But it takes a bridge to bring us together. That bridge has a name: Jesus, baptized for us and extending His own gracious invitation for us to “C’mon in! The Water’s Mine!” Together in Jesus we have a new and eternal identity and personal and shared task to accomplish of bringing others to the water – sharing the Good News – of welcoming the stranger, giving food, clothing and shelter to those in need, of opening our hearts and lives to others to be wounded, to be sure, for there is no sharing in the lives of others or in the sharing of ourselves without the pain of sin-sickness becoming known. But splashing in the water of life we live, always, in hope, the sure and certain knowledge –that by the faith we’ve been granted, the cleansing and newness that is ours – God’s grace and love will cover all the sin and shame and we will be brought safely to heaven’s shores!

Amen.

Now may Almighty God who anointed Jesus at His baptism with the Holy Spirit, anoint us also by that same Spirit, making us faithful in His service and joyful as His children.