

The Power of Water
Isaiah 43:1-7 and Luke 3:15-17, 21-22
Sunday, January 13, 2019
Baptism of Jesus
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St. Charles Ave. Baptist Church

Repent and believe! We've come back to these Lukan texts about John the Baptizer three times in the past six weeks calling us to examine the powerful initiation of new life this peculiar man proclaimed. It's an ancient ritual, dipping into water—hands and feet, faces, whole heads, bodies immersed. The Egyptians did it. So did the Mesopotamians and the Hittites. The ancient Near Eastern cultures surrounding the ancient Hebrews and the Greeks surrounding John and Jesus also did it. Water is about as good a symbol as any we have, and water rituals span the millennia.

Frederick Buechner writes, "FOR NINE MONTHS we breathe in it. The sight of water in oceans, rivers, and lakes is soothing to the spirit as almost nothing else. To swim in it is to become as weightless and untrammelled as in dreams. The wake of a ship, the falling of a cataract, and the tumbling of a brook can hold us spellbound for hours, and in times of drought we feel as parched in our being as the lawn that crackles beneath our feet. Air is our element, but water is our heart's delight."¹

Jesus enters into these waters—ancient, ritualistic, purifying, marking—at the dawn of his ministry. If these rituals were commonplace and widespread, archeologists have discovered "well-to-do people in the wealthy neighborhoods of Jerusalem even had their own ritual immersion pools"² in their homes, why would Jesus go all the way out into the wilderness where John was baptizing? If Jesus was rooted to temple and tradition, where we saw him fully engaged at 12-years-old and will see him preaching soon from the scroll of Isaiah, why not enter ritual waters there? Why not wash and mark the beginning of his movement in the holy place of his tradition?

To answer these questions, we have to revisit the beginning of Luke 3 one more time—our third in these recent weeks. "In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Tracoonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene— during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness." Sixty-one words dedicated to placing the John and

¹ Frederick Buechner, *Beyond Words*

² *The Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, p. 72, "Baptism"

Jesus stories in a very specific time and place. In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, something was happening that was changing everything forever.

Timothy F. Simpson has written extensively on the political theology of Luke and shares, "John was part of a larger movement of outsiders from mainstream Judaism of his day, who preached the eminent coming of the kingdom of God and the destruction of the old order, which was corrupt. And that corruption was not limited to the Roman occupiers but extended also to the Jews who collaborated with them."³

Part of what John was railing against was a corrupt system of economic injustice that was layers deep. From the highest Caesar to the lowest tax collector, everyone was taking more than the legal cut of what was owed to them, and the poorest of the poor were the primary funders of the wealth that was generated in this classic trickle-up economic policy of the 1st century.

Our scripture reading today begins, "The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts..." Who were the people? If we start there and don't go back just one more time, then it's easy to conceive this is a wholesome crowd of well-wishers who are listening to John preach and then get to witness Jesus' baptism. Luke wouldn't set us up for that because Luke wants us to remember that all of this is happening in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar.

Who is around John out there in the wilderness? Jewish leaders who John calls a "brood of vipers" for their corrupt participation in the system. Tax collectors who were most directly involved in the face-to-face robbing of vulnerable people. And soldiers who extorted money from frightened citizens trying to go about their daily lives. John is preaching to the players in the system who are wittingly and unwittingly doing the work of the Caesar and contributing to the brokenness of their world and the poverty of their neighbors.

He didn't just baptize them, he called them to repent and believe in the good news of God. And when they weren't sure what he meant, he told them that repentance means turning from the old path onto a new one—pivoting from the direction you've been heading toward a different one. And if that wasn't concrete enough, he said to the Jewish leaders, "Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same." To the tax collectors, "Don't collect any more [money] than you are required to," and to the soldiers, "Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely—be content with your pay."

³ Simpson, <https://politicaltheology.com/politics-luke-37-18/>

John's ministry, message, and baptism rituals were rooted in the economic oppression of a time and place. He was calling people to salvation not for a mansion in the sky some day but for the good of your neighbor and yourself right here today. Salvation meant loving your neighbor enough not to see her as a tool to manipulate and a pawn to exploit. Salvation meant waking up to the full humanity of those around you, recalling the image of God is within them and within you, and then sharing from your abundance rather than stealing from their scarcity. His message of repentance and baptism was intimately connected with seeking justice. And when John dared to let his message go all the way to Herod's powerful ears, then "Herod added this to them all: He locked John up in prison."

This message. This baptism. This community forming out in the wilderness was enough to get John arrested and eventually killed. And it is there, not in the private immersion pools of Jerusalem, that Jesus goes to enter those waters. It is in the radical, controversial, dangerous waters of repentance at the River Jordan that Jesus shows up among these gathered people to be baptized. "When all the people were baptized, Jesus was baptized too." When the Jewish leaders, the tax collectors, the soldiers had finished hearing John's message about repenting and changing their ways to live a transformed life shaped by the radical love of God, they lined up to step into the river with John and mark that transformation.

And Jesus got in line right behind them all to stand with them in that movement. He entered the river to be baptized by John who was calling people to live differently right here and now—inviting salvation into the lives of people (oppressors and oppressed) who are suffering every day. The good news of God is for now and requires transformation—repentance—change—sometimes dangerous and radical change—in this life for the good of everyone not just for my life for the good of my eternity. And Jesus wanted to be marked in *THAT* ritual in *THAT* line of believers in *THOSE* waters by *THAT* wild preacher out in the wilderness because he believed in the power of those waters to wash something old off of us and something new into us. He was joining a particular movement at a particular moment in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar.

And Luke tells us that when he stepped into those waters and prayed, heaven was opened. And the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." If we are tempted to think these waters are too dangerous for us. If we forget that Jesus wasn't baptized alone but was baptized with all of these particular people. If we start to believe that we can't handle the call to repentance that John offered and

Jesus embodied, may we have the words of the prophet Isaiah still echoing in our ears, "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you." May you hear the same word breathed over Jesus breathed over you now, "You are my child, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

We are called into these same waters, my friends. We are called into the same life's work of loving our neighbors as ourselves. We are called into the same radical love of washing off the stink of oppressive systems that make our lives easier and more convenient. We are called to the same revolutionary path of repentance that may well land us face-to-face with Herod. And we are called to this way without fear.

As we prepare to stand and sing our closing hymn, I invite you to come and remember your baptism. I invite you to dip your hands in the water and remember its power. I invite you to listen for the call of John, "Repent and believe!" I invite you to listen for the call of God, calling you by name, claiming you as a child of the Divine, delighting in you. Will you come and stand in line with all the people who are ready to accept the call to changed life? In Jesus' name. Amen.