

Sermon: When you pass through the waters...

The Rev. Shelby Owen, Trinity Church

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Isaiah 43:1-7, Luke 3:15-17,21-22

“When you pass through the waters, I will be with you....”

Six years ago, I had the privilege of visiting Ethiopia with a group of fellow seminarians. We were there for the Ethiopian Orthodox Epiphany which they call Timkat, the Amharic word for baptism. For the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, Epiphany's focus is on the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River and it is a HUGE celebration, their biggest celebration of the year. On that day all of the Ethiopian Orthodox Churches bring out their replicas of the Ark of the Covenant, which is present at every EOC altar and they process to the nearest body of water. Sometimes they actually dam up streams and rivers for this event. And when there is no local body of water, there is always the fire hose that can be used as it was at the Addis Ababa gathering we attended! There is much singing and dancing as the procession moves along with priests dressed in white and some clerics wearing richly jeweled velvet robes, carrying brightly colored velvet umbrellas while others carry the arks containing replicas of the tablets of the Ten Commandments on their heads. When the procession gets to the water, the priests have mass, bless the water and then there is a reenactment of baptism. The more zealous believers plunge into the water as they renew their baptismal vows.

Today we, too, celebrate the Baptism of Jesus. And I am afraid that our Episcopal response is a little more subdued! We have no plans to dive into the closest body of water or be drenched by a fire hose, (although maybe we could dive into the closest snow bank, if we are feeling zealous after the service. ☐) Most of our readings for today contain imagery filled with water, something that has the power to destroy and the potential for giving us life. Throughout Scripture we see that water does indeed destroy: the Egyptian army drowns in the water of the Red Sea; in one of the psalms the writer describes being up to his neck in the floodwaters; we remember Jonah being in a bit of a panic when he is submerged in the depths of the sea in the belly of the big fish. (And then there are always Noah's skeptical neighbors treading water!) In much of Scripture water symbolizes death.

And yet, in Isaiah today we hear, “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you, and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you...for I am the Lord your God...you are precious in my sight, and ... I love you.” Isaiah is talking to the people of Israel who have wandered from God; at various times he has exhorted them to turn back to God and he wants to remind them that they have been formed by God and that they need not fear for their lives, that there is nothing that can keep them from God's love. In essence these same words are repeated hundreds of years later through the Gospel of Luke as he describes the baptism of Jesus. In Luke Jesus passes through the waters as seen in his own baptism and this foreshadows his death ; and the Holy Spirit descends upon him, God is with him and the waters have not overwhelmed him just as death itself will not have its victory over Jesus as he experiences the resurrection.

Today as we renew our own baptismal vows, we have an opportunity to consider what the sacrament entails. We consider when we are baptized that we have died, that we have been buried with Christ. I think somehow we miss some of the impact of that imagery in our prevalent use of pouring water over our heads rather than being submerged. The water symbolizes, just as it does in Scripture, death. If we see baptism as simply an opportunity to get the family together and celebrate the birth of a new baby, we have missed much of its significance. It is great to get the family together, great to celebrate life itself. And yet, if we can take a deeper look at Baptism, we can see there is a huge commitment taking place, to die with Christ as we go under the water. But we don't STAY under the water! As we are reminded today from Luke's gospel, Jesus will go under that same water and he will rise up out of it. And we know that Jesus will later die for us on a cross and experience resurrection. That is the great joy that we do indeed come back up, gasping for air, we are ready to breathe in a new life. Just as we are buried with Christ we are also resurrected with him.

So what does Jesus' baptism mean for us in our everyday lives? It means that there is no where God will not go with us. I remember having a conversation with an Episcopal priest years ago, whose son had committed suicide. I remember thinking that would be such a cause for despair. He told me that what he learned was that "the bottom holds." That he had been to the bottom and even there- God is. One of our noon-day lunch guests is often reminding me of where she sees God at work when she is going through what I would call very troublesome times. Many of you have shared your own experiences of feeling God's presence as you pass through the waters, the difficulties of your lives. Notice Isaiah says, "WHEN you pass through the waters", not IF. We will all experience death and we will all experience little deaths throughout our lives, fear, rejection, disappointment. And when we have these experiences, we can be sure God will be with us. One of the truths of the Christian faith is that God does not deliver us from trouble but delivers us in trouble. Oswald Chambers, in his classic "My Utmost for his Highest" writes, "God does not give us overcoming life; He gives us life as we overcome. The strain is in the strength. If there is no strain, there is no strength." And this is what we celebrate when we consider Jesus' baptism as well as our own-that God will never leave us. As we lean into Him, as we step out in faith, as we give ourselves over to God's love and mercy, we find ourselves breathing in new life, perhaps even experiencing the joy of the zealous Ethiopian as he plunges into the waters of life.

Amen.