

Matthew 3:13-17

Isaiah 42:1-9

Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Irene Pak Lee

January 12, 2020

## **Wade in the Water**

In the Christian church calendar, today we celebrate and remember the Baptism of Jesus. This holy day is easily overlooked or not seen as that big of a deal. Jesus got baptized. Cool.

If you've grown up in a church setting and depending on the tradition in which you were raised, you may have been baptized as an infant or perhaps not until you could articulate and understand what it was that you were doing. I am sure even in this room, many of you have different opinions and stances on this for your own self or your family. Just for the record, in the Presbyterian Church, we practice both adult and infant baptism understanding that in infant baptism it is the recognition that it is God who chooses us for faith, discipleship and belovedness, even before we are able to articulate it ourselves. Without God in the first place, we have no power to claim these things for ourselves anyway. So the parents and community make those promises to help raise the child in faith until they can articulate for themselves. And so we of course affirm that people come to faith in different stages in life and recognize the baptism of older believers as an equally valid expression of this sacrament. In our Book of Order (which makes for some intriguing reading by the way) we express that we baptize "with undue haste or undue delay"-don't you love our formal polity language? I actually really do. 😊

But I'm not really here to go into an exposition on proper baptismal theology or doctrine. I'm not going to tell you the proper way someone should be baptized ... (sprinkled, dunked, or using a pitcher) or how old they should be. I'm here to remind us of our baptisms, whether we remember them or not, as a way to collectively remember, empower, and renew us again for the work and ministry God is calling all of us into in these days.

This week, I read a commentary by theologian Debie Thomas who talked about growing up in a tradition that waited to perform baptisms until they could understand what they were doing and be able to articulate and claim that for themselves. I'm sure some of you were raised in that tradition too. She said she was twelve years old when her father, the minister, baptized her, and she remembers everything about it. According to the family though, she had been asking to be baptized since she was 3 years old saying that actually

if rumors were true, she did not just ask, she begged, cried, and threw tantrums insisting she was ready to be dunked.

But she said in the tradition that raised her, baptism was understood to be a symbolic stepping OUT from the crowd. It was a personal demonstration of faith. "*I choose to follow Christ. I choose to identify as a Christian. I choose to make a public declaration — without apology, without shame — of my private beliefs.*"

She shared that since then and when she reads the story of Jesus' baptism, which is recorded in all four gospels, she does not see so much a stepping out now but a very intentional stepping IN. She writes of baptism as "A stepping into a history, a lineage, a geography, an identity. In receiving baptism, Jesus doesn't set himself apart from us; he aligns himself *with* us. Baptism in Matthew's Gospel story is not about Othering. It's about solidarity. About joining ... It's about being ushered into a story, a huge sprawling story ... a worldwide community of the faithful. A liturgy that endures. A created universe that whispers, laughs, and shouts God's name from every nook and corner." I love that.

Several years ago, I had the privilege of standing at the edge of the Jordan River, and I remember first, being shocked at how gross and dirty the water looked, but when I got past that, I was amazed at the scope of humanity that gathered there ... people from every place and tribe and language, gathered and seeking to experience the presence of God as Jesus did at his own baptism. Even Jesus stepped into the waters, into the hands of John the Baptist, stepping fully into his humanity ... and in that moment was himself affirmed by the voice of God of his beloved identity before any miracles, any teachings or healings, before he could "prove" it.

It was a powerful witness then and now. And friends, in these days, we not only need that reminder, but also need that sense of renewal and courage of Spirit and always reminders of our personal and collective beloved identity again and again, don't we? I know I do.

And so alongside this gospel story of the baptism of our Lord, we hear about a servant from the prophet Isaiah this morning.

Now to give you a little bit of background into the community that this prophet is speaking to, it is a group of exiles who are still recovering from the trauma of an invasion that has taken their home and livelihoods away. They have seen their city destroyed, their friends and family killed or taken away in chains to a foreign land. They likely feel God has deserted them. They are a

disoriented and dislocated people barely hanging on at the end of their rope. Isaiah did not have an easy task to speak hope into this community.

But throughout these chapters, he tries to use some creative imagery to help them think about how to live in the midst of the horrible chaos that unexpectedly broke into their lives. I thought we might need some of those reminders too. And so earlier, there is imagery of God as a mighty warrior and then a shepherd who protects their sheep and then even God as a woman in labor.

In today's reading from Isaiah, we then encounter for the first time the image of a "suffering" servant of God. The servant is described as a "bruised reed" and a "dimly burning wick." But it comes with the faith filled assurance that God's spirit is working through this servant and this servant will not be broken or quenched but will continue to fulfill mission and establish justice on earth. What looks like or seems weak is still strong. Power in the midst of vulnerability. A different kind of power. It's a power that does not scream or shout, which offers a stark contrast with the brutal force the community was facing by the empires of the day.

Friends, even if you and I have not personally faced the kind of trauma where we have seen our own personal homes and livelihoods taken away, I think like this community, we have found ourselves in a state of chaos and despair in our own personal lives and as we face the realities of these days in our country and world. And I think instead of pretending that we have it all together and that we can do it or survive it alone, like the servant in this text, it's okay to acknowledge that we are often no more than "bruised reeds" and dimly burning wicks." As the songwriter Leonard Cohen writes in his song entitled "Anthem": *"Forget your perfect offering, there is a crack in everything, but that is where the light gets in."* And that's what Isaiah reminds us of today, that God's grace and power works at the points where we are most fragile and dim. God's soul delights in God's servant, just as we are, no matter where we are. It is with us that God is well pleased.

And so then, in the midst of these turbulent or difficult times, when we feel helpless, tired, and out of control, we discover from this text and this particular servant that we need to cultivate the power that we do have in the midst of our current state of vulnerability. Old Testament professor Juliana Claassens writes, "Even in the midst of the most dire of circumstances, we still have the power to make a difference in the lives of the people around us. As we have seen in the case of the suffering servant, this power is a remarkable power – not like the power of the worldly institutions but a power that grows out of compassion, out of being concerned with the needs of the other. Even if

we find ourselves in a completely hopeless situation, we can nurture compassion's power ... (friends) that means that even in the most disturbing of days, we have the ability to do good things, to look beyond our own problems, and to direct our focus to the other."

I think as we remember the baptism of Jesus today, that that is the beauty of our baptism and remembering our baptism. We are tied together into a community of faith that is deeper than just me, myself, and I. In every baptism we witness, we covenant to support one another, to help raise each other in faith, in doubt, to know the love of God and to make sure folks remember that they are loved by our God – before they can articulate it themselves and when they can articulate it themselves. We are empowered and called again just as we are to extend compassion and I would add liberation. Not because we are super heroes or have it all together, but because we are willing to step INTO a worldwide community of the faithful, because we trust that the Spirit is also upon us, and that we are made strong even in our weakness.

There is a spiritual and folk song that was born out of the American institution of slavery that many of you may know (hint, it's my sermon title) called "Wade in the Water." And like many of the songs of those oppressed by slavery, these songs were a way to maintain hope, to remember the biblical story, and to trust God even in the midst of horrific circumstances. Howard Thurman offered this interpretation of the musical text:

"For [the slaves] the 'troubled waters' meant the ups and downs, the vicissitudes of life. Within the context of the 'troubled' waters of life there are healing waters, because God is in the midst of the turmoil." Though African American spirituals were born in the pain, oppression, and struggle of a particular people, they have become songs for all people. Thurman's conclusion is a message for all of us: "Do not shrink from moving confidently out into the choppy seas. Wade in the water, because God is troubling the water." And by troubling that water, it does not mean that it is God who brings the chaos, but that in these particular waters, God abides with us, God heals us, and God drenches us for community. When God troubles the water, it is a different kind of power that is splashed upon us.

And so friends, on this baptism of the Lord Sunday, let us remember that the one who came to walk with us on earth to extend compassion, healing and liberation began by wading in the water first as well. Christ did not begin as a mighty warrior, but as a vulnerable infant. God's Spirit breaking forth from the heavens and resting upon him and naming him beloved did not mean freedom from the chaos and pain of the world but invited Jesus into it. And so

in the midst of talks of war, evil, oppression, and disasters, we too dare to step into the waters again as well, trusting that God's gonna trouble the waters – God with us in the midst of it all, especially in the chaos and turmoil.

Sisters and brothers and siblings in Christ, today, let us remember our baptism and wade in the water, for even in the deepest, darkest water, we are the Beloved with whom God is well pleased. May we believe that today and every day so that we may continue to live and breathe and move through a world with continued kindness, compassion, and justice for everyone. May you wade in that water today.

Amen.

“Wade in the Water” sung by the choir/soloist