

## **Living Water**

Matthew 3:13-17

Crossroads Christian Church

Isaiah 55:1-5

Baptism of the Lord

January 12, 2014

Look at your pew Bible. Pick it up, if you want. Did you know that it is filled with water from beginning to end? Don't worry. It won't spill out. It won't even make sloshy sounds if you shake it. But still, there's water in it, from cover to cover. The Living Word is filled with living water. It begins on the very first page.

In the beginning was God, and God's Spirit brooded over the waters of chaos, ready to bring shape and order, purpose and form. When the earth was in the process of creation, waters of the sky and waters of the earth were carefully separated; sea and land were carefully given boundaries. Then life teemed in the lands and in the waters. A few chapters later in Genesis, the destructive powers of water were unleashed in the story of Noah and the flood. In Exodus, the people of Israel crossed the Red Sea when they left slavery in Egypt, and a generation later, they crossed the Jordan River to enter the Promised Land.

In between the first and the last chapters of the Bible are many stories dealing with draught and rain; pools in the desert; Jonah on the high seas; the prophet Isaiah, saying, "Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters;" Jesus talking about living water to the Samaritan woman; and Paul experiencing storm and shipwreck. Finally, in Revelation 21, the very last chapter in our Bibles, we have the glorious vision of the new heaven and the new earth, of the New Jerusalem coming down from heaven. First comes the promise of the victorious Christ: "See, I am making all things new. It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life." Finally, the visionary John describes the river of life in the new Jerusalem: "Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of

God and of the lamb, through the middle of the street of the city.”

For a book written in a semi-arid land, this whole idea of living water as a gift of God comes up again and again. Maybe the thirstier you are the more you think about water.

In the midst of all these watery stories is today’s lesson, the baptism of Jesus. This incident, in the Jordan River, gives us an epiphany, a revelation, of who Jesus is and how he begins his ministry. It’s recorded in all the Gospels. In each account, Jesus receives a blessing from God and we become partners in that blessing.

One way that Judaism in the time of Jesus used water ritually was in baptizing converts. Being immersed in a pool of water symbolized washing away their old life, their old sins, and becoming cleansed before God. Then along came John, the eccentric son of old Zechariah and Elizabeth, challenging the people of Israel to repent. To repent means to change directions; to change your life. God’s new age was coming, and it was going to be scary for those who didn’t live as God directed. Luke shares some of John the Baptist’s preaching. “Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” “What should we do?” asked the nervous tax collectors. “Collect no more than what you have to.” “What should we do?” asked people like you and me. “If you have more than enough clothing and food, share it with those who are hungry and ill-clothed.” “What should we do?” asked the soldiers. “Don’t use your powers to extort money or threaten others.” As a sign of repentance, John was baptizing Jews, dipping them into the waters of the Jordan River, as if to say, “It’s time to start all over again, like a convert. It’s time to go back to Square One, to put God in charge of our lives.” John then speaks of the coming Messiah, the one whose shoes he’s unworthy to untie. John baptizes with water; the one coming will baptize with the Holy Spirit.

Then one day, this fiery curmudgeon, not afraid to tell off priests and princes and call them to repent of their sins, has a stunned look on his face; because there stands before

him the only person in the world who doesn't need to repent. The Messiah. The Christ. The Holy One sent by God. Standing in the river, the old prophet's mouth is suddenly dry. Is this right? All of a sudden the holy man is very aware of his own sins and shortcomings. "Shouldn't you baptize me?" he whispers, in Matthew's account.

"No, let it be so now, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." This act of baptism would show that Jesus identified with the rest of us, with the rest of humanity, and it would help God's righteousness touch the lives of others. So Christ was baptized by John in the river Jordan. As he came up out of the water, Jesus had a vision of the heavens torn apart and God's Spirit descending like a dove upon him. And he heard a voice, the voice of his Father, saying, "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased." This was his baptism, just as we baptize newcomers to the faith to acknowledge that they have received God's grace, like we did this morning. It was the time Jesus received the Spirit, just as we are baptized and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. It was also his ordination, where he was given the authorization by God to begin his ministry. Jesus would hear that voice again, on the Mount of Transfiguration, as he prepared to leave Galilee and take his ministry to Jerusalem, and to the cross. "You are my son, the Beloved, in whom I am well pleased."

Our own baptism is ordination, too, into lives of Christian discipleship and service. The ordination that we experience when we become ordained servants of the church is just an extension of that initial ordination we receive at baptism. Fred Craddock, one of my personal favorite preachers, described his own baptism like this: "Here on a Sunday evening about three weeks following my confession I was baptized by our minister, Jack McCullough, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Some of those present said that I had 'joined the church'. It was more than that, but I did not know what. With my wet clothes under my arm, I walked home. I told my Mother I wanted to walk alone and I did. I prayed on the way and

again in bed before going to sleep. I felt both uncertain and special, but also wondering if at school the next day any of my friends would have heard about my baptism. If not, should I tell them or was that special night between God and me?"<sup>i</sup>

Like Fred Craddock, we may have not understood fully what our baptism meant, but we knew that it meant something. And throughout our lives, we grow into our understanding of what it means. We live knowing and not completely knowing, realizing and never completely realizing, that somehow things are different for us because of going down into the water. We grow into our baptism. There's a story about Martin Luther, who was the main leader of the Protestant Reformation. His efforts to reform and renew the church met with bitter opposition. His life was often at risk. He himself had doubts and sometimes lapsed into severe depression. But when things got tough, he would put his hand on his head, and remind himself "I am baptized." And that gave him the strength to go on.

Think of the time that you were baptized. What do you remember of it? Think of the Spirit that was given to you. That baptism was a sign of cleansing and of new beginning. It was a sign of grace, that God has always loved you and accepted you and wanted to be in a living relationship with you. It's also a sign of the death, burial and resurrection of Christ, which was what he was baptized toward. For on that day that he came out of the water, he accepted his mission, he accepted his cross as well.

For us who have accepted Christ and been baptized, living into our baptism leads us to act as if it made a difference. It means that we weigh our actions, our attitudes, our decisions, our words, by the fact that we are baptized as Christians. It gives us a calling to serve; to reach out; to be ministers and missionaries in all that we do.

If you haven't accepted Christ, if you haven't been baptized, listen for the calling of God, the invitation to follow Christ. If you have been baptized, remember your baptism and thank God for this wonderful gift of grace. Think about

how the service that you do in life, your mission, is tied back to that baptism. Think about how you can faithfully and lovingly live as Christ's disciples. Hear the invitation of Christ to receive the living water. Amen.

By Michael E. Dixon

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<sup>i</sup> Fred Craddock, *Reflections on My Call to Preach*, Chalice, 2009.