

“Living Waters”

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First Congregational United Church of Christ, Gaylord, Michigan

Sunday, July 16, 2023

Texts: John 7: 37-39 and Luke 3: 21-22

“Martin Luther once remarked that he thought about his baptism every morning when he washed his face. He said that there was no greater assurance in this life than the assurance of baptism. The God who cannot lie said “Yes” to him, said, “You are my child. I will call you Beloved” (Daniel Cooperrider, *Speak with the Earth and It Will Teach You*, p35-36). Do you think about your baptism as you wash your face in the morning? Do you think of yourself as beloved? As God’s child? We’ve talked about baptism before, but I hope this morning it’s from yet another perspective. Baptism is a story not so much about what is wrong with us and getting saved as it is about what is right with God and how God makes us right. We don’t ascend. We descend. Just like the river. Through our encounter with water – living water – we are made alive. We are alive not just for today, but for all time. Each morning looking in the mirror and remembering, “I am a beloved child of God.”

The story of baptism begins in the River Jordan. As you heard in the Kids’ Chat,

“The River Jordan begins its journey deep in the mountains that form the border

between Syria and Lebanon. It starts as a small mountain stream at an elevation of 9,232 feet. The upper course flows south and drops rapidly over its first sixty miles, tumbling and crashing down the mountainside before entering the Sea of Galilee, which lies at about 685 feet below sea level. The river exits the south side of the Sea of Galilee and continues south for eighty miles over a much less steep gradient, dropping only another 700 feet until it empties into the Dead Sea, near where Jesus was baptized, which is the lowest land on earth at nearly 1,400 feet below sea level.” Daniel Cooperrider continues, “The Jordan River Valley is a landscape of inestimable ecological, cultural and religious importance.

Connecting the ecosystems of Asia and Africa, the river is a holy site for more than 500 million migratory birds that follow its flow upstream and downstream each year. And it is a holy site for the billions of people who are part of the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim faith traditions who cherish the sacred stories that are set along its banks... [The city of Jericho, on the banks of the Jordan,] has a claim to being the oldest continually inhabited city on the planet.

And yet, in one of the most damning judgments about the state of our species’ stewardship of the gifts of creation, today the Jordan River, particularly the lower stretch in which Jesus was baptized, is nearing ecological collapse. Over the past fifty years, ninety-six percent of the river’s flow has been diverted. The seasonal

trickle of water that remains is polluted with saline and effluent. It is estimated that a full half of the biodiversity has been lost. Family farms have seen their once fertile fields crumble into dust. The Dead Sea is drying up at a rate of about a meter a year. It is all so tragic that we can hardly face the truth of it, as it haunts us with an apocalyptic ecological wondering: if we as a species cannot take care of such an obviously sacred landscape, what part of the earth, if any, will we be able to keep beautiful and verdant for future generations?

Good question. I don't have an answer for it. I pray that humanity does. I think the clue, though, comes from the river itself. The river is a good metaphor for what a life of faith looks like, as well as what it takes to truly be ethical and compassionate toward the planet and the people that inhabit it. Unlike humans, who always seem to find their way to ascend, to gain, to go up, rivers do exactly the opposite, starting at the top, descending rapidly or slowly, but descending nonetheless until they find their peace. Cooperrider puts it this way: "The way the living waters of a river flow down teaches us something, expresses something, preaching something about how God's energy, God's love, God's mercy flows down and floods every tiny little crack and corner of creation...water is content with the low places that people disdain."

Just like Jesus taught, “those who exalt themselves shall be humbled, and those who humble themselves shall be exalted” (Luke 14:11). “Jesus experienced and was inspired by the alchemical truth of rivers that we need in our age of climate change now more than ever – that rivers are places and means whereby old ways die and flow down and new ways can emerge and be reborn.”

Humans seem always to look to the new, the upscale, the next promotion, the next thing to grab, the next way to rise above. Even in our faith tradition, there are many who spend so much time making themselves feel more faithful, and above others, by talking about how fallible, sinful, and maybe even evil someone else is. Baptism reminds us all that we are all beloved, belonging, blessed, and beautiful in God’s eyes. It’s sad to me that a place so many people revere, the Jordan River, is being destroyed ecologically. Then again, it also pains me to see how we humans spend much time, and often in God’s name, destroying others. Honestly, I think it begins with how we look at ourselves. If we can already see ourselves as beloved of God each morning when we wash our face, then we don’t need to spend any time proving that worth to anyone.

I believe that Jesus did not need to be baptized. He chose to be for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is this is when he began his public ministry. More

than that, Jesus chose solidarity with people like you and like me. Cooperrider put it this way: “There is a sense of the art of humility embedded in the accounts of [Jesus’] baptism as well. Matthew tells about John deferring to Jesus, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” (Matthew 3:14). Luke writes (in our scripture for today), about Jesus’ posture of solidarity with the yearning masses when he writes that, “When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too.” (Luke 3:21).

Standing in solidarity with “the yearning masses” and pronouncing us beloved just as God pronounced on Jesus, the baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan reminds us of many things that are true about people, especially people of faith. I pray that you know that you are recipients of God’s living water. You are beloved. You are redeemed. And no person of faith needs ever justify themselves at the expense of another. Instead, our future is found in solidarity with those who are the last, the least, the lost, and the misguided. Coming alongside the other, with love in our hearts, we can restore many who are broken. First, though, they have to matter to us. Just like the River Jordan has to matter before it, too, can be restored.

Rivers tell us a lot about ourselves, about nature, about our God, about our faith, but mostly about our mission. I'll end with a beautiful paragraph from

Cooperrider's book:

I think about the Jordan River's influence when I think about Jesus's love for the littlest and least, the mustard seed, the little children, the widow's mite. I think about Jesus bending down to wash his disciples' feet. I think about Mary Magdalene bending down to wipe Jesus's feet with her perfumed hair and tears. I think about the incarnation that is celebrated at Christmas, which is the other story of Jesus's birth in the Gospels, and which is a masterpiece narrative about how the love of God descends here to this earth, seeking out the lowest and the least as the place of God's birth into this world. And finally, I think about how, after his death, Jesus was placed underground in the tomb for three days. I think about how the Apostle's Creed describes this as Jesus "descending into hell," descending into the depths of the earth and the underworld."

Descending...the story of Jesus, the story of the river. Might this also be a story for us?

In the many blessed names of God. Amen.