

Sermon for January 14, 2018 – “The Water’s Fine!”

Baptism of Our Lord, Year B – Text(s): Isaiah 42:1-9, Mark 1:1-14

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Did you ever go canoeing? Rafting? How about kayaking? You get the canoe, raft, whatever, into the water, you feel the cool, calm water on your legs, and feet. You begin paddling. You begin to look around you, the calm water ahead, the beautiful scenery along the shore. You continue paddling. You find the right rhythm. You feel a slight breeze. The movement is gentle and easy. It feels good to be in the water.

We have been floating down the river for a while now. Each year, we hop aboard the boat together and start the trip all over again in Advent. We float towards Christmas and through Epiphany. It’s a journey that’s familiar, yet also new each time we take it. It’s a journey that begins with end times. A journey that makes its way with Mary and Joseph to the manger in the stable. On it we flee with them to Egypt to avoid Herod’s insanity. On it we travel with the Magi led by a star to pay homage to the child revealed to be God’s Messiah.

Today, we pick up a little speed and fast forward 30 years. We float down the river Jordan where Jesus is baptized by John. Jesus’ baptism is an unusual story, an uncomfortable scene for Christians. What do I mean? Well, think about it for a second. Why does Jesus need to be baptized? For forgiveness of sins? Repentance? What does it say about John as he baptizes instead of being baptized? In many ways, the story of Jesus’ baptism invites more questions than answers as we hear it once more. During Advent, we heard John’s preaching on the river bank. His stiff condemnation of the crowds, his warnings of the Messiah. This time when Jesus shows up John seems very different, at least as Matthew tells the story. The confidence and boldness are gone. He’s indecisive and questioning. Jesus insists on being baptized, and so John relents, without an argument. This doesn’t sound like the John of a few weeks ago. But John and the crowds don’t see what is going on. They’re hoping for a powerful, kingly Messiah. A warrior who will end injustice, who will remove foreign powers from control in Israel. But, Jesus is neither of those things. It’s the beginning of the problems that John, the disciples, and the crowds, the Pharisees, scribes and temple authorities will all have with Jesus. Some will want an ally, some will want a powerful warlord, some will want Jesus to go away, but Jesus simply refuses to fit their categories. Jesus is going to show us God in ways that we don’t see, that we can’t see, that we refuse to see.

Remember the feeling of standing in the water, feeling the cool, calm water as we got into the boat? Well, the further we travel the more the current picks up. The gentle calm is replaced by force and weight. The water doesn’t smoothly pass by. It pushes and grabs, it pulls and drags. The cool gentle stream that cooled our feet now pulls us in and drags us along. The power of the river is more than we could’ve ever imagined. Like the crowds who gathered on the banks of the Jordan we gather to wait also. We’re waiting for the world to get better, but it doesn’t. As we tried to pause and rest over Christmas the world continued to turn. Life and death soldiered on in the world; there were still tragedies, shootings, war and illness. The news of violence still bombarded us from our newspapers, radios and TVs. The world hasn’t changed all that much since John and Jesus met in the river. Sure, we drive cars, have indoor plumbing. We live in heated houses and can talk to anyone on the planet instantly. But, like the crowds who stood listening to John our world still is filled with violence and death.

There are more shootings in the news, violence seemingly everywhere, a fresh scandal involving a politician, or entertainer daily. The weight of all of this threatens to drown us in the inability to care anymore. We hear the reports, read the news articles and it's too much to take, too much to grieve for.

Not only is it hard to see what's going on as John baptizes Jesus, it's hard to see where God is at all. Today, it might feel like the cool refreshing water of the river has pulled us in and dragged us under. The current is churning, and the waves are like bucking broncos. Those who've ever been whitewater rafting or tubing know what I'm talking about. We bounce in all directions deafened by the sound of the roaring water, gasping for air. Suddenly, we see it and before we know it we're headed right over the waterfall. Um, is it just me or is this **not** what the river journey that began in Advent is supposed to be like! This is **not** what God is supposed to allow to happen in the world. We're not supposed to drown in the waters of grief and apathy! And then a voice cuts through the noise and chaos. "You are my beloved. With you I am well pleased". Words of promise, words of hope. As John dunks Jesus, down into the water and then brings Him up out of the water, as breath and air flood back into empty lungs, God speaks. God speaks in a way that hasn't been heard since the beginning of creation. God speaks and the world is transformed. We tumble over the waterfall, we plunge into the deep pool at the bottom. We're squeezed and crushed under the weight. We can't tell which direction is up. Death under the water seems imminent. And then all of a sudden, while we're tossed about in the churn not knowing which way is up or down, we pop up and out of the water. The air rushes back into our lungs. This is where God's action begins. In drowning, in death. It seems like a strange place for God to be working, yet here He is. Here God is speaking as Jesus comes out of the water. "You are my beloved children and with You I am well pleased". What a weird and wonderful God who can push us below the surface to make us His own, to give us new names as children of God, as His beloved.

This is the reason why John doesn't know what's going on when Jesus asks to be baptized. This is the reason why we cannot see God working in the world. It's too radical. It's too unbelievable. And yet, this is the promise made to us in the waters of our Baptism, the promise that's renewed each and every day, the promise that's remembered each and every time we baptize someone – regardless of age. It's the promise made that in the **place** we least expect it, in the **way** we least expect it. But, tell me, when you stop and think about it, isn't that what God does? Even in death God is showing us something new, something life filled, something surprising, something that can come only from a God like ours. If only we've eyes to see. When we do we see a God who comes into the world as baby born to an unwed teenage mother, a God who lives as a poor carpenter in 1st century Israel, a God who died on a Roman cross as a common criminal, a God who was raised from the dead and who in turn calls us to be drowned and then raised. When we do we realize that new life can only come God, a God who rarely seems to act the way we think He should. This radical God, this God of water and Baptism, comes to us in ways that are so unimaginable, so crazy, that we not only can scarcely believe it but that we can barely even figure out what it is He's doing!

Brothers and sisters, here's the thing, the journey that God promises is neither easy, nor gentle. The results of God's work in the world are rarely what we imagine or hope for. Yet, as this unexpected God meets us in our world, and on our terms, we cannot help but be drawn to this unexpected God whose story has become our story, whose story we tell over and over again.

As we float down the river of Advent and Christmas, as we pass by Jesus and John in the river, we see again and marvel anew at God's love for us. We see a God who not only pushes us below the water to die, but who pulls us out again so that we may rise into new life. And today, we hear a God who beckons us to "come on in the water's fine." A God who speaks through chaos, "You are my beloved Children, with you I am well pleased."

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.