

Rev. Dr. Karen Blanchard  
“The Waters of A New Life”  
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood  
Sunday, January 12, 2020

**Isaiah 42:1-9**

*Here is my servant, whom I uphold,  
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;  
I have put my spirit upon him;  
he will bring forth justice to the nations.  
He will not cry or lift up his voice,  
or make it heard in the street;  
a bruised reed he will not break,  
and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;  
he will faithfully bring forth justice.  
He will not grow faint or be crushed  
until he has established justice in the earth;  
and the coastlands wait for his teaching.*

*Thus says God, the Lord,  
who created the heavens and stretched them out,  
who spread out the earth and what comes from it,  
who gives breath to the people upon it  
and spirit to those who walk in it:  
I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness,  
I have taken you by the hand and kept you;  
I have given you as a covenant to the people,  
a light to the nations,  
to open the eyes that are blind,  
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,  
from the prison those who sit in darkness.  
I am the Lord, that is my name;  
my glory I give to no other,  
nor my praise to idols.  
See, the former things have come to pass,  
and new things I now declare;  
before they spring forth,  
I tell you of them.*

**Matthew 3:13-17**

*Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, ‘I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?’ But Jesus answered him, ‘Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.’ Then he consented. And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.’*

Will you pray with me? Holy God, we gather this day and are reminded of our baptisms as we hear Your word about the baptism of your Son. So be with us now as we wrestle and remember and recommit ourselves. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

So, if you feel like you have ecclesiastical whiplash after hearing about Jesus's baptism this morning, I understand. In a few short weeks, we have moved from angels with messages, Mary's pregnancy to the birth, to the shepherds, and last week the wise men. And now, a week later, Jesus is all grown up and ready to be baptized. Now, I find myself wanting to know more about the years in between. There's little else we know for certain. I wondered though what he was like when he grew up. Did he roll his eyes? Was he a difficult teenager? Was he a hard worker? Was he a quiet observer? We really don't know. And maybe that's for the best because it keeps us open to all kinds of possibilities. But if we look more closely we realize that the story of Jesus's baptism does connect back to the birth narratives.

Remember, Luke's Gospel doesn't begin with Mary's story, but with Zechariah at the temple, learning that he is about to become a father for the first time and that his son is to be called John. We learn that he's a cousin of Jesus and described as an odd sort of guy who wears animal skins and eats honey and locusts. And in each gospel, he is portrayed as the one calling people to repentance and baptism to prepare the way for the One who is to come.

So how does this come to be? Why water and words? Water and repentance are very much rooted together in the Jewish tradition. Gentiles who wanted to become Jews were often baptized. Water was part of the Jewish ritual of cleansing. Not as once in a lifetime experiences, but something that might take place for any number of reasons--if someone had broken a law or touched a dead body and was considered unclean. It's logical if you think about it. We wash our hands before we eat or when we're dirty after working in the garden. We wash ourselves and use the water to wash away the dirt. In those days, people were offered water after walking on the dusty streets in their sandals, when they came into someone's home. So it makes sense that the ritual of cleansing the body became a symbolic way of washing away one's sins or uncleanness.

But John the Baptist, I think, ushers in something that's new. Baptism was no longer about a particular act, but about our nature. It was an act of washing away the power of sin, not from the reality of sinning but of its hold on our lives. That's why we say we die to sin. It's not that we no longer sin, but we're no longer held in bondage by sin, for in Christ, we have been set free. John's actions then bring in a new understanding of what it meant to have new life. But those in the early church struggled with Jesus being baptized. Why would Jesus, of all people, need to repent and be baptized? If he was divine as well as human, then he's sinless, right? It seemed antithetical to their understanding of a divine human if that's a phrase. But clearly, it's an important moment. Each Gospel talks about the Baptism, and also shows how it marks the beginning of his ministry.

In the Gospel of John, turning water into wine comes right after the Baptism. In Luke, we read the very words that Jesus was 30 years old when he began his ministry. In Mark and in Matthew he's baptized, and then he goes into the wilderness. Now, if we look at the passage, we see that John is unsettled by the fact that Jesus wants him to baptize him, but Jesus tells him, "It's an act of fulfillment." The act of his baptism reconnects Jesus and John. After John is born, we remember in Luke, Zechariah says, "His son will be called the prophet of the most high and will go before the Lord to prepare his way until the day he appears publicly to Israel. And that he would give knowledge of salvation to his people and about the forgiveness of their sin."

Consider at this point, that John and Jesus are pretty much unknown. Out of the wilderness and obscurity, John enters the scene preaching about repentance and baptizing people. He begins to do what God has called him to do. He begins to do what he was born to do. Jesus also appears to come out of obscurity, and he, too, soon goes into the wilderness and begins what God has called him to do. When you read the passage, we don't have the sense that Jesus decides this suddenly or impulsively to be baptized, or that John or others push him to do it. Jesus deliberately seeks out John because he knows that John's the one who's preparing the way for him. John feels unworthy, but Jesus insists upon it because he knows it fulfills the statement about preparing the way of the Lord.

And so John finally speaks the words of baptism, and as Jesus comes up from the water, we hear words from God through something like a dove. It's a tender and powerful moment because we are told that the voice says, "This is my son. My beloved one." Jesus' baptism was not only a marker, I think, of the beginning of his ministry, but a marker of belonging and connection. Through it, he is connected not only to God, but to all of us who are named and claimed by God as a beloved. And it's why we, as Presbyterians, only have two sacraments; baptism and communion. Because they are the only two acts that Jesus himself participated in.

So as we noted earlier, our baptisms may vary from time to time in our ages. Some of us are infants. Some of us are adults. But each time we are named and claimed as the beloved of God. Though Jesus is portrayed as literally the son of God, I think that's why Paul tells us we are adopted as the children of God. So as we shared with the children, we are reminded that many are baptized as infants. They become a part of the household of God. A community of people. And that's why we don't do baptisms in private anymore. It's why we do them in the worshipping community, because we all make promises to welcome that child.

When parents present their children, they commit to raising that child within the faith community. And we agree to support them in that and encourage them in that. And so we give Bibles to fifth-graders, and have mentors for Confirmation classes, and Sunday School teachers, and LOGOS leaders, and choir directors that work with our children and youth.

But there are others of us who were baptized at different points in our lives, whether it's at Confirmation or as adults. Each time, it is a mark of belonging and grace. For some of us, it is the conclusion of a process in one way that is fulfilled in our confirmation, one that started at baptism, and then we respond to God at our Confirmation.

The other thing I noticed is that John called people to repent and then to be baptized. And repentance is an interesting word because it is a word that we often connect with to admitting our sins. But it's not only about recognizing human frailty. Such a word can mean something about changing directions, for, in Greek, *metanoia* means a change in direction, a change of heart, a new beginning, a new awareness. And I think, in that particular way, Jesus repented, because he moved in a new direction as he began his ministry.

So we are called to remember our baptisms, our active belonging, and we're reminded we are loved, but not just for what we do, sometimes in spite of what we do. For when we learn and become aware, we repent and ask for forgiveness, and that can be a holy act of grace and renewal. So baptism is not a simple stamp of approval as a beloved child of God, but it marks the beginning of a lifelong process of reflection and growth. We become more able to be aware of our shortcomings and our need for grace and mercy.

So baptism is not just an act of love and belonging, but also grace and forgiveness. I came across a powerful story from a woman who had lived this out, someone who moved from being lost and alone to finding new life. Her name is Candace, and she said of herself, "I found myself in a deep hole. I'd lost my job, gambled away money until I was about to lose my home and drank to make myself feel better. I was depressed, and hopeless, and angry, and cynical, and irresponsible in every way. I pitied myself and I hated myself. I had some wonderful friends, but I didn't appreciate them. My family relationships were strained. And over the years, I had sort of taken a Whitman's Sampler of faith. What little love I knew of the Bible and a Christian life was distorted. And the whole notion of God seemed unintelligible to me, fairytale-ish and anti-intellectual, a crutch for people who couldn't figure out how to live life on their own. But then early in the year, I learned of the tragic death of a dear young friend, and things for me got worse. Fortunately, though, as I struggled with that loss, I also developed a new friendship. I emailed him some questions about God, and he answered in ways that spoke to me, adding little bits of advice. 'Just talk to God while you putter around the house like God was your buddy.' So feeling foolish and awkward, I began talking to God. A few days later, I wrote him an email saying I'd polished off a bottle of vodka the night before and I was going to try and drive home without buying another. And he simply said, 'Let me know when you get home even if you do stop.' I made it home without stopping, and he kept me company via email all through the weekend as I detoxed. I also spent a lot of time talking to God."

"The following Tuesday morning while I was driving, I suddenly felt overwhelmed with emotion and started sobbing. I was crying so hard I had to pull over to the side of the road, but once I was done crying, I felt so different. I didn't understand exactly what had happened, but I knew my world had changed for the better. When I got home, I went right to my computer and tried to remember the things I had said to God in the car. I now call it the Cynic's Prayer." And I think it's a wonderful name. She said, "Okay, God, I give up. I'm yours if you want me. I don't care how awkward I might feel talking to you or about you. I don't care what havoc may have been wrought in your name in the past or what might happen in the future. I don't care if some seem hypocritical or self-righteous or sanctimonious. I don't care if there are times when I can't feel Your presence. I don't care if loving You means I have to at least attempt to love myself. I don't care if friends roll their eyes and laugh at my story. I don't care if I feel like a faker sometimes. And I don't care if it's harder to do Your will than it would be to follow my own desires, and I don't care if I'm less than perfect at it. None of that matters. I give up. I'm Yours if You want me."

She said, "I wrote this story after I'd been sober for 15 months, attending recovery meetings every week. My new friend, Jon, and a long-time friend, Bill, encouraged me to find a church family, and I did. And late that year, I became a member of my church and was baptized with John and Bill and many people I loved at my side. I don't gamble anymore, and I'm working with a volunteer financial counselor to learn how to handle my money. And things are getting better. My life now holds things I hadn't known for a very long time, if ever: hope and peace, humility, perseverance, contentment, self-control, joy, courage, strength. Truth be told, my problems didn't magically disappear. In fact, for a little while, they seemed even more overwhelming. But underneath it all, I knew that there was a river of joy carrying me forward, and I find rest in God's grace and peace and love that is beyond my capability to express. The process of confessing and repenting of my sins has been difficult. It's still a work in progress. Actually, and no doubt, being human like I am, it will never end. That's what we humans do, right? We sin."

Candace's story of repentance and baptism speaks to us of the power of God's grace and love, of the gift of faith to strengthen and comfort, to challenge us. She turned in a new direction. She repented, and she was baptized. And on this day, we are invited to remember our baptisms or the baptisms of the children we cherish and love. Whether we are struggling or joyful, baptism is a reminder that we are indeed, each one of us, God's beloved and that we belong to God and one another.

Candace closed her story with words from a favorite passage from 1 Peter. "Therefore putting aside all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy, like newborn babies longing for the pure milk of the word, may we do so so that we may grow and respect salvation." And she said, "Then you will know you have tasted the kindness of the Lord." She said, "I most certainly have tasted the kindness of the Lord." <sup>1</sup>

So on this day of remembering our baptisms, may we remember we belong to God and to one another. May we remember the power and healing promise of the forgiveness of our sins, and may we too find comfort and joy in the kindness of the Lord. Amen.

<sup>1</sup> This is copied with some parts of poetic license from a story called, "One Woman's Conversion Experience (While Driving!)" June 9, 2008 by John Shore from Progressive Christian, an online web page on [Patheos.com/blog/johnshore](http://Patheos.com/blog/johnshore).