

Into the Water

Isaiah 60: 1-6; Luke 3:7-22

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Probably my favorite baptism scene in a movie comes toward the end of the 1993 film, *The Piano*. Even if you've seen the movie recently, you may not remember it because it wasn't a traditional baptism. It didn't take place in a church, or even in a river, there wasn't a priest or minister involved. In fact, there wasn't any overtly religious ritual or language. Still, there was a baptism. Ada, played by Holly Hunter, was a mute woman who endured an oppressive and abusive marriage in the backwoods of NZ in the mid-19th century. At this point in the movie she is returning by boat from NZ to Scotland, and she is so miserable that she decides to tie herself to her grand piano as it is being thrown overboard into the ocean. Then as we watch her sinking in her long, billowing skirts, we see clearly on her face that she has a change of mind. Suddenly she realizes that she doesn't want to die after all. As she struggles to extricate herself from the ropes that bind her to the piano, we hear her voice. "What a death," she says weakly. "What a chance....What a surprise....My will has chosen life." In the next and final scene we see that she has become an altogether new person, learning how to speak again, living in a new and joyous place with a new husband who obviously loves her completely.

It's not a traditional baptism by a longshot, but certainly this denouement has all the elements involved in baptism: submersion in water, a decision for life, dying to the past, rising to new life and new ways of living, and central to all of it, making all of it possible—the incredible gift of being loved completely.

Baptism—the act of being washed, of bringing forth new life out of water—is an ancient religious ritual that has had powerful, symbolic meaning for people throughout human history. In our Hebrew scriptures there are prescriptions for various purity rituals that involve being immersed in water, as well as the ritual bath in a mikveh that is part of the process of converting to Judaism. But with the advent of John the Baptist's ministry, this ritual cleansing took on a whole new meaning. John was preaching to people who were already Jewish so they weren't converting from one religion to another. And his message had a radically different tone and sense of urgency. John was the first to make a strong connection between baptism and repentance, and he was clear that his listeners needed to change their evil ways immediately, before it was too late. John recognized that God was about to do something new, and everyone needed to be baptized because the whole of society was so riddled with spiritual disease that no one would be able to be part of the new era or realm God was about to usher in. And, remarkably enough, people were flocking from everywhere to hear this harsh exhortations, and lining up around the block to get the chance to be dunked into the River Jordan.

I sometimes wonder what drew people to John the wild man and his hypercritical message...and, more to the point, to preachers today who rail on and on about everyone's sin and their need for repentance. It's not the most appealing message in my opinion. But one suggestion I read this week is that people are looking for hope. They are already well acquainted with the dreariness and tawdriness of their lives. They know they are sinners living in a world filled with sin, dirty deals, broken promises, compromised principles, unbridled power, corruption and greed. They're looking for something or someone bigger and better than themselves to lift them out of this muck, to save them. So they trek out to the countryside to hear this charismatic preacher offering them a new beginning, asking "What do we need to do?" And John tells them to start sharing their personal resources, stop lying, cheating and extorting. And how do his listeners respond? "The people were filled with expectation" which does sound a lot like hope to me. And then they start asking if John is the Messiah. "Oh, no," he tells them, "I just baptize with water, but one who is more powerful than I am is coming to baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire."

And then he describes how the one who is to come will winnow out the sinners like chaff from grain, and be thrown into an unquenchable fire. Talk about a fire and brimstone preacher!

Then we hear that Herod, a cruel and corrupt puppet king, throws John into prison for one particularly pointed sermon that highlighted all the evil things Herod had done. John wasn't just fiery, he was fearless.

So, it's a bit of an anticlimax when we finally see Jesus in next few verse. He's been standing patiently at the end of a long line of sinners waiting to be baptized. You kind of wonder if John even would've recognized him. Because as preacher Barbara Brown Taylor points out, there's a stark contrast between the "ax-wielding arsonist" John describes in verse 17 and the "gentle carpenter whom the Holy Spirit chose for a roost" who shows in verse 21. But what happens next recaptures and calibrates some of the drama of John's ministry and message. Taylor says, Jesus "goes into the waters of the Jordan a carpenter and comes out a Messiah. He is the same person, but with a new direction. His being is the same, but his *doing* is about to take a radical turn." It's a subtle twist on the idea of repentance which is best defined as turning away and moving in a new direction. The way Taylor sees it, Jesus isn't so much turning away *from sin* as he is *turning toward* his vocation, his calling, his ministry. And all of this is punctuated by the voice from heaven saying, "You are my Beloved Child, and I am well pleased with you."

Taylor's take on what happens in Jesus' baptism is significant because theologians have been raising questions about why Jesus was baptized in the first place for centuries. If baptism is for washing away sins, and Jesus was without sin, then why did he have to be baptized? Don't try to figure that out by reading the Bible. Scripture doesn't tell us *why* he was baptized, but it is clear that Jesus *was* baptized. An account of his baptism appears in all four canonical gospels. And more importantly, as biblical scholars like to point out, no one would make up stories about their Messiah being baptized, any more than they would invent the central narrative of Jesus' life: that he was crucified like a common criminal. Climbing into the muddy river, succumbing to another person's authority, confessing your need for repentance was humbling, even humiliating. These were not behaviors that one expected of a Messiah, someone whose mission is to save other people.

So it's quite natural to wonder, "Why baptism? Why not start his ministry with an eloquent speech or a simple ordination service?" Taylor says we can put those questions alongside questions like, "Why did Christ become human when he could have stayed wholly divine? Why was he baptized with the sinners when he could have stayed on the banks of the river and supervised? Why does he come to us wherever we are, time and time again, when he could save himself the grief, the pain, the death, by insisting that we come to him where he is?"

The answer to all those questions is because he loves us that much, and it has never been Jesus' style to shout directions from some safe spot on the sidelines, like a coach or a vociferous fan. As Taylor says, Jesus has always led us from within our midst, "joining us in the water, in the mud, in the skin to show us how it is done....He took the plunge right along with the rest of us and so it came to pass that he who was without sin was baptized in the river Jordan to avoid the sin of standing apart from us."

In today's church, particularly in traditions like the United Church of Christ, we don't talk a lot about repenting from our sins as an integral part of baptism. Instead our focus tends to be on affirming our identity as God's beloved children and becoming a member of the body of Christ. In infant baptism we affirm or acknowledge that God's grace comes to us before we can even make decisions about God or anyone/anything else. When we baptize teenagers or adults, we emphasize their decision for Christ and their desire to join the Church. Those are all important, legitimate tenets, but we should not lose sight of the hope and promise of repentance. We should acclaim loudly and fully that in baptism we've been

given the opportunity to change, to start over, to turn away from the past and take a new direction. As Ada says in *The Piano*, “What a death. What a chance. What a surprise. My will has chosen life.”

This morning we’re inviting you to participate in a ritual that involves water and is a reminder and reaffirmation of our baptisms. But we’re adding a subtle twist to the ritual. We’re inviting you to write on the little slip of paper you received something that you believe is holding you back from being whole or healthy or that prevents you from being able to participate wholly and healthily in life, or in the life of this congregation. It might be a doubt or a hurt or a fear or a grief or something you think can’t be forgiven or you’re unable to let go of on your own. We invite you to pray and reflect for a few minutes, write something down, put it in the water and watch it disappear. We hope this will help you visualize and believe that the Divine Spirit will help you to let go, find forgiveness, healing, peace, wholeness. As we take a moment now, keep in mind the words that Jesus heard at his baptism, “You are my Beloved Child; with you I am well pleased.” Just as Jesus joined us in being baptized, so those words are meant for you and me, as well.