

“The Water of Baptism”

1st Sunday after the Epiphany

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

January 10, 2010

We cannot escape the limits of our ancestors when it comes to their understanding of themselves, the world, and of God. They who penned the words we call the Bible understood the cosmos to be a world flat with the sky shaped like an upside down bowl, heaven on one side and earth on the other. It was filled with holes like a sieve, and when the rains came they came from the ocean/waters of heaven giving life to the earth. We cannot forget that those who are our ancestors of faith were people who lived in the desert regions of our world. Water was life – literally! No wonder water plays such a large role in the formation of our understanding of God and how God has called us into being, sustaining us, and shaping us to become the people we were created to be.

Creation appeared out of the waters of chaos, separated from the waters on earth and the waters (heaven) above earth.. Noah and his family were saved from the waters. So was Moses. Naaman the leper washed in the water of the River Jordan and was healed. Jesus was baptized in the same water and was given his identity and his call. □□

Jesus knew the importance of water. At the well, at high noon, thirsty and without a bucket or a cup, Jesus asked a Samaritan woman for a drink of water, physical water to quench his thirst. But when he spoke of "living water," the water of life, he referred to that which was spiritual, not like the stagnant water that is held in a cistern. This water was living, flowing, gushing water. □□

Jeremiah called God "the fountain of living water," for God said to Jeremiah, "My people have committed two evils; they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water". Jeremiah reminded the people of faith that God is the source of the water of life. □□

Each of us can think of our own "cracked cisterns" that we put in place of God, but they hold no living water, cracked cisterns of money and power, popularity and control. In living water there is life and movement; waves crashing on the shore, soaring up over the high rocks and the dry, sandy beaches, ever-flowing brooks, sparkling in the sunlight, summer swimming pools bubbling with children's laughter, refreshing sprays of spring rains, and water sprinkled over the head of the one being baptized. □□

Longing for God, we thirst for the water of life, waiting for God to send us blessing in some supernormal way, when all the while God is giving us an abundant supply if we would only learn to retreat into the fertile source of our own spirit where the well of living water seeks to rise. □□

During a dry season the missionary dug for water. The natives were shocked. Did the missionary not know that water came down from heaven and not up through the earth? □□

Where do we, you and I, seek living water, that living water that Jesus gave the Samaritan woman? We seek this water from the source, from our God, the giver of living water.

Today is the Sunday after the Epiphany, a day in which we celebrate the baptism of Jesus in the river Jordan by John the Baptist. John is a prophetic figure who calls the people to repentance. All Judea and Samaria

come to John the Baptist repenting of their sins. They are washed by the waters of the River Jordan as a symbol of the need to be made clean and whole and new. But John washes with water only. His is a washing that is sign and symbol only. There is really no change in the person who is washed by John's water; it is the same person after all.

Jesus came to the River Jordan to be baptized by John. One of the great questions of theology is just why Jesus came to be baptized. Luke does not give us a reason in so many words, but explains it as symbolic action not for cleansing, but for ordination and being set apart for his role as Messiah and King.

Jesus is recognized as the Messiah at his baptism. Jesus has come as the judge who will save the precious grain and discard the worthless chaff. And in his baptism, during prayer, the heavens open, the Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus as a sign of the power of the Holy Spirit and a voice comes from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved. With you I am well pleased." It is the voice of God declaring Jesus to be Son of God, Beloved of God. Jesus is Messiah and Lord.

In the water of our baptism we are set apart too. We are born creatures of a loving God, but also part of a fallen humanity. Through the water of baptism God restores us to be truly God's children and heirs to God's Kingdom. The water of our baptism is not the same as that experienced by those going to the Jordan River. We are baptized in Jesus' Name, in the Name of the Triune God. We are baptized not with water only but with God's Word and by God's command. We are baptized with water as well as the Holy Spirit and fire to give us power and courage and strength to live our life with God and be God's people.

John the Baptist's baptism was a symbolic washing, a sign of human repentance, remorse, but it was only a human work. It was really just a human ritual. Christian baptism is much more, it is God's action washing away our sins and making us new and different people, children of God, heirs to the promises of God. Given and nourishes us through its living water.

So we remember the baptism in the river Jordan. We remember Jesus being anointed as messiah and king. We also remember our own baptism in the Triune Name. Not water only, but water with God's Word and by God's command. In his baptism, Jesus was ordained and commissioned Messiah and Lord. In our baptism we are made children of God and heirs to an everlasting kingdom.

Amen