

Into the Water

About fifteen years ago, I went with a friend from college on a backpacking trip in Yosemite National Park – any of you ever been? Yosemite is one of the most stunningly beautiful places on Earth and while it has a whole range of natural beauty, it is known for two things in particular – massive vistas and rock formations and water – or really fast moving water – rapids and waterfalls – some stretching almost 1000 feet high. When we began our hike, we climbed to the top of one waterfall and then we kept going and made it to the top of a second – this one falling several hundred feet into the rocks and the river below. At the top of the second waterfall, we are now completely above Yosemite Valley, we can see the expansive views around us, look down at the vertical drop of the waterfall all while hearing the rushing water that seems both near us while also echoing across the rocks all around us creating an eerie symphony of rushing water. It is one of the most beautiful, one of the most life-giving places I've ever been. And it's also one of the wildest, one of the most dangerous places too. Near the edge of the river is a sign that said, "Stay away from the river. If you fall in and go over the falls, you will die."

During the season of Lent, our sermon series will focus on ways we practice our faith. From focusing on traditional Christian practices of baptism and Holy Communion, to various forms of prayer and contemplation, to fasting and sacrifice, and ultimately to choosing to live as people of hope, there are a host of practices that Christians have engaged in throughout the centuries to more fully live into the gospel of Christ. Each week, we will see these practices as a part of Jesus' own life and reflect on how we might incorporate these practices into our lives both individually and collectively as a church. Today, we look at baptism with the theme of Into the Water.

Water is a peculiar thing. Other than air, it is perhaps the most essential thing for life. Whereas our body can go on for weeks without food, we can only last a few days without water. Water can evoke incredible images of peace – for instance, sitting on a porch staring out at a peaceful lake at sunset. Or water can be exhilarating as those who have chosen to raft and kayak white water can attest. Water can create electricity and power entire cities and water can be one of the most destructive forces on the planet as the memory of the floods of Vermont are not far from our minds. The book of Job tells us that the Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away. Water is the same. Water is at the same time one of the most life-giving and one of the most destructive forces on the planet. It is both one of the most tranquil and one of the most untamable forces. But one thing is certain, water is beautiful and life-giving AND it is also wild and chaotic.

We see this same dynamic in Scripture. In Genesis, it tells us that before God created the cosmos, the spirit swept across the waters, representing chaos. We see this same theme of water representing chaos in the story of Jonah where he is swept overboard in the storm. We see the destructive nature of water in the story of Noah and the flood. We see the salvific nature of water and the destructive nature at the same time as the Hebrew people pass through the Red Sea and the Egyptian army is swallowed up. We see the life-giving nature of

water when Moses brings water out of the rock to satisfy the thirst of the people wandering in the wilderness. The image of water means many different things (and sometimes even contradictory things) in Scripture. Like in nature, in Scripture, water gives life and it takes life away, water is evoked as images of peace and as an image of chaos. And perhaps, that is exactly why water is the symbol we use for baptism.

By entering into the waters of baptism, we are entering into all of these dimensions of water. First, we are entering into life. In our Scripture, we find out who Jesus is. As he comes up out of the waters of baptism, God speaks, "You are my Son, chosen and marked by my love, pride of my life." Now here's the thing, there are actually relatively few instances in Scripture (especially in the New Testament) where God actually speaks. Often, a prophet or apostle is speaking on behalf of God, but rarely does Godself speak in the New Testament. This is one of those times. And so we have to ask, what is so important about Jesus' baptism that causes God to actually speak. I think it's simply this: God is a proud parent. You ever know those parents who can't quit talking about their kids. I know, I know, some of you are thinking, "Yeah, like most weeks in your sermons."

Guilty as charged.

I am an introvert...which means making small talk can sometimes be difficult for me. But do you know what's never difficult for me – talking about my kids. I can do it anytime with anybody because I'm so proud of them. It seems to me that is why God is speaking here. It's like God can't help it. God is so proud of Jesus, so honored to have Jesus for a child, that God can't help but speak.

And God does the same thing for us. Baptism is where we learn our identity, it's where we learn the deepest truth about who we are. In baptism, we learn that we belong to God from the moment we are born. The reason we baptize babies is because we believe that that baby belongs to God even more than the child belongs to her or his parents. God loves and claims that child even before the child knows how to say God. And just as God claims Jesus as God's own child, so too does God claim us. In baptism, we declare our deepest identity. We are all God's children. God is the proud parent of all of us. In baptism, we find that we have life simply because we belong to God.

But...that's not the end of the story. Immediately, after his baptism, Jesus begins a wild journey – first into the wilderness to be tempted, then to come back and teach and perform miracles, and find people who love him and find people who hate him and find people who ultimately will betray and deny him, and eventually to be killed. Living into his identity as God's son was, at times, anything but peaceful. To say the least, living into his identity as God's child was a wild and dangerous ride.

One of my seminary professors, Will Willimon loves to tell a story from his time as dean of Duke chapel when an angry parent came to see him. This father was upset because his daughter who was on track to go to medical school and had chosen to become a medical missionary in an

impoverished country on the other side of the world. And the father was not happy about it, and he blamed Willimon. He approached him and said, "This is your fault. You've told her these things about radical discipleship and she thinks she can't serve God at home. Don't you know that you can serve God here just as much as you can on the other side of the world. This is your fault."

Well, you ever know those people who like a good confrontation? Will Willimon is one of those people, and so he said, "Don't you blame me. This is your fault. You're the one who chose to baptize her. You gave her to God, so why are you so surprised that God would call her onto a wild journey." The father became silent for a few minutes and finally shook his head and said, "When I baptized her, all I wanted was for her to grow up to be a good church goer."

Just as the water we use for baptism is wild, so too is the God we serve and so too is the journey that baptism leads us into. And I think the reason this life of the baptized is so wild is the calling that comes with it. After Jesus was baptized and after he was tempted in the desert, he began proclaiming his central message – the kingdom of God has come near. And Jesus had some pretty radical things to say about what that kingdom would look like. He said the last would be first and the first would be last. He said blessed are the poor and woe to the rich. He taught that the greatest in the kingdom would be the one who serves. In other words, time and again, Jesus flips on its head what the world means by success, by power, by greatness and offers a very different way that is good news to the poor and was seen as a threat by the powerful. It is precisely because the kingdom that Jesus proclaimed seemed threatening to the powerful, that Jesus ended up getting killed.

That message is no less threatening today. And that message is exactly the one that we, as baptized followers of Jesus, are called to proclaim. Having been baptized like Jesus, knowing that Jesus experienced temptation just as we do, we are also called to respond to our baptism in the same way Jesus did – by living into the reality of God's kingdom and announcing its presence here among us. You see the waters of baptism that we enter into give us life but it does not bring with it the promise of safety. It gives us everything we need and then turns around and may ask everything from us. It means that we all belong to God – wholly and completely – which means we are confident in God's unfailing love for us, but it also means we are fully and completely surrendering to whatever wild journey God may take us on.

Just as the waterfall at Yosemite is beautiful, and awe-inspiring, and full of life, so too is it wild and dangerous – just like the waters of baptism. So today may we remember the waters of baptism that we have entered into; may we be filled with the life that is found within those waters, and may we let ourselves go to ride the waves and rapids of a life that is sometimes peaceful and sometime wild and chaotic but is never boring.

Amen.