

“The Wind on the Water” / Genesis 1:1-5 / 15 January 2012 (Baptism of the Lord)

“A wind from God swept over the face of the waters.” This is ancient poetry, and it’s meant to evoke a mental image; can you see it? It’s a fearsome picture to me: dark water, vast and measureless, invisible Spirit brooding and twirling, dancing and churning above the infinite dark waters. It’s “Baptism of Our Lord Sunday,” a time when we think about how Jesus himself chose a rite of passage that marked him as one of us. He stepped into the troubled, chaotic waters of our world. And so I ask today, what baptisms, what pivotal moments, have marked your life? What identities have you earned by passing through deep, unordered waters?

Unlike most Presbyterian pastors I know—and very much against the rules of the Presbyterian constitution—I was baptized twice. I didn’t know any better. In the church my family was attending at the time, kids got baptized about the time they turned ten or eleven. I didn’t like the fact that that church did their baptisms in a little mini-swimming-pool hidden under a panel in the floor, as many Baptist churches do. I’ve always had nightmares about murky water, and this was in the days of *Jaws* the shark, so hidden bodies of dark water did not appeal to me. I didn’t like the fact that I would have to wade down into the hidden little pool, wearing a white robe, to get completely dunked in the chilly water...saturated in front of the whole congregation. I didn’t like the way we were told to cross our arms over our chests, like Egyptian mummies, and to plug our nose with one hand if we had to. What I liked least of all was climbing awkwardly out of the pool in the floor, sopping wet, all the adults beaming at me, wearing a white robe that clung to my almost-naked body, with swimming trunks underneath. It’s hard enough being a bookish, awkward eleven-year-old. But add a wet, clinging, transparent white robe to the equation, and it’s just humiliating. But I did it...and it never meant a thing to me.

My second baptism occurred when I was twenty. And it was less awkward than the first. I was living on my own out in Oklahoma City, a thousand miles from home, young, idealistic, maybe a little bit full of myself. I had stopped going to church because I looked around one day and said, “You’d have to be stupid to believe this stuff.” But a girl I was seeing suggested that we visit a Presbyterian church. The church looked like a castle. I liked castles, so I agreed to go with her. And I was an instant convert.

I had thought church was just for people who needed simple answers to complex questions. But that new church gave me something real and insightful to think about each a week. I thought church was all about the afterlife, getting into heaven and avoiding hell, punishments and rewards. But at that new church, they mostly talked about the many ways that God is active in *this* world and in *this* life. They talked about something I had never even heard before, a concept they called “social justice.” I thought church was an ugly thing, but here was a church that used beauty in a way that helped me to see the world, and my life in it, in new ways. To me, church had always been a place where you don’t ask questions; don’t disagree; just believe. In the churches where I grew up, we heard basically three kinds of sermons: 1) why Christians are better than everyone else; 2) why Americans are better than everyone else; 3) and why we were the best kind of Christians in America. By the time I reached young adulthood, those ideas no longer held any appeal to me. Church seemed empty.

But here was a church where the preacher quoted secular writers that I admired, poets, novelists, and even philosophers. Here at this new church, the minister preached about grace...a word I only recognized because there was a famous song about how

amazing it was. And he preached about how it's okay to doubt. And about the big world around us. And about new ways of living. He talked about psychology, and made clever jokes, and referred to popular TV shows. And I was awestruck, and thought, "So this is church, too?"

On the morning when I joined that church, an elder was filling out paperwork on all the new members, and she asked me (just minutes before the service) what my religious background was. I didn't know what to say. I had never identified with the churches of my childhood, and I didn't want to be identified with them now. Besides, I hadn't been going to church for a while, so I told her, "non-denominational," and she took it to mean "non-churched" or "unaffiliated." And so she said to me in her sugary Oklahoma drawl, "Oh, honey, then we're gonna hafta baptize you." And she proceeded to give me the worst definition of baptism I have ever heard. She said, "Don't worry. The pastor's just gonna put a little bit o' water on your head. Won't even mess up your hair." This was twenty-one years ago, in the days when young men made their hair stand up with styling mousse.

But she was right. There was no clinging white robe, no eerie indoor water tank. He just put a little bit of water on my head. It didn't even mess up my hair. No, my hair stood straight up, as before, but the baptism trickled into my soul, and changed my life forever. If I had to choose one day to be mine, one day in my life to declare my personal holiday, my own private Independence Day, then it would surely be the second-to-the-last Sunday in November. That's the day when I came home to a life of faith...by way of a different road. It's the day when I was initiated into a whole new journey. If not for that day, I never would have gone to Africa as a teacher in a mission school; I never would have enrolled in Pittsburgh Seminary; I never would have met my wife at that seminary; I never would have had my children, nor come to this place as your pastor. That day, that holy rite, made of me a whole new and different person from the one I was before. I don't know what that says about my first baptism, but my second baptism was a rite of passage for me, from an old life to a new.

Baptisms: they mean dying to the old and rising to the new. And there's Jesus in the River Jordan, being baptized by that wild-eyed prophet John. Just four weeks ago we were still lighting the Advent wreath and anticipating Christ's birth. Today he's already walking and talking and hearing voices from heaven. They grow up so fast, don't they? And almost nothing is said about those silent years in between. In those quiet decades perhaps an aging Mary hoped against hope that life for her son would prove uneventful after all. Ever since the angels' song faded over Bethlehem, the heavens had been silent. Three long decades! But now over the waters, again a voice is heard from heaven, "This is my beloved Son." And Jesus steps into the dark, unordered waters of our world, embracing our chaos and fears, identifying so clearly with us. Waters of life, waters of death, waters of change.

Now I can't tell you why Jesus had to be baptized, nor what John said while baptizing him. One thing he surely did not say was, "Jesus, I baptize you in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit!" But here's Jesus getting baptized, choosing a rite of passage that marks him as one of us. There are events that mark our lives forever. There are initiations, rites of passage, when we are claimed, and chosen, indelibly branded like cattle. And our lives are never the same because we bear a new mark upon us. Baptism

is just such a passage. And so too are all the many lesser baptisms that bear us through turbulent waters into new identities and selves.

Maybe you don't remember your baptism, but you do have significant rites of passage that you cannot forget. We choose so many of life's important passages. Perhaps you stood, one day long ago and made vows to another person and to God, vows that said something like "for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, as long as we both shall live." In fact, maybe you underwent that rite of passage right here in this very room. That was your free choice, just like my two baptisms. That was your own doing, and much of your life ever afterward has crystallized around that one significant day. Your whole future, as well as the futures of other people, was determined, in part, by the events of that day. The person who would provide one half of the genetic makeup of your children, the person you would share your pillow with, the person you would end up buried beside; that was all determined—by you—on one important day. There are those watershed occasions of our own doing, our own choosing.

But I think by far the most significant rites that change our lives are the ones we do not choose. They choose us: in boot camps; in the doctor's office, trying to take in the bad news; gripping the telephone, speechless, in disbelief. And your life has never been the same since that moment. You have become a whole different person because of a passage, a painful initiation that you never would have chosen. A moment in time claimed you forever, and made of you a veteran, a cancer survivor, a widow. What was your unsought baptism in dark and chilly waters? Chances are, it has done more to make you into the person you are than many of the baptisms you've chosen.

You see, doves may seem all meek and mild, but they swoop at their prey. Imagine the scene at Jesus' baptism. Mark says that when he came up out of the water, the Holy Spirit alighted on him like a dove. You've seen the hundreds of paintings of that graceful, fluttering white dove, a bright bird with a halo, lighting softly on a transfixed Jesus, a Jesus whose arms are crossed—well—like an Egyptian mummy. But have you ever seen a dove alighting on anything? They don't flutter gently. They don't coo softly when they're hunting a worm or a ladybug. When a dove alights, it dives like a fighter plane. It dives nose first, like a barn swallow, and snatches its unsuspecting prey, all unawares. And while it's true that a dove would prefer a seed or a bit of fruit, it will swoop at its hapless living prey: a June bug, a maggot, an inchworm. Just look at the diving dove on the front of your hymnal. The Holy Spirit didn't come sweetly with an embossed invitation to Jesus' baptism. The Holy Spirit lunged, plunged, accosted Jesus from above, claimed him as prey. And then the Spirit consumed him. Jesus of Nazareth had lived quietly for thirty years, but he spent his last three years on earth consumed by the Holy Spirit. He was dove prey! Our most significant rites of passage are those that choose us, hunt us, claim us, swoop out of the skies, change us forever.

And so it is with your baptisms, those pivotal moments on which your whole identity is determined. Of course, your Christian baptism integrates you into the Body of Christ. But so, too, your many other sacred baptisms plunge you into all varieties of human experiences and communities. Most of them swooped in and claimed you, all unawares. They dragged you through troubled waters and brought you out on the other side—a different person, a member of a distinct community.

When the old film "The Greatest Story Ever Told" was filmed in 1965, Charlton Heston played John the Baptist. There's a scene where the crowds are filing down into

the river to be baptized, and Jesus is among them. Dozens of local people had been hired as extras to play those many nameless folks being baptized by John, and they're all wearing petrified expressions on their faces, as if they're truly repenting of their sins. It wasn't because they were good actors. It was because they filmed the scene in the Colorado River in November...and they were freezing. Heston said that it's a good thing Christianity got its start in the Middle East because, with an initiation like river dunking baptism, it wouldn't have attracted many adherents in most places.

Baptism is dying to the old self and rising to the new. We always hear that water is life, and it is. But throughout the Scriptures, water is also a thing of death and fear. Water is the chaos that God has to tame at creation. Water destroys all the world except the ark. Water is the thing that has to be divided at the Red Sea, so that the Hebrew slaves can escape their Egyptian captors and emerge on the other side as a free people. Water is the thing that a renegade Jonah plunges into, right into the belly of the beast. And all throughout the Psalms and the prophets, you hear such desperate pleas as, "Save me, Lord, for the waters have come up to my neck; Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord." For the most primitive Hebrew religion, long before Abraham, saw not one God, but two: the good god of the land and the evil god of the water. It was the good God versus Leviathan, the monster of the deep, the lurking thing, the unknown thing, the thing of chaos and death. This is a very ancient vision of good and evil that runs through the Bible almost imperceptibly: land represents all that is good, and water represents all that is evil. Think about it; aren't some of your most basic fears around water? Drowning, floods, black ice? Jaws?

That's why water is the old, old symbol of dying to one thing and becoming alive to another. Yes, water is death. But also life. What would have happened if Jesus had never stepped into the chilly waters of the Jordan? What would have happened if he had stayed in Nazareth, a simple carpenter? How different would the history of the world have been? As painful as some of our baptisms can be, they make all the difference. Baptisms, pivotal moments, set you aside and claim you. They mark you as one who belongs to a certain group. But oh, the dark, chaotic waters that they sometimes call us through! Those waters are both death and life to us. Death in that they plunge us into their cold depths and horrify us. Life in that you can never really know what joy is until you've suffered some terrible baptism. The unwanted baptisms give us our lives back with a richness and a power that the unbaptized life can never know. And we emerge from their chilly waters stronger, more whole. When that dove swoops, it claims us for bigger things! What baptisms, what rites of passage, have pulled you into their frigid current and claimed you? Into what groups they joined you? More importantly, what baptism are you undergoing this very day? Never fear. The Spirit still moves over the dark, uncertain waters of our lives, making new life out of the very thing that frightens us and threatens to undo us. The Spirit who danced over the churning waters at creation, dances again over the troubled waters of our many baptisms—creating us anew. Amen.