

“Passing through the Waters” / Luke 3:15-17, 21-22 / 13 January 2013

The baptism of Jesus is that strange moment—etched in the world’s memory—when he put down the saw and hammer, ceased to be a quiet, village carpenter, and took his place on the center stage of history. It’s one of those historic turning points that every medieval and Renaissance painter had to depict at least once. When Jesus stepped into that muddy stream, no bigger than Chartiers Creek, he was plunging himself and our world into unfamiliar waters. His baptism was the start of a journey, a defining moment in history. The baptism in the River Jordan is a portrait on the wall of our world.

It’s always interesting to me when I enter a person’s home or office to notice the pictures that are on display. You can almost guess a person’s stage in life by the photos that they choose to put on view. If it’s wedding photos, then chances are the marriage is less than ten years old. If it’s pictures of exotic vacation destinations—Waikiki or Acapulco—then the person is almost certainly in their middle years and plugging away at some demanding career. If there are photos of kids on the walls, then you might assume that they’re that person’s children. But you would be wrong. Those are grandchildren. Mom and dad see those little faces all the time, so they don’t really feel the need to put them into frames. People tend to surround themselves with images that represent the joys of life, escape from the daily grind, inspiration. These are the things that make it into our picture frames. And as we grow and change, some photos make their way up to the attic, only to be replaced by others that represent more current joys. Now, I do know one woman in her senior years who keeps a life-sized cardboard picture of her husband—as a young man—in the liquor cabinet that she calls her broom closet. And she’s proud to tell everyone that he was voted the handsomest boy in their high school. But mostly, I find, that only very few pictures stay on display forever. Just as a museum is forever switching out its displays, our life’s story is told in ever-changing exhibits.

Let me ask you this. If we could step inside your mind the way we stepped inside this building today, if we could step into the room of your inner self where you do most of your living, your thinking, your feeling, what images would we find in gilded frames on its walls? For just as we adorn our literal spaces with the images that give our lives meaning, so we decorate the spaces of our interior selves with images, whether things remembered or things hoped for, whether past events or simple fantasies. We choose a few favorite pictures to put within our field of view, and visible to ourselves alone in the quiet of our spirits. They may not be the same pictures you had hanging ten years ago. Though some of them will surely be the same; the great themes of your life never go away. What seminal experiences are preserved forever in your mind’s eye, treasured under glass? What pivotal moments in your life continue to define you and make you into the person you are?

What would we see if we could step into your mind? Oh, the lacy white dresses, the evening gowns, the graduation hoods and caps! Oh, the hospital rooms, whether welcoming a new life or bidding farewell to an old one! The familiar faces. Oh, the uncelebrated places, the kitchens, the hallways, the porches, and classrooms, where somebody placed meaningful and good in our hearts, some affirmation, some assurance. Oh, the churches—perhaps this very church!—where faith happened, where truth dispelled lies, where the private saints of your life showed love in a hundred ways, big and small, shaping you, making you good! What three or four key moments or images do

you show yourself over and over? What are those pictures doing to shape you into the kind of person that your loved ones, your neighbors, your world...needs you to be?

There are portraits on the wall of your life, and they will shape the way you journey through this world—to mix a metaphor. Imagine the life of Jesus. He's been a quiet man, an unlettered man, a simple carpenter in the far-flung region of Galilee. After the angels' song faded over the night skies above Bethlehem, life was calm for the carpenter. I'm sure Mother Mary had no complaints. She was hoping against all hope that those strange events of thirty years ago had been a distant dream. She had reason to believe it, too, for her son's life had been uneventful for three long decades. But then one day, Jesus the carpenter comes under the influence of an old-time Jewish revivalist preacher, John the Baptist, and he realizes that—even at this late date—he wants to do something else with his life. John's fiery preaching has jarred something awake in the carpenter's spirit...a very old promise that was made at his birth. And he, too, makes his way with the crowds down into the River Jordan to be baptized. The lost years of Jesus have drawn to a close.

Jesus' choice to get baptized has been a source of great embarrassment for the church. The gospel writer Matthew shows John the Baptist humbly trying to protest, "No, Lord, you should be the one baptizing me." And here in Luke's gospel, the baptism itself is only mentioned as an aside. "And after Jesus got baptized along with the others, he was praying, when he saw a vision and heard a voice." Luke seems to be hoping that he can get the information out there without calling undue attention to it, just sort of slip it in. Nobody wanted to talk about the baptism of Jesus because nobody wanted to believe in a Jesus who was capable of new insights and turning points. And yet, this baptism was clearly a turning point in the life of Jesus and our world.

And then everything happened so fast: the dove, descending from the skies, the voice in his ears, telling him that he's beloved. And if you know the rest of the story, you'll recall that the baptism experience troubled Jesus so deeply that he fled to the wilderness to pursue a forty-day "vision quest" before finally—finally!—beginning his ministry. It's tempting to point out how long it takes, sometimes, for our best hopes to reach the light. I'm sure many of us have been waiting thirty years or more for our most God-given selves to emerge. But the thing that I feel most compelled to bring to your attention today is the driving vision that propelled Jesus onto the world stage: A vision of a dove, and a voice from heaven assuring him that he was loved. And how often did that vision of love—that first calling—return to give him courage in the hard days ahead?

We all need a life-sustaining vision to lead us through the waters, a portrait of hope to hang on the wall of our mind. We all need to have words of assurance ringing in our ears. "You're my beloved." These are the things that will bear us safely through troubled waters of our world.

What do you really know about the portraits hanging on the walls of your neighbor's mind? Think about it: the person sitting next to you right now, the person with whom you've shared a bed for forty years, the person you greet every Sunday. What turning points, what defining moments do they cherish and gaze upon every single day? We live in a time when people have many venues to display the things that matter to them. We can post our life's best photos on FaceBook, or MySpace. We can maintain a personal blog about our life. There's Twitter, for those who think the world cares to hear all their deepest thoughts in the form of sound bites. There are personal ads of all

descriptions, some of them good and helpful, others used for sordid purposes. And yet, with all of that, how much do you really know about the portraits that adorn the inner walls of your neighbor's soul? What visions give that person life and direction?

In March of 1920, a man put an ad in a small newspaper in Bavaria, in Southern Germany. "Bachelor, 43 years old, stable, good Catholic, is seeking a wife. Candidates must be able to sew, cook, bake, maintain a spotless household, maintain a garden, mend clothes, and produce children. Must be a pious Catholic. Personal fortune is preferable, but not necessary." [It's good to see that he's a flexible man.] Not surprisingly, the ad got not a single taker. He reran the same ad in December of that year. This time, someone responded. The couple got married and became the Ratzinger Family, and she did indeed produce three children, the most famous of which is the pope. The portraits that we put out there for all the world to see are usually glossy, highly edited versions of the ones that we see inside our minds. Indeed, much of what we have framed and displayed in the deepest chambers of our minds would never, never make it to our FaceBook page! We couldn't dare to share it. We embellish it...with the apparent exception of Herr Ratzinger, who didn't bother to embellish any of his desires or credentials! But the self that we display to the world is usually only the cleaned-up version of the ones we see in the quiet of our minds.

It's those inner visions—those interior portraits—that matter most, for these are the things that will motivate our behaviors, which will form into habits, and lifestyles. And when we are called to pass through the waters of life, these inner images will either bear us safely to the other side, or they will weigh us down and threaten to drown us. Just for a moment, let's return to the literal pictures that we display. Especially in their workspaces, people keep photos of their vacations and their loved ones to remind them that there's more to life than making payroll, meeting deadlines, and keeping within the budget. People need reminders that life is bigger than the little tasks at hand, that I am an individual, with a family, and a private history, that there are things I love and value, and in this world there's more than fluorescent-lit cubicles. There's beauty, and adventure, and relationship, and wonder. Our truest selves are not defined by how well we fulfill our tasks, but by our investment in other people and in our communities, by our commitments, and by our faith. The whole point of pictures is to remind us that there's more to our life than what we see right now. It's all about reminding us that life is filled with infinite possibilities.

Whatever your turning point moments were, your life's most defining experiences, I'm sure that they were occasions when you were made to feel that the possibilities of life were endless. Your turning point was a time when you realized that there's a richness to the texture of life that you hadn't noticed before, that there are options never imagined, choices, freedoms. Whole realms of possibility go unnoticed, but as near to you as your breath. In fact, I'm certain that such was the case for the man who went into the water a carpenter and came out of it the Christ.

In all of our lives, there are those rare instances when the heavens seem to open, revealing a new world of possibilities and options. Sometimes even a bird can seem like a messenger of the Divine. There are those times when the very voice of God seems to whisper to us. But then the heavens close, the dove goes chasing after a bug, and the whisper fades. In their afterglow, we are left to live in a world that is mostly unspectacular, but we live with the new awareness that wonders do indeed happen, that

guidance sometimes comes, that promises are whispered from heaven, that there's a better world somewhere, if not here. We come away from our best baptisms with the hope-filled realization that the dusty, earthy realities that occupy most of our waking moments are not all there is to this life of mysteries, this life of wonders, this life of lights years, and dark years, and New Years, and old. There's more, much more, than we usually know. And we brush up against that Something More every now and again. And those occasional encounters give us all we need for service and happiness in this world, for they convince us that we are known, that we are beloved, that our life is not random, but that somehow, despite all the occasional evidence to the contrary, Love is finally in control.

This is why people listen to music; it transports them to a realm of other possibilities. This is why people skydive, and gaze at paintings, and read books, and turn to nature, and spend time in beautiful spaces, like this one. In fact, sometimes when I have writer's block down in my office, all it takes is a visit upstairs to this lovely space, and my spirit begins to see things anew. Even just sitting in this room is good for your soul, no matter how insipid the sermon. These are the things that nourish the spirit, those reminders that in this life of years, no matter our age or circumstances, there is still room for possibility. Possibility overwhelms necessity. Things don't have to be the way they are. With God's help, we can change. The world can change. Things can be better.

What images adorn your inner spaces? Do they represent those words of assurance, "You are my beloved"? Or are they something less than hopeful. Is it time to pack some of them away to the attic, and dwell on better things? Those images will either bear you through the waters or cause you to sink. We will all pass through the waters, all of us. I suspect that when Jesus was gazing down on the world from a cross, that parental voice, declaring its love at his baptism, seemed like a far-off echo, mocking him. But how long it often takes for our baptismal promises to come to fruition. How long it often takes for old, old promises to be fulfilled! Sometimes it takes thirty years or more, sometimes as little as three days. Amen.