

“There is no river”

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John 3.1-17

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In tonight's gospel, Jesus directs our attention to the font of baptism. By water and the word, the Holy Spirit gives us new birth. Freely, out of God's love we are made sons and daughters of God and brothers and sisters of Jesus the Christ. Not only that but we are made messengers of the holy spirit. From our own deadly lives we plunge into the cold waters of death and malnourishment and emerge as God's own people, loved and blessed.

Earlier this day we baptized three people and confirmed another 18. This same gospel was a part of that service because this Lenten gospel is a cornerstone of our baptismal theology. It may not seem so at first.

There is no direct mention of baptism. There is no river running through this story. No, this gospel is all about the font because this story gives us a taste of what happens at baptism. It gives a glimpse into the life changing transformation that is about to happen for those about to be baptized and it reminds the rest of us that we too have been blessed by living water and have been given new life in Christ.

The bible begins with God and water in the genesis story. Water is paramount in the story of Noah, in the perils of Jonah and Water is present in the saving of the people of Israel as they walk the red sea.

For Jesus, water is more than an environmental factor and tool of God – water has become a vehicle of cleansing, of life and of death.

We know that water can cleanse and purify and earlier this year we read of John the Baptist cleansing the people of their sins. Jesus himself wades into the waters churning with the sins of the people and is baptized not only with water, but with spirit, in the form of a dove.

Jesus, however, is not the baptizer. He is the son of man, the beloved son of God. He offers waters that not only cleanse us of sin, but that sustain our life and quench the thirst that abides in each of us to love and be loved by our God. Jesus is himself the living water and he will die to pour it out for us.

It is for this reason that the water we consider today also means death. Early christians would prepare for one to three years for their baptism, then shed their clothes and enter into the foamy waters of a river or lake, deep enough to drown a person – especially a person who did not know how to swim. Later Christians would dig tomb shaped pools, again deep enough to drown a man or a

woman for the catechumens to freely enter – emerging, dripping, gasping, heart thumping not only cleansed, not only covered in living water but reborn as children of the kingdom of God. Jesus said, I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit.

In our Book of common prayer, as a part of the baptismal service, the celebrant prays in thanksgiving over the water to be used to baptize. “We thank you, Almighty God, for the gift of water. Over it the Holy Spirit moved in the beginning of creation. Through it you led the children of Israel out of their bondage in Egypt into the land of promise. In it your Son Jesus received the baptism of John and was anointed by the Holy Spirit as the Messiah, the Christ, to lead us, through his death and resurrection, from the bondage of sin into everlasting life. We thank you, Father, for the water of Baptism. In it we are buried with Christ in his death. By it we share in his resurrection. Through it we are reborn by the Holy Spirit. Therefore in joyful obedience to your Son, we bring into his fellowship those who come to him in faith, baptizing them in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”

Thus for us, the water in our font is still the place of our rebirth. For it is here where spirit and water bring us into the kingdom, as full children of God. The thing is that we must not forget that baptism and new birth are not always serene waters. Jesus does not say, “I’ve come to make you comfortable or consistently joyful or to fix all your problems. Jesus comes to save us. When we are born from above we are given new life and a new set of eyes with which to see the world. Seen from our new kingdom vantage point, we look out on the peoples of the world and the problems of our nations with the eyes of Christ.

Suddenly, our life has kingdom potential – the possibility, no, the admonition to take our new life and make it count.

It is for this reason that Nicodemus was wise to hesitate, wise to come to Jesus in the dark and ask his questions in private. Because as the baptized we are not able to overlook things that we did not see before. Suddenly, the broken people and barren landscape stands out. We can see the invisibles now, the poor, the lonely, the sick, the hungry and we our hearts must beat a drum that cries for peace and justice.

Were we only born of flesh, we might see these things and be moved to pity – might even come to Jesus in the night and ask for answers. But as the spirit born, as those baptized with water and the Holy Spirit we must see these things and be moved to action. We must quench the thirst of those who thirst and feed the bellies of those who hunger and we must light the darkness of those who seek answers and still do not understand.

Let us pray.

O lord, grant us courage to accept, again and again your invitation to new life. Give us the eyes of new life that we might see the abundant blessings and the unbearable suffering of this world and the heart and will to use our life to serve you through serving others. Each day of this journey, Lord, may we be your disciples born of the Spirit and awash with your love. Amen. (prayer from Abingdon's Women's Preaching Annual, 2005).