

“Living The Wet Life”

Date: 12 January 2020 (The Baptism of Jesus)

Text: Matthew 3: 1 – 6, 11 - 17

Do you remember when you were baptised? For most of us the answer is “no”. We were so very, very young. Perhaps, too, we put it out of our memory. For some babies it must be a scary experience: to be wrenched from your parents arms by someone in a big floppy gown, to be grasped tight by a stranger, then to be doused with water. It is a wonder that more babies don’t scream through the experience! But once back in a parent’s arms, the memory passes. After all: the water dries, doesn’t it? And life gets back to normal. But what we forget is that “normal” changes for us in baptism. The water – though evaporated – leaves an indelible mark.

There are many things to be learned about our baptism from the baptism of Jesus. We hear in this story that people were going out to the wilderness to see John and be baptised. To the Jews this was not a new spiritual innovation. They had a practice of body cleansing with water as a ritual of purification. Additionally, when Gentiles converted to Judaism, this cleansing ritual akin to baptism was practiced as the sign of becoming part of the people of God. In both instances, the cleansing with water came at the end of a period of preparation and spiritual renewal, and the cleansing signified a crossing over into a new way of life. So we find here in our story a purpose held commonly between that old Jewish understanding and our practice of baptism: then and now it is a sign of how we have accepted change in our lives. Baptism makes us different. We are now wet. We heard in the story that people were streaming out to the wilderness to see John, to “confess their sin” (that is, to acknowledge that their lives were not being lived in conformity with God’s will). They came to him to “repent” (that is, to commit to living a changed life). They came to get wet – to be immersed in water, a sign of cleansing. Now, they would be different.

A Rabbi was asked what would people of faith do if they had 10 days notice that the sea level would rise to cover all of New York City. In response the Rabbi said, “Well, the Catholics would gather at St. Patrick’s to offer Mass continually, to remember how even Jesus suffered. The Evangelicals would gather at Madison Square Gardens to be led in powerful prayer, asking God to hold back the flood waters. Presbyterians would gather at Riverside Church to hear great preachers expound on Romans 8, that nothing can separate us from the love of God. And Jews would gather at the harbour. The senior Rabbi would say to them, ‘Right, we have 10 days to learn how to breathe water’”. The Jews have it right in this story. The water of baptism never goes away. For us, it is always going to be wet now, and you have to learn to live with the wetness. The water we breathe now is the Kingdom of God. In baptism we say that the old life is gone, a new life has begun.

So too Jesus walked out to the wilderness, hunted down his cousin John, and sought out baptism for himself. It can seem odd to us that something that symbolizes cleansing from sin is something Jesus would ask for. Why does he need baptism? John, apparently, had the same problem. So we hear that John tried to dissuade Jesus, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and here you are coming to me!" But Jesus assured him, saying "it is proper for us. In this way we fulfill all righteousness". Here we see "incarnation" again. Incarnation is a word we think about at Christmas: that the Son of God took on human form. But in his baptism we see Jesus humbling himself even more: acknowledging his unity with us... us for whom life needs to shift from self-preoccupation, to pre-occupation on God, to pre-occupation with others. In the oddness of why Jesus would seek baptism we hear an echo of the mystery of baptism for us. For as Paul says, in our baptism we are united with Christ in his death and his resurrection. Our baptism speaks to the mystery of how grace – somehow – enables us to become even like the Son of God! Like the boy's name, written on the foot of Buzz Lightyear, we have been marked with the name of God. God claims us. And that mark never rubs off.

With the water of his own baptism still clinging to him, Jesus went out to live a very different life. Here he was – about 30 years old, perhaps a career carpenter by trade like Joseph. And from the inferences in the Gospels, Jesus had not been a stand-out guy in the crowd up 'till then. That changed with the baptism! All of a sudden, it was the time for his ministry: teaching, helping, healing, preparing people to make the same kind of change that Jesus had made on the day of his baptism. And as we read in scripture, the people of his home town started to ask, "Hey, isn't that Jesus, Joseph's son? Wow! He's acting so different now!" For Jesus, baptism was not just the end of a time of preparation. Baptism for Jesus marked a beginning. It was for him a commissioning to serve: to serve others, to serve God. And God, we read, was well pleased. "This is my Son" the voice from heaven declared! Living wet means living differently. Traditional congregations say "the church has a mission". Missional congregations say "God's mission has a church." In our baptism we become the hands and feet of Jesus. By the way we live our lives, we become the evidence that the Kingdom of God is indeed here.

Years ago Sheri and I went to see "Les Miz" in Toronto. It is the grand, sweeping and moving drama of a man in need of some bread, yet living in a world of little compassion. Les Miserables is a testament of repentance and forgiveness, of mercy and compassion – of one man's change from thief to benefactor, to saviour, to someone willing to give even his own innocent life for the sake of another person. The musical conveys strongly the deep need of so many in society, and our own calling to live changed lives, to live compassionately for les miserables. It is compelling. Well, after the show Sheri and I moved towards the exit doors, becoming stuck in a great congestion of the crowd of theatre-goers. The crowd was not budging. Undeterred, I made my way like an icebreaker through the crowd to the door, with Sheri in my wake. As we squeezed through the crowd, I was wondering, "What in the world is happening outside that is holding people back from leaving?" Finally I could peer out the door and see the cause: it was drizzling, lightly. The blockade was formed by a large knot of people, gripping their coat collars, anxiously looking at the sprinkling rain, saying, "O, but I don't want to get wet!" The experience has always been a parable for me about the people of faith. In the play we heard the Gospel of love preached, heard the call to live differently in love for the sake of those in need. To help the poor and

oppressed. And the theatre goers responded by saying, "I don't want to get wet!" Everyone who gets wet in baptism eventually leaves the church building to go back into the world. And there we are to embrace the wetness. This is core to the idea of the missional church. Remembering the wetness of our baptism is our reminder that we are to live changed lives: lives honouring God, lives serving others. But, when we forget our baptism, it is as if we want to huddle in that dry doorway, not wanting to go out into a world filled with need. But our baptism should be remembered, for it means that now we will live differently. Look what Jesus did after His baptism. From our perspective, his baptism marked the moment when he finally got to work! Curing lepers. Our baptism is a commission, when God says to us, "Go!"

Now, this notion of living changed lives after baptism would be overwhelming if this was all there was to the story of Jesus' baptism. After all, Jesus was the Son of God. How can we expect ourselves to "Go!" like he went? But there is one more bit to the story. People came to John by the river Jordan to receive his baptism by water. But in that act he told them, "I baptize you with water for repentance, but One who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit, and with fire". When Jesus was baptized we hear that the spirit of God descended upon him like a dove from the heavens. So too, Jesus says, God's Holy Spirit descends on us. After our baptism, we do not go back out into the world alone to live changed lives. We go with a partner, an enabler—the Holy Spirit. And with that, with that help, the living of Christ's life is made infinitely easier.

So, do you remember your baptism? Even if it happened when you were three weeks old, you should. Because we believe baptism is a big part – a big step – in our faith journey. It is when God claims us, saying to us You are my daughter! You are my son! Now, Go! Live like one!"

Stay damp.