

Sermon for The First Sunday After the Epiphany: Baptism of Our Lord

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Growing up in the Ozarks, one of my earliest means of transportation was by water. In fact, while my friends were getting hand-me-down cars for their 16th birthdays, I got a canoe. Its first test drive came during a thunderstorm that flooded my neighborhood. All the hills gathered at the same midpoint, and one of the roads turned into the second-largest waterway in town. So of course, I couldn't resist the chance to test my mettle on those fleeting rapids. I carried the canoe up a hill, like a 16-foot long sled, and dropped in towards the top, right where the water was pushing against my ankles. A loud and slow scrape left some green paint on the asphalt, but I was on my way. The ride down the hill, rushing ever faster, bumping against the curb, and shooting out into the drainage pond couldn't have lasted more than 30 seconds, but the moment is forever scraped in my memory. Now, I do not recommend doing this. It was dumb. It was dangerous. I know that. But boy was it fun. I floated rivers and creeks, paddled around lakes and ponds, tried to catch fish and water snakes in that canoe, tried to get away from dogs and other water snakes in it, too. I even dodged a group of Baptists in that thing! I loved being out in that canoe.

There's always been something about water that's calming for me. Maybe it's some evolutionary survival thing, like seeing water means I don't have to struggle for a bit. Maybe there's some innate theology about God and Creation and water. For whatever reason, water calms me way down. I can watch a still pond for hours. I used to sit on my parents bed, perfectly still, and watch storms blow in, rage, and then fade out. I still count snow days and marvel at how many different states frozen water can take in our winters. But over the years, I've also learned to respect it. Water is a powerful force. It's absolutely crucial to life, but it is no respecter of persons. It is strong and patient and unpredictable. Water crumbles mountains, cuts natural wonders from stone, carries lightning. Water washes glass into grain, bursts pipes, delivers unseen disease. There's a saying for those that live by the ocean: never turn your back on the water; it's got a power you can't imagine. I was living in Thailand when the 2004 tsunami hit. I felt the earth shake and heard the dread rise in people's throats 600 miles away. The power of water reached even beyond its horrific waves. I think it's easy for us to forget what water can do until we're forced to remember it. Sipping a glass of ice water or clutching a hot cup of coffee, water's comfort again. It's a storm watched from inside my house. A massive snowfall when I don't have to drive anywhere. A canoe ride in a quiet but soggy neighborhood.

But in the ancient world around Jerusalem, water was seen as chaos. It was necessary for life but it could take life. It did what you expected until it didn't. It wasn't good or bad, it didn't take sides, but it affected everyone. Droughts and floods and parting seas and parched tongues. Water was unpredictable, loved, and feared. Water was chaos. So when God's spirit blows over the waters, when the waters are covered in darkness and God's light brushes the face of the deep as it speeds along in the first twinkling moments of Creation, it's not just about bringing light and the world and humanity into being. It's about creating all that from the chaos. Creation doesn't remove chaos from the equation anymore than Creation removes water from you. The waters remain in us all, in every bit of Creation, and so, too, does chaos. This is no more a good thing or a bad thing than gravity, it's just part of our world. Creation comes from that chaos. But so do many other things.

There's an author who says "chaos is God's neighbor," (Hakan Nesser) as though the two are so closely connected as to be necessarily coexistent. And maybe there's something to be gained for us there. Epiphany, Wednesday, was the day the Wise Men ended their journey following God's light to the Christchild. And today, we've jumped way ahead to the adult man standing in the waters, God's Son, the Beloved. The First Sunday After the Epiphany is a day to remember the light Christ shines into our world and also a day to remember his Baptism in the extremely chaotic River Jordan. What strikes me is that it's out of chaotic waters that Jesus is baptised. Just like at Creation, God's Spirit came to those waters and his light shone across the face of the deep.

In our baptisms, we experience the same thing, the same chaotic power of water, remembering this moment alongside the Parting of the Red Sea, the waters of New Birth, fresh wells in the desert, and fierce floods that wash away the stain of sin and death. Never turn your back on the water. It's got a power you can't imagine.

Being a Christian is a funny thing, you know? Seems like there are all sorts of misconceptions about just how we're supposed to go about living into what everyone thinks we're supposed to live into. But most of those supposed insights from pop-Christianity don't understand just how deep our depths go. Creation rooted in chaos is a big one, but there's others. Springs of joy rushing out of mundane moments. Deep wells of faith flowing from a place of doubt. Mists of confusion obscuring a quest for truth. We're a complex, sometimes chaotic, storm us Christians. We wash ourselves in the same waters of Baptism that Jesus did. We bathe in that Creation, and we swear by our souls that we'll never forget the promises made as the deep splashes our necks and burns our breath-holding lungs. Even the tiny trickle from a civilized and well-behaved font reminds us of the wild and roaring waters at its origin. You just can't tame water.

I think one of those places where people have misunderstood us Christians the most is at the core of our baptisms. Paul points to this. Right at the core of baptism, right at the center of it all is the near impossible: forgiveness and repentance. Looking at the chaotic face of the deep, face-to-face with the wild God of our scriptures, face-to-face with the God of Creation, we name the moments our chaos has gotten the best of us, and we forgive those whose chaos has gotten the best of them. Now a lot of the world, a lot of Christians, for that matter, seem to think that means that we're pushovers. That you can do anything to a Christian and get away with it because they have to forgive you. Shoot, a lot of Christians think they can do anything because the rest of Christians have to forgive them. But that's not how it works. For repentance to actually take place, we say you have to show true contrition and "amendment of life." In other words, you've really gotta be sorry for whatever you did, and you've really gotta change your ways. And if it's possible without causing more harm, you also have to fix what you broke. Forgiveness goes hand-in-hand with repentance. Forgiveness can't be claimed by the offender. It cannot be demanded. Forgiveness is in the hands of the one who has been harmed. For forgiveness, you are not expected to forgive everyone that's wronged you. You are expected to be prepared to forgive, but if the person doesn't repent, if they don't show contrition, if they don't amend their lives and repair the breach, you are not required to forgive. You can, but you don't have to.

I say this because, for one, we all made promises in our baptisms related to these things that we need to be reminded of. But, for two, we are hearing a lot of calls for forgiveness these days. Some of them are true and honest and show those necessary signs of repentance. But some of them are not made in good faith. I'm not going to tell you which ones are which. Y'all are grown-ups and you can sort through that chaotic messaging on your own. But what I will tell you is this: it is meet and right so to do to stand for justice and for the oppressed. Our scriptures call us to that over and over, and we made promises in our baptisms to do the same. The universal offer of repentance and forgiveness is not a theological get-out-of-jail-free card. It requires something of you if you want to repent, and it requires something of those who have harmed you if they seek your forgiveness. And there should be a humility in that. You may need to repent as much as you need to forgive! But, and this is maybe the single most important piece of everything I've said today, if someone comes to any of us seeking forgiveness and they are truly repentant, it is our Christian duty to forgive them. We do this ourselves every week in the confession, even on Zoom. It's core to who we are, as core as the water in our cells. And we extend that offer to the world, even to, especially to those who have wronged us. It's our particular light that we shine in the chaos.

God doesn't wash chaos away in Creation. God uses that chaos and creates with it, and the world goes on. Ecclesiastes, Job, Lamentations, they all name this reality. But what God does do with chaos, right from the first moment of Creation, God shines light on chaos, maybe even shining light on what still needs to be done.

From there, more Creation comes and on and on until Christ himself rises from the waters and begins his ministry on earth. He, too, rises from chaos and shines light on work that needs to be done. From there, more life comes, and on and on until we wet our hair with or plunge backwards into our own baptisms. Forgiveness promised for our own chaotic missteps alongside our faithful repentance. And like God in Creation and Christ stepping out of the river, we too shine light on work that needs to be done. So maybe there's something of water beyond chaos for us. Maybe we have some of water's patient strength on our side, too. We're wily and hold potential the rest of the world isn't counting on. We have a power in God and in God's forgiveness. That's our light in the chaos, our strength in these waters. So maybe it's time we all remember never to turn our back on water; because in God, we've got a power the world cannot imagine.