

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22 (New Revised Standard Version)

¹⁵ As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah,^[a] ¹⁶ John answered all of them by saying, “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷ His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

²¹ Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, ²² and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

Introduction:

I don't remember that summer day. I know it was nothing like our winter wonderland judging by the gleaming faces of the men in suits.

I've got a picture of that day.

Pictures become our memories, don't they? They are a window into events that we cannot know in full, but that undoubtedly shape us. Such moments were important enough because someone captured them.

Not as much these days perhaps, with the instantaneous and digitized photography we enjoy. But we recall a day not so very long ago when a picture was taken and it was days before you saw what was really captured in the lens.

In the picture. I am at my grandparent's church in Jackson, Mississippi. A little bitty thing with a red face only weeks old. And there is my great-grandfather and two grandfathers. My grandfather, Rev. Matheny just baptized me.

In the Methodist tradition I come from, infant baptism is a welcome thing. There is a deep understanding of grace that comes before you can ask for it or know that you need it. It is a flow of love (even if there aren't loving ones to tower with you). With baptism is *prevenient* grace. The going before kind of grace that precedes birth. It was in conception and doesn't leave you when you dare to be born.

Water as Our Life Force:

Coming to water is an outward sign of an inward motion—not just in the life of an individual, but in the very shape of the community. Because every time a child comes to the water, the people around are saying “yes” to being alongside the child. They are surrounding him, her, ze and serving as vessels of mercy and grace. Such lifelines are vital in the turbulent waters of life's beginning and consequent swimming. Newborn life means hunger and thirst. And as the child grows, we as church say, “we are here” to be a representation of God's love to you.

We believe in the belovedness of all. We say all means all, whether or not you have been baptized or not. In infancy, or as a teen or adult, or never with no intent.

But for those for whom the water calls, baptism is an important way we connect to the starting journey of Jesus and can be one way that we affirm the Spirit's holy breakthroughs initiating our ministries in this world. For we are co-bathers in the Spirit drawing upon the same channels that have invigorated generations.

Invigorating John hosted the rough and tangly crew repenting by the water. When Jesus gets in, he signals his oneness with the crowd (he ate with sinners, and heals the sick). He is in solidarity, incarnate, extending himself to the untouchable. It is this equalizing effort of entrance that calls us to our most compassionate expression. Blessed by the Spirit, we can experience the parting clouds. We claim a sameness with the those labeled unclean and uncouth. In the water we are invited to release all that holds us back from God and from each other, and from loving ourselves.

The Water Within Us:

Today we recall that we as KC always have water available to us. It is a healing and commissioning constant. It is a reminder of the free-flowing grace of our Creator. Water is important across religious traditions and meditative practices. At my yoga class this week we focused on the water elements of this winter season.

Water is as ever ready as the tap. It is as thirst-quenching as the fountain in our hallways. It is as reflective of life as our lakes nearby and our little pond on the edge of our Sacred Garden. It is so crucial to life's existence that it is a part of every cell of our being. Without our water we are dry to our bones.

And in the face of our modern ecological masochism, we are reminded of the urgent need to better care for our waterways and alter our ways of life that drain creation. And here is a wide woundedness we must not fail to address in our future conversations. We wonder at how committed we are to the muddy river of the entire globe's need.

The Spirit Still Beckons:

However you classify baptism, and whether baptized or not, let us name that without the viable water that stirs now in each of us, we perish. And hereby, water cannot help but communicate our reliance on some force beyond us. And we are drawn into the creative landscape of God's lakes, streams, fountains, and springs.

If someone out there wishes to learn more about baptism—to consider what has meant to the wide church and to learn about how the ritual has been a source of connection among Jesus followers, please come and be in touch with me. I understand that has been some time since we have experienced a baptism here at KC. We are not seeking to re-baptize. You might need us to reaffirm the grace that has been preventive for you in an earlier season through your baptism. And there may be someone out there who has never been baptized who longs for the water as a symbol of the Spirit's urgent presence. Someone may be feeling a unique call on their lives that starts in the inviting and healing place of the fountain. Perhaps you seek the assurance of others on the shore affirming birth in you.

It is not John who is hosting the moment at the River. In some ways we know that it is Jesus who is holding the moment there, holding space and setting the stage. The Spirit joins divinity and human life, and ushers in the holy moment of belovedness. It is hard to resist, even if just onlooking, even if we never ourselves get in the water. It's hard not to hear the voice of God beckoning us into new seasons. And we in turn host the Spirit, inviting grace to seep into our most parched deserts of human want.

Conclusion:

In that small photo I have of little me next to the giants of my family—the Spirit invited us all as guests to the waters that day. There we gleamed, in all our summer Southern perspiration. In solidarity, if even for a snapshot, the holy moments link us for all times into the broader range of God’s equalizing activity and the cosmic call to our ministry.

And so, we are connected with all who have dared to venture to the muddy rivers of this life. Out of our very own mire, the very primal cries of our birthedness, God is blessing the world. And we are the beloved. But for now we only have snapshots of grace from a river in motion. Let’s discover our role in what is yet coming into being for ourselves, and for community.

Meditation with Water (Anne Yenchko and Claire Matheny)

Find a quiet space with a vessel of water before you.

Opening:

From ancient times people have had experiences with God
Some have heard the voice of God
Some have had dreams of God
While others have had visions of and conversations with God
Many have had a sense of God’s presence within them and around them

Today we invite you not only to remember a time in your life
when God has seemed very close to you
When you might have heard God calling you by name
But also to allow yourself to feel God’s presence in this moment.

Entry into God’s presence:

Open yourself to the energy of a river, flowing.
When it encounters an obstacle,
its waters find a way of working in, through and around it.
May the peace that is this river, find its way to your heart center.

God's calling to us:

In the present moment, you might choose to let yourself go back in time finding a place or time when you felt the closeness of the Creator:

- A quiet moment perhaps in prayer, or just in stillness,
- A joy-filled mountaintop experience
- The moments as a loved one transitioned into God's presence .
- You might imagine being held as a baby with water of the Spirit poured and words of promise spoken;
- Or maybe there has been a time later in life when like Jesus, you have been touched or immersed with water in community.

Allow past moments of love and grace to wash over you and meet you now.

In this moment, invite God to be fully present to you.

I open my self ...

I open my heart... Come Lord...Listen.

God's blessing on us:

God knows your name and is telling you that **you** are beloved:

“This is my beloved daughter, on you my favor rests;

”This is my beloved child on you my favor rests.”

That soft, gentle voice that calls you the Beloved has come to you,
alighting with you.

Let yourself repeat the words, “I am God's Beloved” (Pause)

With the vessel in front of you, recall God's beckoning love. If you so feel called, please touch the water now. Feel free also simply to sit in meditation in these next moments.

Flowing Forward

As you recall this space in which we reside lovingly together, we know the river's roll will resume. We will move unto the world and the busy streams of life.

Let us flow forward with confidence in our belovedness. May you return to this time and space as you need it—in the stillness of your mind's eye and heart center. A community attentive to the Spirit. A God lovingly present.