

## **Water, Water Everywhere**

Matthew 3:13-17

Katherine C. Kerr

First Presbyterian Church, Charlotte, NC

January 12, 2014

If you've been on the internet or watched the news in the past few days, then you've likely seen at least one video of someone throwing boiling water into the air. When the air temperature is as cold as it's been in most of the country this week, boiling water will turn into snow. It's a neat trick, and the videos of a few people doing it inspired many more to try it. Unfortunately, a number of those folks weren't careful, and stood downwind as they threw the hot water, and ended up scalding themselves. One newspaper counted 50 social media reports of scalds and burns as of Tuesday. No matter how many times someone says, "Don't try this at home," people are going to try anyway. And you can't really blame them, I guess.

Water is fascinating, isn't it? It's one of the most common, versatile, and powerful elements on earth. It is the only one that occurs naturally as a solid, a liquid and a gas, it freezes and it boils, and it covers about 70 percent of the earth<sup>1</sup>. We use it for cleaning and for recreation, for energy and art and transportation. And of course we use it to sustain our lives. Our bodies are about 60 percent water, and while a human being can survive as long as three weeks without food, without water, we can only live for about three days.

Water is amazing.

In addition to being a necessary part of our daily lives, water is also an integral part of our faith. In the beginning, we read, the spirit of God hovered over the water and all that is was created. When humanity strayed too far from God, the waters rose and flooded the earth, carrying Noah and his ark of animals to a new place to begin a new life. When God's people were liberated from slavery in Egypt, the waters of the Red Sea were parted for them to pass over to begin their journey to the promised land.

And Jesus, the Living Water, began his ministry in a river.

This Sunday, the Sunday after Epiphany when we celebrated the dawning awareness of the identity of the Messiah, we commemorate his baptism. In Matthew's gospel, the account of Jesus' baptism in the Jordan River is a part of an ongoing elucidation of who Jesus is.

---

<sup>1</sup> Shanna Freeman, "How Water Works." <http://science.howstuffworks.com>

Just before this morning's passage, Matthew's gospel tells us that John was out in the wilderness, calling the people to repentance. It is Matthew's account that describes John as being clothed in camel hair and a leather belt, eating locusts and wild honey. He lambasts the Pharisees and Sadducees who come to him seeking baptism, calling them to turn from their egotistical, hypocritical ways. He baptizes with water, he says, but one who is coming will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire.

In calling people to repent and be baptized, John is calling people to a new life, a life he knows that Jesus will usher in. He has no idea just how new that life will be.

Immediately after John's dramatic introduction, we read that Jesus presented himself for baptism. Not surprisingly, John was taken aback. This man whose coming he had proclaimed with vigor and passion, who was to baptize with spirit and fire and be like nothing anyone had ever experienced now appeared before him alongside the wayward and fallen masses, asking to be baptized like a common human being. "I need to be baptized by YOU," John says, "and do you come to me?"

He didn't need to do it, John thought. We might think the same thing. Whether our own understanding of baptism is rudimentary or theological, we can all agree that the Son of God probably didn't need to be immersed in water to be cleansed of his sin.

Barely a toe into his ministry journey and Jesus is already shaking things up. As one commentator puts it, this could easily be considered Jesus' first miracle – the miracle of his humanity. In a foreshadowing of his coming crucifixion, when he will be put to death among sinners, Jesus begins his ministry being washed in the river with everyday folk – common, broken, fallen sinners.

In so doing, he sets the foundation for those who will follow him.

Immersing himself in baptismal waters, Jesus enters into our lives in an unexpected and powerful way, calling us to a new understanding of power and faith.

Taking one of the most basic elements on earth and using it for a sacred purpose, Jesus opens to us a new understanding of the significance of water.

Submitting himself to the baptism he will later call us all to practice, Jesus consecrates himself to the ministry to which he is called.

In this seemingly simple act, the King of kings and Lord of lords enters fully into the lives of his people, experiencing what we will experience, doing what he calls us to do.

Today we have the privilege of ordaining and installing 24 members of this congregation to the offices of Elder and Deacon. These men and women, elected by you the congregation, have responded to God's call in this unique way. In just a few moments, we will

acknowledge that. They will make some promises and accept this call that God has placed upon them. We will pray for them, invoking the Holy Spirit to anoint them to this work.

We do this not as an isolated act, but in recognition that ordination, like other momentous events in the life of faith is truly an extension of baptism. Like Jesus began his ministry baptized in the waters of the Jordan, each of us begins our ministry baptized in water. For some of us, that happens when we are babies, not able to claim God's love for ourselves, but in the arms of our parents who acknowledge that God's love and grace are upon us from our earliest days. For others of us, baptism is a decision we make, when we decide for ourselves that we want to turn away from a life lived unto ourselves and accept the grace offered to us through Jesus Christ.

Whatever our age or awareness, in baptism, we submit ourselves to the water which, though it is not frozen or boiling, falling out of the sky or carving a canyon in the rocks, has a power that we are incapable of replicating. Though it is a common, often overlooked aspect of our daily lives, when poured out for the sacrament, water becomes the source of all life in a way we can only begin to understand.

As we say in this sanctuary when a person is baptized, "in the waters of baptism, we die to all that separates us from God and self and neighbor, and are reborn to newness of life in Jesus Christ."

It kind of makes you want to be baptized again and again, doesn't it?

But here again, the power of the water is beyond our understanding. Though we sin and fall short of God's glory time and again, we need only pass through the waters of baptism once. In Ephesians we read, "there is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism." The waters of baptism, whether a handful sprinkled on your head, or a pool or river into which you are dunked, are enough. In that one act, an act in which Christ himself participated, God's grace is poured out, and is sufficient for all of our lives.

Touched by the waters of baptism, we are both bound and set free. Bound to God's grace and love, set free to serve and glorify him.

Baptism changes us, but it doesn't make us perfect. Though forgiven, still we will sin. Though saved, still we will falter. And so we need to be called back to the water, time and again.

And it's no mistake that water is everywhere.

I grew up in Florida, and so water was a part of my life from my earliest days. Some of my greatest memories have to do with water- swimming in the ocean, boating on the river,

dashing through an afternoon rain shower. Some of my scariest memories involve water as well- an ocean wave or rushing river, a hurricane's rains or even a leaking pipe can quickly remind us of the vast power of this common element.

One of my most abiding childhood memories centers around water. North Florida, where I grew up, is a place of extraordinary natural beauty. There are countless rivers fed by springs gushing cool, clear water in a constant stream. When I was little, my family spent many weekends canoeing these rivers and camping out in the parks that surrounded them.

One weekend we were in the Ocala National Forest, at a place called Alexander Springs. There was a big swimming hole where a lot of people had gathered to escape the summer heat. Nothing felt better than that cool water on sun-baked skin.

At the edge of the swimming hole, there was a boulder- to my 5-year-old eyes, it looked like a mountain, but in reality, it was probably about six feet high. It was a perfect diving platform, and lots of the swimmers were scampering up its sides and plunging into the pool below. I decided I wanted to try, so I followed the others, including my big brother, and climbed up. As soon as it was my turn, and I inched towards the edge to jump, I panicked. Looking down into the pool, the reality of what I had just committed to do struck me hard and I froze.

Just below me in the water, my Dad looked up at me, and stretching out his arms, he reassured me. "You can do it," he said, "I'm right here. Don't be afraid- I'll catch you." I listened to his words but still didn't jump. By this time, others had noticed me and instead of getting impatient, they encouraged me. With my Dad in the water, and strangers on the ground cheering me on, I screwed up all of my courage. Bolstered by my Dad's support, I leapt out into the blue. Splashing down into the water, I came up in my Dad's arms and felt an exhilaration I'd never known before.

My Dad is a great man, that is for sure. But he's not God. Still, I can't help but think of that moment in my life as an analogy to my life of faith. We all face moments when we are called to step out in faith and plunge into something unknown. And when that moment comes, we may feel terrified. We may feel inadequate. We may feel alone.

But we are not alone. For having passed through the waters of baptism just as our Lord did, we are assured that God is with us in all that we do. The God who took on flesh and lived as we do, experiencing hopes and fears, sorrow and frustration, joy and suffering, walks alongside us throughout our days, calling us, encouraging us, supporting us, and catching us.

And when we forget that, which we will, he has given us a reminder that is so common we see it, feel it, taste it every day. Water is everywhere. It is a visible reminder of an invisible grace.

As the prophet Isaiah wrote, “when you pass through the waters I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you.” In the water, through the water, with the water, God’s love for us is strong and sure. Thanks be to God.