



The Mud of Life

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Claire Nevin-Field
The Baptism of our Lord ~ January 10, 2021*

Genesis 1:1-5

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. But the earth became chaos and emptiness, and darkness came over the face of the Deep—yet the Spirit of God was brooding over the surface of the waters. Then God said, “Light: Be!” and light was. God saw that light was good, and God separated light from darkness. God called the light “Day” and the darkness “Night.” Evening came, and morning followed—the first day.

Psalm 29

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| 1 | Ascribe to God, you heavenly beings, *
ascribe to God glory and strength. | 7 | The voice of God splits the flames of fire;
the voice of God shakes the wilderness; *
God shakes the wilderness of Kadesh. |
| 2 | Ascribe due honor to God’s holy Name; *
worship the Most High in the beauty of holiness. | 8 | The voice of God makes the oak trees writhe *
and strips the forests bare. |
| 3 | The voice of God is upon the waters;
the God of glory thunders; *
God is upon the mighty waters. | 9 | And in the temple of the Holy One, *
all are crying, “Glory!” |
| 4 | The voice of God is a powerful voice; *
the voice of God is a voice of splendor. | 10 | God sits enthroned above the flood, *
enthroned for evermore. |
| 5 | The voice of God breaks the cedar trees; *
God breaks the cedars of Lebanon; | 11 | God shall give strength to the people; *
God shall give the people the blessing of peace. |
| 6 | God makes Lebanon skip like a calf *
and Mount Hermon like a young wild ox. | | |

Acts 19:1-7

While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul passed through the interior of the country and came to Ephesus. There Paul found disciples, to whom he put the question, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?” They replied, “No, we were never even told there was such a thing as a Holy Spirit.” “Then how were you baptized?” he asked. “With John’s baptism,” they responded. Paul then explained, “John’s baptism was a baptism of repentance; he insisted that the people believe in the one who was to come after him—in other words, Jesus.” When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. And the moment Paul laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came down on them, and they began to speak in tongues and prophesy. There were about twelve of them.

Mark 1:4-11

And so John the Baptizer appeared in the desert, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to John and were baptized by him in the Jordan River as they confessed their sins. John was clothed in camel’s hair and wore a leather belt around his waist, and he ate nothing but grasshoppers and wild honey. In the course of his preaching, John said, “One more powerful than I is to come after me. I am not fit to stoop and untie his sandal straps. I have baptized you in water, but the One to come will baptize you in the Holy Spirit.” It was then that Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized in the Jordan River by John. Immediately upon coming out of the water, Jesus saw the heavens opening and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. Then a voice came from the heavens: “You are my Beloved, my Own. On you my favor rests.”

One of my pandemic coping mechanisms has been watching a lot of nature shows, documentaries, and travel shows. I have long been a fan of these genres, but with the pandemic, I am devouring them like it is my job. I recently saw a travel show about a place (can't remember where it was!) that's big claim to fame was it's mud baths. People go there, strip down to next to nothing, and wallow around in the mud for a while. Evidently it feels very good, though it looked a right mess. As an unabashed church geek, I couldn't help but think, when I watched the people come out of the mud and get cleaned with fresh, clear water - pink shiny skin suddenly emerging from the muck- of baptism.

Jesus' baptism story is essentially the story of Jesus joining us in the mud- hopping in the pit and wallowing right along with us.

Today's reading begins not with Jesus, but with the activities of John the Baptist. John, that wild man-opinionated, determined, and fed up with the status quo. By all accounts John was not taken to social pleasantries but was quite confrontational-in some Gospel accounts even harassing those who showed up to be baptized. Surprisingly, people seemed to take John and his oddness in stride and kept showing up to be baptized, likely assuming that John's wildness came directly from God. And of them began to confuse John with the Messiah, which likely irked John and let him to declare emphatically that he is not even worthy to bend down and untie the sandals of the One who comes after him. John goes on to say "I baptize you with water but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit". At that point, the people probably had the sense to be good and scared- because everyone knows that when the Holy Spirit shows up life gets messed up, uncomfortable and out of control. The Biblical evidence is myriad- people ending up in all sorts of dangerous situations because the Spirit showed up and asked/told them to do something. So if John, as wild as he was, wasn't the One who would bring the Spirit, look out. Whoever this was would be 10 times wilder than the axe wielding John. And then Jesus shows up. A gentle carpenter who wandered around preaching love and justice. He did get riled up, angry on occasion, but he was not at all an angry presence- he was One who showed the face of love. Well, this was not really what people were expecting- somehow, then and now, it is easier to believe in an angry God than in a God who is pure love- so a lot of people didn't and don't believe.

One of the questions many have about Jesus' baptism is why it ever happened. What exactly was going on? If Jesus was the Sinless One, why did he need to be cleansed? What did he need to repent of and be forgiven for? Curiously, Jesus never baptizes anyone in the Gospels. The disciples do. Paul does. But Jesus? Not once. Evidently he was more interested in giving power away than in claiming it. So rather than shove John out of the way and say "Excuse me I am the Messiah and I'm taking over", Jesus waded on into the river with all those who did have things for which to be forgiven, to repent of- the whole sorry looking lot of us. And it really wasn't until he came up out of the water than anything dramatic happened- a voice from heaven announcing, "You are my Son, my beloved, and with you I am well pleased." Well, not to question God or anything, but why? Why was God so pleased? Jesus really hadn't done much of anything yet. His ministry was just kicking off, really not much of a report card to issue at this point. So the best I can figure is that God was really, really pleased that Jesus said yes to baptism itself. Jesus first act of ministry was to hop into the Jordan with all of humanity. No special privileges- no taking a pass on the being human thing- rather he joins the crowd in the mud pit. And God was downright thrilled.

The folks watching the proceedings, if they knew their Bible, knew that God was quoting Godself in the words from above- "You are my Son". That is right out of one of the psalms about crowning the king. And the second part, "with you I am well pleased", comes right out of the suffering servant song of Isaiah. So there it is- God telegraphing loudly and clearly what Jesus was all about, what his ministry was going to look like. He was God's Son, a King, yes, but unlike other kings this King was to be a suffering servant- one who stoops low into the mud and extends a hand to those of us wallowing and unable to lift ourselves out.

So Jesus' baptism is about him going into the water and coming out with a new direction- he goes in a carpenter and comes out the Messiah, King and servant. He looks and sounds the same, but his life is turned in a different direction. Which really, is what the word repentance means: to turn around and go in a different way, the way of God. So perhaps at his baptism Jesus did repent, not of any sin, but instead repented of going the way of a life lived quietly and in peace, he turned and went the way of God- instead of being a private person, he came out of the water as God's person- a public, controversial figure for the rest of his brief life.

Why that happened is quite the mystery. Why did he become human when he could have stayed God? Why did he jump on into the Jordan instead of standing on the banks organizing and directing everyone? Why did he leap on into life, coming to us, opening himself up to suffering, grief, pain and death? The answer, as far as I can tell, is quite simple. It is because he loves us, he is irrationally pleased with us, and he will come to us again and again- leading us through the water of life, through death and into life eternal. Being human, joining the fray and seeing life from the inside out, was just Jesus' style. He leaped in to show us how it is done- and demonstrating is so much more powerful than simply giving

instructions. For him, perhaps, the sin would have been in standing off on the sidelines and staying removed.

Thank God, Jesus still comes to us, never asking us to go anywhere he hasn't already gone. Ashes to ashes, cradle to grave. Jesus has shown us how to live life fully, how to live a life that never ends. Choosing to go not our own way, but God's way. My prayer for each of us is that we live life fully, that we continually turn and re-turn to God's ways and that we choose the things that Jesus did, the things of earth, our lives, our very selves, to carry out the purposes of heaven.