

Sermon for January 10, 2021—“Down to the River”

Baptism of Our Lord, Year B—Texts: Genesis 1:1-5; Isaiah 42:1-9; Matthew 3:4-17

Have you ever gone canoeing? Whitewater Rafting? How about kayaking? I’ve never tried kayaking, but I did a good bit of canoeing, starting back when I was a Boy Scout, where I spent about a month in the summer of 1977 canoeing in the Wisconsin lake region. My love of being on the water continued well into my college days, where my friends and I would spend weekends whitewater rafting down the Youghiogheny River in Ohio State Park.

I loved it. You get the canoe, raft—whatever—into the water; you feel the cool, calm water on your legs and feet. You begin paddling, you begin to look around you: the calm water ahead, the beautiful scenery along the shore. You continue paddling until you find the right rhythm. You feel a slight breeze. The movement is gentle and easy. It feels good to be in the water.

As a church, we have—in a manner of speaking—been floating down the river for a while now. Each year, we hop aboard the boat together and start the trip all over again in Advent. We float towards Christmas, right on through Epiphany. It’s a journey that’s familiar, yet also new each time we take it.

It’s a journey that begins with end times. It’s a journey that makes its way with Mary and Joseph to the manger in the stable. On it we flee with them to Egypt to avoid Herod’s insanity. On it we travel with the Magi—led by a star—to pay homage to the child revealed to be God’s Messiah.

Today, we pick up a little speed and fast forward 30 years. We float down the river Jordan, where Jesus is baptized by John.

Jesus’ baptism is an unusual story—an uncomfortable scene for Christians. What do I mean? Well, think about it for a second. Why does Jesus need to be baptized? For forgiveness of sins? For repentance? What does it say about John, as he baptizes instead of being baptized? In many ways, the story of Jesus’ baptism invites more questions than answers, as we hear it once more.

During Advent—we here John’s preaching on the bank of the river Jordan. We know of his stiff condemnation of the crowds, his warnings of the Messiah. This time—when Jesus shows up—John seems very different—certainly as Matthew tells the story. The confidence and boldness are gone. He’s indecisive and questioning. Jesus insists on being baptized. And so, John relents—without an argument. This doesn’t sound like the John of Advent.

But John and the crowds don’t see what’s going on. They’re hoping for a powerful, kingly Messiah, a warrior who will end injustice and kick the Romans out of Israel, but Jesus is neither of those things.

It’s the beginning of the problems that John, the disciples and the crowds, and Pharisees, scribes and temple authorities will all have with Jesus. Some will want an ally. Some will want a powerful warlord. Some will want Jesus to go away. But Jesus simply refuses to fit their categories. Jesus is going to show us God in ways that we don’t see; that we can’t see; in ways that we often **refuse** to see.

Remember the feeling of standing in the water, feeling the cool, calm water as we got into the boat? Well the further we travel, the more the current picks up. The gentle calm is replaced by force and weight. The water doesn't smoothly pass by; it pushes and grabs; it pulls and drags. The cool gentle stream that cooled our feet, now pulls us in and drags us along. The power of the river is more than we could've ever imagined.

Like the crowds who gathered at the Jordan, we gather to wait also. We're waiting for the world to change, waiting for it to get better, but it doesn't. As we tried to pause and rest over Christmas, the world continued to turn, life and death soldiered on in the world. There were still tragedies, shootings, war and—lest we forget—COVID 19. All of it continued to bombard us from our newspapers, radios and TVs.

The world hasn't changed all that much since John and Jesus met in the river. Sure, we drive cars and live in houses with heat and indoor plumbing. Sure, we have fancy devices that allows us to talk to anyone on the planet instantly and places stores of knowledge at our fingertips. But, very much like the crowds who stood listening to John, our world is filled with violence and death.

We woke Christmas morning to the news that someone detonated a bomb inside an RV in downtown Nashville, injuring eight people and damaging dozens of buildings, causing days-long communication service outages. On Christmas Day!!!!!! As of a few days ago the number of COVID cases in the US stood at 19.4 million, with over 335 thousand total deaths.

The weight of all of this threatens to drown us in the inability to care anymore. We hear it—how can we not? And it's too much to take; too much to grieve for. Not only is it hard to see what's going on, as John baptizes Jesus, it's hard to see where God is at all.

Today, it might feel like the cool refreshing water of the river has pulled us in and dragged us under. The current is churning and the waves are like bucking broncos. Those who've ever been whitewater rafting or tubing know what I'm talking about. We bounce in all directions deafened by the sound of the roaring water, gasping for air. We're talking class five rapids—if not class six. Suddenly, we see it and before we know it, we're headed right over the waterfall.

Um, is it just me, or is this **not** what the river journey that began in Advent is supposed to be like! This is **not** what God's supposed to allow to happen in the world. We're not supposed to drown in the waters of grief and apathy! And then a voice cuts through the noise and chaos: "This is my beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Words of promise—words of hope.

As John plunges Jesus into the water and then brings him back up out, breath and air again fill empty lungs—God speaks. God speaks in a way that hasn't been heard since the beginning of creation. God speaks and the world is transformed.

We tumble over the waterfall, we plunge into the deep pool at the bottom. We're squeezed and crushed under the weight—we can't tell which direction is up. Death under the water seems imminent. Then—all of a sudden—while we're tossed about in the churn, not knowing which way is up or down, we pop up and out of the water. The air rushes back into our lungs.

This is where God's action begins. In drowning. In death. It seems like a strange place for God to be working—yet here he is. Here God is speaking, as Jesus comes out of the water: “This is my beloved son with whom I am well pleased.” And with those words the sacrament of Baptism is inaugurated. We understand Baptism as a symbolic dying and rising with Jesus Christ; as a sign and seal of our incorporation into his body—the Church; a sign and seal of God's covenant with all humankind. All—meaning everyone!

What a weird and wonderful God! One who can do this: who can push us below the surface to make us His own; to give us new names as children of God as his beloved. This is the reason why John doesn't know what's going on when Jesus asks to be baptized.

We have these pre-conceived ideas of how God works and—truth be told—they can be narrow and shallow. This is the reason why **we** often cannot see God working in the world. It's too radical. It's too unbelievable. And yet—this is the promise made to us in the waters of **our** Baptism; the promise that's renewed each and every day. This is the promise that's remembered, each and every time **we** baptize someone. It's the promise made **where** we least expect it, in the **way** we least expect it.

But tell me, when you stop and think about—isn't that what God does? Isn't this how God works?

Even in death, God is showing us something new...

Something life-filling...

Something surprising...

Something weird and wonderful...

Something that can come only from a God like ours.

Ah, if only we've eyes to see. Because if and when we do, we see a God who comes into the world as baby, born in a barn—in the middle of the night, in the middle of nowhere—to an unwed teenage mother. We see a God who lives as a poor carpenter in first-century Israel; a God who died on a Roman cross as a common criminal; a God who was raised from the dead and who in turn calls us to be drowned and then raised.

When we do we realize that new life can only come from God, a God who rarely seems to act the way we think he should. This radical God comes to us in so many ways; ways that are so unimaginable—so crazy—that we can scarcely believe it, let alone understand it!

Brothers and sisters, here's the thing: The journey that God promises is neither easy, nor gentle. Kind of like the whitewater rapids of the river know to locals as the “Yough” (pronounced “Yock,” referring to the Youghiogheny.) The results of God's work in the world are rarely what we imagine or hope for. Yet, as this unexpected God meets us in our world and on our terms, we cannot help but be drawn to this unexpected God whose story has become our story; whose story we tell over and over again.

As we go down to the river to pray, studyin' about that good ol' way”—as the song goes; as we float down the river of Advent and Christmas, headed straight for Lent and Easter; as we pass by Jesus and John in the river, we see again and marvel anew at God's love for us.

We see a God who not only pushes us below the water to die, but who pulls us out again, so that we may rise into new life. And today, we hear a God who beckons us to “come on

in—the water’s fine.” A God who speaks through chaos, “You are my beloved Children, with you I am well pleased.”

O sinners—let’s go down. Let’s go down, don’t you wanna go down! C’mon sinners let’s go down, good Lord—show us the way!

Thanks be to God. Amen and amen.