

Meaning-Making

Epiphany 1B 2018 St Thomas's Church
Genesis 1:1-5 Acts 19:1-7 Mark 1:4-11

I still remember my knees turning to water

and my heart pounding so hard I thought my chest would break open.

In that moment I was standing in front of the door

to the rectors office trying to get up the nerve to knock.

I had made an appointment with him to talk about this persistent internal pressure

I kept feeling but couldn't name.

I thought it might have something to do with God.

Maybe it was only heartburn.

Right that minute I wished I had never made the appointment.

If only the floor would open and swallow me up.

I knocked.

He was cordial enough and after a few minutes of chit chat

he got down to business – HIS, not mine.

Why do you think Jesus was baptized? he wanted to know.

If Jesus was sinless, getting baptized by John for repentance of his sins
would have been ridiculous.

MY agenda went right out the window in that moment.

Having never thought about it before, I had no answer...
and even if I HAD thought about it, I'd have had no answer.
Thinking I should have had one, I took having none as my answer
to the question of God's possible nudging in my life. Answer: Of course not.

My next important encounter with Jesus' baptism came some years later.

It was a Sunday at church.

I had long since become a "lapsed Episcopalian"
no longer believing in God and thinking church totally irrelevant.

But when she was in fourth grade,
my daughter wanted to sing in the church choir,
and I refused to be a "drop the kid off and come back when its over" parent.
So I sat in the pew and prepared to be bored during the sermon.

The rector began to preach. He held up a vial of clear water.

He said "this water from the Holy Land is the most embarrassing
souvenir I brought home from my recent trip to the Holy Land."

Just as I was wondering how water from the Jordan could be embarrassing
(I thought being from the Jordan it had to be holy by definition
meaning probably magical in some way)

he explained: this came from the clean part of the Jordan,
clearly NOT where Jesus was baptized.

Jesus jumped into the human condition down river,
down where the water is muddy and unclean,
like the life we all live – which is anything but pure and clean.

Clean water is for tourists only. It has nothing to do with Jesus.

That was a life-changing sermon for me.

No, I remember thinking, his baptism probably
didn't have anything to do with Jesus being sinful.

This made more sense.

I wanted the Jesus who jumped
into the wilderness of our own muddy lives
and our bleeding and broken world
bringing the promise of new life to God's struggling people...

That Jesus just might be able to **make meaning** out of the muddy mess of life –
my own and the world's.

Over the years, I began to see
From the beginning God has been creating order out of chaos

and **making meaning** all along.

From the waters of creation itself, through the waters of the Red Sea

to the muddy waters of the Jordan River –

God has brought light into the darkness and chaos

of the human condition.

When Jesus waded into the formless void

of the waters of the Jordan at his baptism,

with the Spirit descending from above,

tearing apart the heavens so that earth and heaven were open to each other,

he again brought hope and promise into the muck of the human condition.

God's acts throughout history resonate in this baptism:

and bring hope even to today as God's people still cry out

for God's ordering Spirit to calm the world's chaos.

Personally I rather like the vial of clear Jordan River water best –

or rather my naïve "now that Jesus is one of us, he'll fix the mess we've made

and everything will be fine."

That's what my understanding of baptism was for many years...the Disney version.

Even when I had my own children baptized,

baptism was still (as my grandmother used to call it) “hell insurance”
and the excuse to dress up my kids in my grandmother’s baptismal gown.
I pretty much blew it off as anything deeply significant,
it was just what Episcopalians did ...
and it made for an extra long Sunday service.

I am as embarrassed to admit how long it took me to even begin to
understand the significance of baptism – first Jesus’s,
and then its implications for our own.

Just as embarrassed as I was that day I had no answer to my rector’s question.
I only begin to get over it when I realized
that even the gospelers had different ideas about
Jesus and what his baptism meant.

In Mark, the Spirit that descends is the sign
that Jesus is the divinely appointed Messiah.
In Him, God’s eschatological reign has begun.
In Matthew’s gospel, Jesus’ baptism is an act of humility and obedience.
In Luke, his baptism is the prelude to Jesus’ prayer
during which the Spirit descends on him in the form of a dove

and he hears God's voice identifying him as God's Son.

But back to Mark, Jesus' son-ship is not revealed as his true identity

until his death when the centurian says: Truly this man was God's son (Mk 15:39)

However we make it mean,

what we know for sure is that Jesus' baptism was the prelude to all that would follow:

to his ministry,

to the rejection and betrayal by his disciples,

to his victimization by the systems of religious and political injustice which led to his death,

and the torture of his death itself.

It is clear that wading in the water of the Jordan would prove costly indeed.

What does that mean for us?

It means our own wading in the baptismal waters is

no tourist or Disney matter.

We do not wade into a warm prayer shawl faith.

Baptism is our own prelude to following Jesus and wading in the muddy waters of life.

When the babies in our congregation are stripped naked

and immersed in water and signed with the oil that represents the Holy Spirit

re-clothed in their baptismal gowns and wrapped in a baby-sized white shawl, we rejoice as we welcome our newest Christian.

It would be nice if we could simply stay gathered at the font warmly and cozily gathered in the joy and hope of the new life promised in any baptism.

But just as Jesus did not receive the Spirit in order to privately enjoy a cozy moment.

He was baptized to be empowered for all that lay ahead. The same is true for us.

As he was sent into the wilderness, so we will be sent from the church, not to immediately forget baptism ever happened but to **remember** our covenant with God to **live by** the baptismal promises: to resist evil, to seek and serve Christ in all persons, to strive for justice and peace and respect the dignity of all people... all of which can lead us deep into muddy waters.

Empowered by the Holy Spirit and united as Christ's body,

we will go out the red doors into our own wilderness
and we will have all good intentions...
but like keeping New Year's resolutions,
we may not be very good at keeping our promises –
we may not know even how – or where - to begin.
The problems – our own and the world's – seem so overwhelming.

The Good News is:

God gave us the gift of the Holy Spirit not to save the world –
God's already doing that -
but to empower us to witness
to the hope we have in Jesus who demonstrates
God's power to create, to recreate, to bring order out of chaos...

We can witness even when our own lives are falling apart,
even when the end of the world looks like it's around the corner.
We can witness because we have seen and heard it:
in the beginning and now in Jesus. We may have even personally experienced it.

Our job is to witness to God's grace and power,

to witness to **God's** truth

to offer hope, to empower others as we have been empowered.

For God is wading in those muddy waters...and troublin' them...and that means

The day will come when the richest of the rich are brought down,

when black and brown men can walk down city streets

without being stopped and harassed,

when women will no longer be objectified and will be treated as equals

when prison doors will be flung open and the innocent released

when institutional corruption across the board will be rooted out

when guns and swords will be turned into plowshares...

for the mouth of the Lord has spoken it.

We are witnesses to God's justice

and called to act in Jesus's name.

That means wherever we are planted,

we must speak up and speak out:

we must say NO to sexual harassment,

NO to racial injustice and oppression,

NO to social and economic inequity,

No to gun violence.

We speak out as a people of peace and justice.

The water of life is muddy.

And because the water is muddy,

it is not easy to see and there are no black and white answers

to seemingly simple questions.

Answers will require conversations

lifting up and affirming our baptismal promises and gospel values,

and making space and listening with care to those who differ from us.

Baptized into Christ empowered by the Holy Spirit

we can go forth together following Jesus

who is always going on ahead of us.

We can trust that God IS creating and restoring and bringing life and light.

We are called to wade in the water to look for Jesus.

In whatever venue you are called to wade, remember:

You will not find him in the clear water.

He is in the darkest, muddiest, roiling waters.

Look for him there. He is waiting for you.

- The Rev. Julie Kelsey

