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Matthew 3:13-17

Isaiah 42:1-9

Psalm 29

Acts 10:34-43

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The Baptism of our Lord

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When you envision the Jordan River, what do you imagine? A serene, winding river. Cool, clear water up to your waist. Sand beneath your toes. A gentle breeze. Birds singing. The sun shining.

I don't know about you but every time I read these verses in Matthew about Jesus' baptism, that's the Jordan River I want to envision. Jesus wading in as John greets him. Beautiful and refreshing, clear and nourishing.

Well, I hate to break it to you, but the Jordan River isn't very pretty. The first time I visited the Jordan my ideas were crushed. It was packed with tourists, clothed in white robes, holding onto metal rails as they walked down concrete ramps into the murky water. There was a gift shop full of various tchotchkes, an ice cream stand, and a locker room to dry off after your baptism.

Is that the Jordan River you imagine?

Another time, I was in a bus. Our group didn't have time to stop at the river so as we crossed this little rickety bridge our tour guide pointed out in a lackluster voice that we were crossing the Jordan River. I looked out the window only to see a slow trickle of muddy water coming out of a drainage pipe.

Is that the Jordan River you imagine?

On another occasion, I visited the source of the Jordan River. It was like a wild gush of cold mountain water pushing through the rocks and landing with a loud drone into a pool at the base of the hills. The water rushed with so much force that you could feel a slight breeze brush your face as the water's mist dampened your clothes.

Each of those locations along the river's path held nothing familiar to me. And yet, they were all part of the same river. Stale and overcrowded, muddy and unassuming, wild and unruly. All of them holy.

Here's what interesting to me...I like the vision of the clean water, the beautiful water from every piece of art that I have ever seen of Jesus' baptism. The water that isn't too cold or too muddy. The water that is just right, the idealic water that I could float in and feel close to God with the Holy Spirit surrounding me with love and warmth. Baptismal perfection!

But in reality, isn't the messiness of the Jordan more appealing? Isn't it more appealing that it doesn't take beauty or perfection to be loved by God? That the water in all of its forms is just as special to God.

There is something profoundly moving to me when I think of all the faces of the Jordan River. That no matter how it might look it is still holy and good. And in whatever form it takes, God is doing something with it just as it is. And right there, in the midst of the murky waters, Jesus meets us.

Commentator Dan Clendenin describes the text from Matthew as “Jesus' baptismal solidarity with broken people.” Solidarity with broken people. Meeting us in our messiness. Why is that important?

Growing up, I always thought about baptism as the commitment to Christ that I made for my individual salvation. It was a transactional contract of sorts that solidified my future in heaven. That's certainly one theological approach to baptism. But, isn't there more to the power of this water than just self-focused salvation? I think there is.

New Testament professor Diane Chen suggests that a more holistic way to think about Jesus' baptism (and ours) is not simply a singular event that has eternity in mind, at least not in its totality. Instead, she suggests that the water of baptism speaks to something profoundly transformative in the present. Something that is happening right here, right now, between us and God.

Historically, when people were coming to John to be baptized, confession of one's faults wasn't a celebratory process. It was seen as shameful in Jesus' time to admit one's short-comings. A public confession of sin created deep vulnerability and so walking into those waters was an extremely counter-cultural thing to do. A person was ultimately risking public shaming for the promise of God's forgiveness and salvation.

Maybe you can relate to that kind of risk. How many of us are comfortable admitting the things we have done wrong? Either privately or publicly, it isn't something we tend to relish. Saying we were wrong, that we made a bad decision, that we had been dishonest or hurtful.

Jesus alludes to this dilemma when he says in verse 15 that “it is proper for us in this way (the way of baptism) to fulfill all righteousness.” What does he mean?

Jesus is equating the act of baptism to the quality of righteousness. And to be righteous in biblical terms meant not just fulfilling a moral imperative, not just choosing right over wrong. It was a sign that you were a person of faith, that you trusted in God. Righteousness is a commitment to being in relationship with God in all that we are. It's placing our trust in God and it's our willingness to say...God I am coming just as I am and I'm going to trust that you are going to love me and mold me into a new creation.

By being baptized, Jesus is taking that step with us...not for his own sins (because we believe that Jesus was without sin) but in solidarity with us for our sins. To remind us that he is walking

with us as we lay down our fear and our apprehension, our need for public approval, our desire to always look like we have it all together.

Jesus got into that water to identify with our faults and failures, our pains and problems. And as people came to the Jordan that day, together they stepped in along with Jesus seeking solidarity. Seeking understanding. Seeking peace and forgiveness, and wholeness. And we are all called to do the same.

This morning, as you come up for communion, I have placed the baptismal fount up front. If you would like, dip your fingers in the water. Touch the water to your forehead. Remember your own baptism. Remember that Jesus is walking with you...in solidarity to love and support you in all that you are and all that you have been and all that you will be.

Thanks be to God. Amen.