Wondrous Water

Sunday, January 12, 2025
Luke 3:15-17, 21-22 & Isaiah 43:1-7
Baptism of the Lord Sunday
Woodlawn Chapel Presbyterian Church
Rev. Dr. Chris Keating

Once more, John's booming voice calls us to the wilderness. We were here just a few weeks ago. John's voice was the messenger that invited us into Advent, calling us to take stock of our lives by looking for God's coming to us. He guided us along our Advent expectations – into a season of waiting and wondering.

Our season of waiting has changed into a time of revelation, of discovery. Epiphany is more than the wise men showing up at Joseph and Mary's doorstep. It is a season of discovering Jesus' manifestation as God's Son. It is a time when the sensory dimensions of faith explode: the rich fragrance of the magi's gifts, the sounds of John preaching, the feeling of water splashing on the crowds, the visions of heaven erupting.

Once more, we are immersed in feelings of anticipation and expectation. No wonder Luke tells us people drawn to John were filled with expectations, questioning whether John might be the Messiah. Like those whom Isaiah addressed, their lives are burdened by painful oppression. They have been threatened by both the floods and fire of terror. Paradoxically, they are both overwhelmed by water and parched by thirst. Hearing John's thundering sermon, their hearts are stirred. Standing in those wondrous waters of redemption, their feel the current of baptism run through their toes and even into their lives.

Could this be the one who will say to us, "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine?"

Expectations are tricky. We are barely out the door of a restaurant when our phone buzzes with a text message: "How was your service tonight? Did we exceed your expectations?" A store clerk hands us a receipt, and circles the bottom. "Look how much you saved today by spending hundreds of dollars in our store! And while you're at it, could you go online and tell us how we met your expectations." Today when you pick up your donut after church, tell us if we exceeded your expectations.

We all have expectations that the world is going to work in certain ways, and when it doesn't, we may feel confused or angry. I can only imagine how defeating and

terrifying it felt to those firefighters in Los Angeles as they have battled those monstrous fires. And then imagine how it would feel to hook up their hoses to hydrants which were depleted.

We all have expectations. We have expectations for a new year, a new administration in Washington, a new Congress. And when those expectations are unmet, it can feel as though our lives have been drained and depleted. Researchers tell us that our expectations about New Year's resolutions and changes can be so overwhelming that most people give up by the second week in January. In fact, you might have heard that last Friday was designated as National Quitters Day—a day when all those unrealistic, highly ambitious goals are jettisoned in favor of getting on with our lives.

But Jesus' baptism is not about quitting. It's about wondrous, amazing, astonishing water.

We imagine John's eyes widening at the sight of his cousin standing in the long and growing line. The line snakes up and around the banks of the Jordan, moving steadily toward the river. Compelled by the urgency of his message of repentance, throngs made their way to be baptized. They've come seeking a star, searching for a celebrity, perhaps intrigued by what seems to them to be the latest spiritual fad. But he warns them that the life God gives, the redemption God promises goes beyond anything they could anticipate or expect. He warns them that the one who is coming will bring a baptism of fire and the Spirit—and now he's arrived.

What happens next depends on which Gospel you read. In Matthew, Jesus and John have engage in a bit of dialogue as John wrestles with the idea of what it means to baptize a Messiah. In Mark, Jesus presents himself to John and is baptized. But Luke lets the expectations and questions linger in the air a bit longer.

For some reason, Luke interrupts the story by inserting details about John the Baptist's imprisonment. It comes out of sequence, and seems a bit distracting. Perhaps Luke is foreshadowing a bit, or perhaps he reminds the audience of the price John pays for his testimony—which is the same price Jesus was pay, too. Perhaps he is just reminding us of how God challenges our expectations—for here, indeed, is one who is greater than John, one whose sandals John is not even worthy to untie.

Luke reminds us that God's arrival in our world defies any of our expectations. God comes in the unexpected moments and places, arriving not with splashes of power or majesty, but in dusty sandals, waiting in a long line of people whose hearts are burdened by spiritual yearnings and questions.

Questions like, “Am I enough? Do I please God? Does my life have any meaning or value?”

One day, I was called to a scene of an unexpected death in our area. A woman, burdened by multiple addictions and psychological difficulties, had taken her life. Her boyfriend was downstairs in their apartment at the time. He was, as you can imagine, inconsolable. Scared, grieving, angry. He had all sorts of questions, including such basic things like, “How do I clean up the mess?

It was as raw a question as I have ever heard, and likely more revealing than he understood. It is, in fact, the question that propels the crowds to be baptized. Hearing John’s sermon, the crowd has asked, “What shall we do?” And he tells them to share their clothes with those who have none. The tax collectors who were there, even they asked, “What should we do?” And he told them, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” And then soldiers – presumably Gentile soldiers – even they asked, “And we, what should we do?” And he said: do not extort money by threats or lies, and be satisfied with how you are paid.

All of this raises their expectations even higher, prompting John to exhort them with proclamations of good news while pointing them toward the water beneath their feet. Remember the one who walks with you, he tells them.

And then Jesus arrives. The story of Jesus’ baptism quickly became an embarrassment for the church. If Jesus, as was assumed, lived a sinless life, then why is he there, standing among liars, cheaters, and thieves? If Jesus comes to fulfill all righteousness, the redemption of all creation, then why is he baptized?

Luke says to keep following the story. Keep listening for the voice of God that will soon break across the canyons. “You are my Son,” says God, “with you I am well pleased.”

It’s remarkable: long before Jesus has spoken a word, or healed a single person, long before he has done anything, God calls him beloved. Still wet with that wondrous water, Jesus is called beloved. And he has not done anything.

Here is the one who stands with us. Nadia Bolz Weber says that what she loves about this story is that “God did not say God did not say “this is my son in whom I am well pleased because he has proved to me that he deserves it, he has quiet time with me each morning and always reads his Torah and because boy can he heal a

leper." Nope. As far as we know Jesus hadn't even done anything yet and he was called beloved. The one in whom the Father was well pleased."

This is the God who baptizes us, who blesses us. This is why we say, "remember your baptism, and be glad." Even those who have not been baptized are called to remember the way God has blessed them. Each week we pour water into this font to remember that God rehydrates the parched places of our soul. That we are called beloved—even before we have done or said a thing. "Beloved," says Bolz Weber, "be loved. Just sit and be loved."

God is standing with us, immersed in our lives. This is the truth which reveals the hope of the Gospel to us, and allows us to discover the love God intends for us. Truly, it is proper for Jesus to be baptized in this way to fulfill all righteousness. Amen.