

“Through the Waters”  
Isaiah 43:1-7; Romans 6:1-4;  
Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

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Well, it's a new year. Do you have your resolutions made? How are you looking into this new year? Ready with resolutions? Full of expectations? Hopes? Perhaps coming with a few fears from all that went on last year? What will carry us through this coming year? In some ways, it is a bit arbitrary. The calendar changes and so we decide it's a new year. Yet, it is a time when it starts to get lighter and it's a great time to think about newness.

I was thinking about another fellow who did something new. He had grown up in a small village and had learned how to build with stone to make walls that would last and with wood to make the doorframes just right. He'd lost his father somewhere along the way and perhaps, since he was the oldest son, he kept the family going and stayed with the trade until some of the younger brothers had grown old enough to support the family. But then, around age 30 (I still think of that as young) he felt the need to change his life. We might think he felt called, called by God. So he went to the river to get baptized.

Really, we know very little about Jesus' life from the time he was born except for that one incident in the temple when he was twelve years old where he seemed to overstay his time. We know very little until it says he was about thirty and he went to be baptized. We know he hadn't been teaching and preaching. He really hadn't done that yet. He just came to John to be baptized. In Luke, the account of this is very short. Those few lines are all there are about Jesus' baptism. But it says that the Holy Spirit came down and God announced that Jesus was his beloved son, with whom he was well pleased.

What do we do with this baptism as a beginning? I'd like to think about what it is for Jesus as he makes this change. Now, it's a little hard for me to think about this in terms of Jesus as the Son of God because it feels like the story is talking about Jesus, the human being, the one who has to make decisions and figure out what he is going to do. He comes to the waters. What does it mean to come to the waters? To be willing to walk in and be baptized?

He came to the Jordan, which is a river that is flowing, and sometimes flowing water in scripture is called living water. So it is interesting to think about some of that symbolism that he is walking into what's living and then he is going to put himself in the hands of another. Thinking about the water's flowing, I'm reminded of Heraclitus who is an ancient philosopher who said, “You can never put your foot in the same river twice.” Going into a river is going into something that is changing.

The other way that water is sometimes talked about in scripture is to identify water with chaos. And sometimes, I identify chaos with life. I'm not sure if scripture actually does, but I do. There is this idea that Jesus is going in—perhaps there is something symbolic about that. He walks into the water. Maybe John takes some water and sprinkles it over his head. Or, perhaps, John lays him back in the water, submerges him

and pulls him up. That vulnerability of allowing someone else to put you in the water feels a little like what happens with us when we allow God to put us into life, particularly as we go into a new year.

Jesus is going into a new life. He is making a change. I don't think it was that easy a thing to do. Now, he no longer was going to continue in his career. And, that's just something that really wasn't done in that time. You grew up in a family, you did the family business. You didn't just go off and become a teacher. There was a route for that. You didn't just make a decision to leave your family and go wander and start teaching. In fact when he comes back to Nazareth a little later, we kind of get the impression that it wasn't something they were too excited about him having done. He does something that is difficult because there is a call of God on his life. He makes a change. He goes into the water. And I don't imagine that Jesus was there just testing the waters. He walked in. I think it was because he trusted God to lead. He was willing to give himself to God to do with him as God would. He was ready to follow God's will.

You know, all these are themes for us as well, an invitation for us. In some ways we can look at the new year as going again into the waters. It seems like a reaffirmation of our own baptism as we think about going into the waters of a new year—the chaos, the life—and who do we trust? Can we allow ourselves to be vulnerable to God?

Jesus, I believe, trusted God. That always seems key to me. He trusted God. I'm going to get back to that. Because, as we follow what Jesus did, we then find out that our baptism, in some ways, is even more like Jesus' than we might expect. The dove came down, the Spirit came down on Jesus—the idea that the Holy Spirit was then with Jesus. Paul says in our baptism we, as well, are baptized with the spirit and with fire. Fire and water. Two different metaphors perhaps. And yet, there is this sense that the Spirit comes down and God is with us.

So then, baptism is about turning to God. Jesus makes that turn. John is inviting people to make that turn. We return to God as we think about our own baptism, as we go into the new year thinking about God before us. So, there's the Holy Spirit—an expectation of God's presence with us, moving us, challenging us, comforting us.

But what about that fire? Well, it says he is gathering the chaff to burn so that the grain can be used. I hate to admit it, but I think I have all too much chaff in my life and that there is that which needs to be gathered and burned away. I think about the gathering of grain as the gifts that I have that I might bring, that God might use to enable me to care for others, to encourage one another, to build each other up.

There is something about going into the waters that might change us. Being baptized or reaffirming our baptism is to open up to God, to be vulnerable to God and to recognize that it might not mean that I get to do the same things I did before. You see, when Jesus begins to do his ministry, it's not to make himself safe but to do the right thing. It's to do what God calls him to do, and then to do what is right. We think about God as protecting us but I think what God protects us from is evil, doing evil and leading us to do what is right. And doing what is right is sometimes hard.

So walking into the waters, going into a new year, there can be a little trepidation which always bring me back again to the first question for me: do I believe in God? Do I really believe God is there? That God is present? That God is real? That God can move among us? That God really can, will, and does change us? That God leads us?

It feels to me that as I go into a new year I always have to re-learn, to look again at what I'm holding onto that keeps me from going into the waters. What am I paying attention to rather than paying attention to God? I have to notice again the chaff in my life and allow God to gather it up and burn it away because I seem to collect it so easily. My hope is that each year I won't have to learn it all over again, but that slowly God is moving me, moving us to be more like Christ.

Now the wonderful thing about this idea of baptism is that it is both a claiming of a promise and a making a promise—claiming the promise of God to be our God and to make us his children. And it's making our promise to him that we want to be God's children. And so, when we walk into the water or live into life, the idea is not to do it alone but to be together as God's children, gathered around a table, encouraged together, to use that grain for one another.

Yet, it's a challenge to turn again to God and be open to God, to be willing to come to the table to be God's family, God's children, and let God change us. Sometimes change seems like such a hard thing to do. Yet, when I think it might make me more Christ-like, there is that promise and hope in it. I do believe that there is a wonder in it as well, a gift and a grace. He invites us to trust him and walk through the waters and into the newness of life, a new moment, a new day, a new year as children of God through power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.