

Wet-N-Claimed

(as in Wet-N-Wild)

Back when we were planning the worship for the new liturgical year, today, the baptism of Jesus Sunday, was talked about. And I immediately was excited saying this was my favorite day of the whole year. I should have realized that showing that much excitement about a bible passage would receive feedback. I was asked why it was my favorite day, and asked to preach. Keenan challenged me to preach about *why* this day in particular was so important to me. And I can honestly say that at the time she asked, I didn't know why this day holds such importance to me. I was just drawn to it. I couldn't put it into words.

So in reflecting on the text, I came to the conclusion that baptism, and Jesus's baptism in particular, involves a process of moving water - water running down, water being splashed, water washing ... And again, why would water engender such emotion about a certain day of the year? Well, when I look back on my life, many of my formative experiences took place around water. I grew up next to a pond where I would chase the ducks around the water trying to catch them until they went to the safety of the water. When the ducks wore me out, I would spend endless days making mudpies and not understanding why my mother didn't serve them for dinner. Then we moved when I was a preteen and we were by a creek where I would spend hours lying on my back watching the clouds and listening to the water – mostly just getting out of the house. In middle school and high school, much of my summers were spent at camp where ten day canoe adventures were the norm – where everything I and my partner needed for two weeks fit into our canoe. I studied abroad in Europe where I swam in the Mediterranean Sea - and came to the realization that life is SO much bigger than the picture I learned in the South growing up. Then I spent time in the Philippines, where most of you have heard about my life changing

experiences - Obviously, being islands, water is ever-present. The ocean became a type of healing place where I could retreat in order to deal with my life-changing experiences.

I see water as an element that is malleable, running through my life in a common thread. In my experience, water has been playful, insightful, leading, and cleansing – which are all adjectives that describe the Spirit of God. Water is a conduit of the Spirit. And it is intriguing that 60 percent of our bodies ARE water.

Mark

So obviously, with my love of and interest in water and the spirit, the text that Bill just read from Mark excites me. The image of Jesus and John immersed in water and the skies opening up is such a great image - it is visual poetry. Yet the gospel writer of Mark doesn't seem to paint it all that poetic as his counterparts of Matthew and Luke do - they tend to use fancier language than Mark. But for some reason, the simplicity and lack of details in Mark's account of Jesus Baptism speaks to me. It is simple – This man named John was baptizing people for the forgiveness of sins and Jesus comes out from the crowd to be baptized. And a voice tells Jesus that he is beloved and God is well pleased with him. Nothing too fancy there. But scholars have argued over this point in Jesus's life since its inception. The numerous books I sought out to help me with this sermon were filled with tangled questions about Christology, the trinity, and the sacrament of baptism. But, for the case of time, I will focus on the 2 most intriguing questions: ***Does anyone around Jesus hear the voice or see the heavens open up?*** and ***What new self awareness does this event give to Jesus?*** In the Greek text, Mark's gospel very clearly states that only Jesus heard this voice. Jesus saw the heavens open and heard the voice of the spirit. So was this just for him? Was this coming of God just to show Jesus his purpose in life? And if so, can we experience moments like this in our lives? It's interesting to think of our own self awareness

when we finally knew what we were going to do when we grew up (or maybe that hasn't happened and the self awareness is still coming) But for Jesus, was the baptism a new step for him?

Us

When I try to interpret this text from our location as 21st century people living in the Bay area, celebrating the baptism of Jesus right after Christmas in busy times of going back to school or work, trying to start off the new year right with new habits and routines - it's exhausting thinking of everything we are doing now in this moment. But then I realize that we are always busy with something, if it isn't preparing for the holiday, we are rejuvenating from it. Something always occupies our time. As a church worker and a student I always struggle with finding times to just "be". It is easier to call myself a Human Doer rather than a Human Being.

It is rare for me to find times to look up at the sky to see the spirit, or to take time to be relaxed to hear God tell me that I'm an adopted child. I rarely take time out to play in water, as I did as a child, wondering over the new substance that is created when mixing water with dirt. And I can't remember the last time I was saturated with water riding a slip-N-slide or the wet-n-wild, which is where I got the title. Yet, I do have moments where I experience of self awareness, a deepening knowledge of who I am, moments calling me to my next step. And I do attribute these to God. Yet I never concentrate in that moment. I never just sit and meditate in the newness of the knowledge shown to me. I can't live in that new knowledge of self-awareness.

Which brings me back to the text. The book of Mark is unique not only in it's simplicity and lack of adjectival word painting. It is also unique because every verb is in the present tense, inciting a hurried atmosphere, reminding us of the passion and necessity that the writer felt when composing. Also unique is that it starts with the baptism of Jesus. We don't get a nice story of a

child being born into a stable with a single mother who gets pregnant and has to travel to on the back of a donkey in her ninth month - a story that is easily acted out year after year. What we get is an abrupt start, an adult Jesus who has been called to get baptized by John, a man who wears camel hair and eats bugs. Then after the baptism, the spirit FORCES Jesus out into the wilderness, testing him. How similar is that to our experience right after Christmas? After the loving and giving nature of the holiday season spent with friends and family who love us dearly, we are forced to go back to everyday life -- to school or work, back to the reality that life is hard. Mark's gospel story is fast paced and fits our hurried world. But in a strange way, the story of Jesus's baptism is a pause before the writer goes on. The writer pauses to tell us that Jesus saw the heavens open up and heard a voice. Jesus paused to look and listen. It doesn't seem to matter to Jesus or the author if anyone else heard or saw this. What is important, is that Jesus saw and understood. Jesus got up from the water with new knowledge of himself, with energy to go forward where the Spirit pushes him to go.

It seems like the people who come up with the liturgical calendar know the ebbs and flows of life. They know how hard to be pushed back to the grind. It is hard to find affirmation in the things we do or the people we are. We don't have birds flying out of an open part in the sky, bringing words of how much God loves us. Yet, if we look close enough, we might find affirmations from unlikely sources. This Thanksgiving, I was depressed over certain events that took place. But I had no time to be depressed because I was in a house filled with people who were truly filled with thanks. One night I retreated outside to just sit, listen to the night, and look at the stars. As I sat, I laid back and looked at the clouds being illuminated by the moon – just as I did as an adolescent at the creek. I started seeing images in the clouds, like children do, seeing a huge thunderhead morph from animal to animal. One cloud in particular fascinated me. It looked

like a face, but I had to fill in the detail. When looking at this cloud, I had a spiritual moment – which I don't have often. But I felt a sense of peace about my life. For the first time since the beginning of fall semester, I felt myself breathing in the new life offered by the spirit and breathing out the stress of papers and grades and family.

I am not saying I heard bells and whistles, birds and voices, as I'm sure the gospel writers want us to envision when Jesus was baptized. But the peace I felt lying on my back and making portraits out of clouds, is analogous to what I predict Jesus felt. From this moment, however brief, Jesus knew who he was and whose he was. In my moment on the grass, acting like a child, I felt this, however fleeting it was. The difference is that Jesus had the memory and the power to actualize the Realm of God within himself and within others.

This day and this story offers us time to look above us, look for the revelation from God telling us that we are children of a greater being and that this being cares about us and loves us and is excited about us! It invites us to look for the moments where God is like our parent, putting the A report card on the refrigerator for all to see and/or taking our art projects to display at work. For me, this day is about pausing and truly being present to the Spirit that is in our life – the spirit that claimed us from the very beginning stating that she was well pleased with us. This is the same Spirit who looks for opportunities to call out to us words of encouragement, if we only open our ears. We need to open our eyes to view the Spirit in whatever form he takes. And to open our ears and eyes, we must remember to be childlike – to be open, accepting our own limitations.

This is why water is so important to me. It represents a time when I was a child exploring and wondering, open to every movement of the spirit, but also a time when I had the maturity to decipher what the movement of the spirit meant. It represents the time in our lives when we slow

down so God can tell us how pleasing we are to her. And this day also reminds me why the church performs baptisms – not to save someone, or help them get into heaven eventually, but to welcome people into a community that will be a family – to guide, encourage, and to love.