

## JUMPING INTO SPIRITUAL DEPTHS

Isaiah 43:1-7; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

I wonder if any of you have ever been at a pool at a time when there are children swimming? And I don't mean just 3 or 4 children, but tons of children. Small children with floatation devices splashing around in the shallow end, bigger children chasing each other with games of tag, children in and out of the pool constantly, setting up to jump or dive in over and over again. Some practice their underwater handstands. Some toss toys back and forth. Some take those pool noodles with a hollow core, fill them with water and then press their mouths to one end and blow the contained water out the other at some unsuspecting friend (this is pre-Covid, of course). Some try to see how long they can manage to stand on top of a partially submerged flutter board. And it's *loud. Very loud.* But loud with the sounds of both chaos and pure joy.

A friend of mine was at the pool with her 3 children on just such a day as this. Children splashing and jumping everywhere as parents and caregivers either played alongside or kept watch from an area where the splashing was less intense. As my friend sat on the edge of the pool deck with her legs in the water, watching her own kids climb out of the pool to jump back in again, a child of 5 or 6 years came and stood next to her. The child looked like she was readying herself to jump in. Worried that this child, who wasn't wearing any kind of lifejacket or other floatation device, might be out of her element jumping into this deeper part of the pool, my friend began scanning the pool and deck for an adult who might look like they were caring for this child; she wanted some reassurance that this kid would be okay if she jumped in. No one stood out to her though, and so she said to the child, "maybe you should wait a minute until someone is here to help you or catch you in the water." Without pausing this kid turned to her with a big smile and said with complete confidence, "it's okay, I'm baptized!" and jumped right into the pool without another moment's hesitation. Thankfully, the child could swim and made her way to another area without a problem. But wow, can you imagine having that much confidence in your baptism? A kind of confidence that makes you certain of God's love and care even as you enter the deep? Even when there is chaos all around you? *That* is spiritual stamina for you.

We enter into what I imagine could be a similar situation with John the Baptist in our scripture today. John is in the Jordan River baptizing all kinds of people. You see, John has been preaching about preparing the way for the Lord and calling for everyone to repent. While it could be easy to think of people standing patiently in line, waiting their

turn for baptism with John, I imagine they were really all crowding around, wanting to be close enough to ensure they weren't missed or forgotten, wanting to see every detail of what was happening. There were probably children playing tag and splashing, too. Perhaps people splashing some cool water on themselves as the sun beat down. And just as we often enter a new year with fresh hope and some sense of a fresh start, so too were these people coming out in droves to be baptized and get that fresh start. They came with all the weight of what they had and had not done; with all their sins and disloyalties and wrongdoings. And they came to be baptized within this community of others who stood for a new social world where grace and love, compassion and justice, repentance and forgiveness made up its core—not social standing or wealth or ability or power.

In fact, things with John were going so well that the people questioned whether he was in fact the Messiah, come to save them. But John makes it clear that he is there to prepare: prepare each and every one of them for the coming of the Lord; one who will baptize not just with water on the outside, but with Spirit from the inside, igniting a holy fire within: a spiritual wind and fire that has the power to blow away and burn that which is like chaff—the useless, frivolous, superfluous material left over after the wheat is harvested; the part of the wheat that cannot be consumed and, therefore, cannot not sustain life. But, like the wheat kernel, that spiritual fire also has the power to sustain and preserve that which is life-giving. John paints a picture of this powerful, flowing, glowing Spirit and, by extension, the Messiah who will bring it.

And then, after everyone has been baptized, there is Jesus himself. The one who they have been preparing for. The one who would baptize with fire and Spirit. You might expect a big show or fanfare of some kind, but that's just not Jesus' way. He didn't make a big deal of being the Son of God and insist on going first. There was no big celebration just for Jesus. No, Jesus stood among them all, one with these people who had been broken by the everyday struggles within this selfish and often cruel world. Jesus stood with these people who had perhaps given up on themselves, but not on God. Jesus stood with these downtrodden people formed in the hope of new beginnings through a return to God, identifying with these broken and damaged children of God. One of them. Not above them.

And then, once John has baptized Jesus, Jesus begins to pray and the heavens open and a dove, the Spirit, descends upon him. And a voice from heaven says, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." That's right, God is well-pleased right from that moment. Jesus hadn't done anything particularly amazing yet—he hadn't

healed some lepers or preached an amazing sermon or done anything that might prove he is deserving of God's love, and yet he is called beloved. And this is important for those gathered around that day to witness: God's love for God's children before they even do anything particularly special or different, before they might going about trying to improve or change, is pure and full of grace. It was a day to remember, for sure.

A phrase we often use at the time of baptism is "remember your baptism." I was three months old at my baptism, so I can recall none of it except the images I have in my head from photos of the day that are in an album at my parents' house. So, what then, does it really mean to remember your baptism, especially if you were too young to do so? If you had been there on that day in the Jordan River with John and Jesus and witnessed those clouds parting and a dove descending and were already filled with a lot of emotion over the decision to repent and be baptized... you'd likely remember and tell the story of that day often. But rarely do we hear the stories of baptism from one another today.

Remembering your baptism isn't about casting the details of your, or anyone else's, baptism day into perfect memory. Rather, it's about constant recommitment to the promises made on that day. In our tradition, when someone is baptized—whether an adult or youth who are able to speak for themselves, or an adult speaking on behalf of a young child—they make promises that relate to turning toward God and God's goodness: committing to a journey of growth in faith and as a follower of Jesus; committing to the way of forgiveness and the desire to seek justice, healing, reconciliation; and committing to a life lived in community, of serving others.

When you remember your baptism you are remembering that God's love and grace is upon you; that each day we have the choice to renounce what is wrong or evil and embrace that which is right and good; that we have a community of the faithful to help us learn and grow and mature spiritually. And remembering all this helps us in our day to day living. How can we be like a child, ready to enter unknown depths with confidence? To shout out for all to hear, "I'm baptized!" and jump right into the deeps? To have that kind of spiritual stamina?

There is a legend that speaks to this connected to the Protestant Reformer, Martin Luther, who is best known for nailing 95 theses to the church door in protest of a number of problems he saw within the church in the early 1500s. When reading the writings of Luther, it is clear that this theologian was often engaged in a mental battle with what he labelled as the devil. The evil he battled wasn't about being tempted to do bad things. Rather, late at night, it seems that this form of evil buzzed around his head

like an annoying mosquito and caused him to doubt God's goodness and grace; caused him to wonder if perhaps God was an angry and vengeful God. But as the legend goes, on one particular night as he battled this despondency and anguish, Luther threw an ink pot at the devil and yelled out "I am baptized!"

While our Presbyterian tradition doesn't involve throwing ink pots or the belief in an evil spiritual being that forces us to do bad things, there is a recognition that evil exists in this world and that this darkness can make its way into our heads and hearts in a variety of ways: through depression, addiction, greed, apathy, self-involvement. And in overt ways within our world, as well: through wars, mass shootings, genocide. But there is also the love of God whose love is so deep and sincere and unending—God who is just crazy for each one of us. God who came to this earth in human form to stand with us in all our brokenness. God who, though Christ, baptizes us with the Spirit, with a fire that burns in us and brightens our way when darkness creeps in. God who, as described in Isaiah, has called us by name and claimed us and will be with us so that we might pass through deep waters and scorching fires without being overwhelmed, without being consumed. And, as when Jesus was baptized, we didn't have to do anything first in order to receive this amazing grace in return: God has just unconditionally loved us all right from the start.

To say out loud, "I'm baptized!" is to remember that God has claimed each one of us and loves us infinitely. To shout out "I'm baptized!" is to embrace the knowledge that even in the face of overwhelming depths we are never alone, but filled with a cleansing spiritual power and energy that is stronger than the power of fear and self-loathing and hatred. To proclaim "I'm baptized!" is to turn *to* God and turn *away* from dressed up empty promises. To declare "I'm baptized!" is to accept that there is a wonderful community of siblings around you, who love you and are ready to support you and explore faith with you, and help open your eyes to God's loving actions in ever-new ways. To yell out "I'm baptized!" is to remember the promises made to God and that God makes to us and recommit to those promises, opening our hearts in love to God's amazing grace, and continually being transformed through the fire, wind and power of the Holy Spirit. To bravely jump into new spiritual depths.

On this day when we remember Jesus's baptism, I hope that you will also remember yours or one that you have been witness to; I hope that each time you encounter water today and every day, whether that happens while drinking it, washing your hands or the dishes in it, swimming in it or skating on it, that you also remember God's promises,

particularly that of life eternal—of being raised again and again to new life and new hope. You are marked with the cross of Christ, sealed by the Spirit, and belong to God. Amen.