

Isaiah 42:1-9, Psalm 29, Acts 10:34-43, Matthew 3:13-17

Baptism of Our Lord

“Polar Plunge For As Jesus”

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, for you are our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

I can guess what everyone is thinking right now; all four lectionary readings, from 2 different translations, on your third sermon? Getting a little big for your britches there, Christina... This is the Sunday of the Baptism of Our Lord. This is a big deal! Depending on what sect of Christianity you follow, you might have been **required** to attend church today in times of old. That’s right. Mandatory attendance, folks. This is the afterlife we are talking about, and again, baptism is a big deal! The verses from Acts and Matthew are clear cut; we see reference to or explicit description of Jesus’ baptism as told from the perspective of others. But the readings from Acts and Isaiah? These cannot all possibly relate to today’s message! You be the judge about whether I need to go shopping for new pants after this one.

Baptism or ritualistic cleansing, in some form or fashion, is practiced by many faiths around the world. We likely baptize because of a Jewish tradition called mikvah. Mikvah, like potentially our own baptisms as Christians, happens more than once. A Jew would be cleansed through mikvah before being married, a significant birthday, after a year of bereavement, cessation of menstruation, converting to Judaism; the list goes on depending on your gender. An important aspect of mikvah is the water used for these baths must be flowing or moving and cannot be ‘manmade’ therefore water from the tap is prohibited. Instead, they

will gather from natural bodies of water; or in the cities, collect rainwater on rooftops to be used in the basin.

A good Muslim will pray five times a day; the best Muslim prays five times a day AND every single time before this person goes to pray, that person will wash (not necessarily in this order) their feet up to at least their ankles, their hands up to their elbows, their head, their ears, and their faces, being sure to rinse and spit water from inside the mouth and rinsing the insides of their nasal chambers by forcing water into and back out through the nostrils. These ablutions, prayer preparations, are so important the prophet Mohammed made exceptions allowing people to use sand in lieu of water to ready their bodies, minus the head and face, for prayer.

Of course, the natural association with a Christian baptism is certainly not sand, and again, the act of ritualistic bathing is not uniquely Christian; but how we baptize and what that baptism means is what makes us different. Before we get into the specifics of Christian baptism, let's talk about the natural element that makes baptism possible. Water. If we take all of today's texts into consideration, even without support pulled from any other passages, we can see there is a **very** close relationship between God and water.

Enter Psalm 29 for boatloads of overwhelming water imagery: God depicted as a thunderous, powerful storm over the water that falls landside and lays waste to oaks and cedars: two species of trees known for being strong, excellent for carpentry, beautiful, and highly valued. As an arborist, this sounds like job security; as a Christian and human being, this sounds frightening. By some translations, God the Rainstorm induces labor of the deer and other ruminant

animals! Water is powerful; a force capable of extinguishing fire, carving rock, washing away earth, creating natural disasters of terrifying size. God in water is not playing around, people!

It is the single most significant chemical compound to life as we know it. The average human adult in Nacogdoches is 60% water, slightly more than that if either of the Clines are their doctors. Internally, water helps us regulate our body temperature, cushions and lubricates joints, supports and lubricates the nervous system, helps with waste elimination in the various workings of our digestive and urinary systems, forms saliva to aide digestion, delivers oxygen throughout the entire body, makes water soluble minerals and nutrients accessible to our bodies; that's not even everything. We need not delve into the functions of water in the environment; that's a whole other sermon in and of itself. In the Bible, especially in the setting of a hot, arid, sandy desert, God and water are walking a **very fine** line theologically speaking. Water is a basic need ergo God is a basic need. Without water we perish quickly; without God, we cannot survive. God in water is not playing around, people!

Okay, that's enough with the science lesson and the storm anxiety, Christina! We get it. God uses water to do things. Old news! What about Jesus and the water?

Enter Isaiah 42: 3, the servant of the Lord i.e. Jesus, so tender and gentle that "a bruised reed he will not break". Reeds are large grasses that grow in shallow watery areas such as the edges of lakes, bogs, marshes, and streams. Their biological range extends from the Arctic to the tropics, practically the same as humans. We are those bruised reeds, bent over from the wind and the

relentless day to day grind; growing in shallow water, being sustained even in the smallest puddles of faith. The servant of the Lord does not pull up an already injured plant to make way for a stronger one; he lovingly grows and tends to the damaged grasses.

Enter Isaiah 42: 4 “in his law the islands will put their hope”. We are those isolated ones, feeling like we are all on our own out here; yet we are still surrounded by the water. In typical Jesus fashion, there he is right there, waiting on the edge of the shore, not as far away as we might think, a beacon of hope. We see this type of behavior all the time with Jesus, going out of his way to care for the one who is lost or hurt or alone. Water is powerful in other ways: fun, gentle, able to be floated on, hydrating, healing, relaxing, soothing. Knowing the power of the Son’s love, it makes perfect sense that we see this gentler aquatic imagery associated with Jesus. God in water is not playing around, people.

Since 2001, an organization comprised of law enforcement officers wanted to raise funds for the Special Olympics. Someone came up with an idea called the ‘polar plunge’. The term ‘polar plunge’ is pretty self-explanatory but for the benefit of all involves immersing oneself in ice cold water for a brief period of time (usually two minutes or less). The first Rochester Polar Plunge event raised \$15,000 and had 75 participants; the event has grown to include 15 locations in just New York state and is practiced today internationally beyond the act of a well-meaning fundraiser. Just one week ago today, there were thousands, likely hundreds of thousands of people worldwide participating in a cold plunge on New Year’s Day. As with many trends, there are perceived benefits to plunging. This icy immersion triggers the ‘fight or flight’ response, increases our heart rate,

constricts the blood vessels, and creates a natural high by elevating levels of dopamine and norepinephrine in our brains. The science on this activity is still new but looks promising. According to an article published by Discover Magazine in December of 2022, a recent case study reported that “a woman who had suffered from severe depression for eight years was able to stop taking antidepressant medication after swimming in cold water once a week improved her mood and that even cold showers have been shown to have antidepressant effects”. There are people who practice cold plunging on a daily basis because of how they feel afterwards. Now, I am not saying everybody in the church needs to stop taking their prescription medications, head on over to Lake Nacogdoches after the service and jump on in, and please do not participate in any kind of cold water therapy without consulting your doctor first; but if immersing ourselves in ice cold water can make those kinds of dramatic, impactful changes in people’s lives, imagine what immersing ourselves in baptismal waters and embracing the true meaning of that immersion can do not only for ourselves but for the world? All this to say, we should not be surprised that God uses water as a sacrament because God in water is not playing around.

Enter Matthew 3: verse- take your pick- We do not have many details about Jesus’ baptism. No clues as to the time of year, practically no information about the process itself other than by a river, and not a whole lot of dialogue either other than a brief conversation between Jesus and his likely flabbergasted cousin, John, and God at the end giving the stamp of approval. The text serves as an example of how we do baptism and the significance of the act. The root for the word ‘baptism’ is thought to derive from the Greek word ‘baptizo’ and ‘baptisma’ which means “to bathe, wash, or immerse”. This etymology is why we often fully

immerse the one being baptized. Baptism represents life but also represents death. Kyle said the standard verbiage for performing a baptism consists of the following phrases:

Buried in Christ in baptism,
raised to walk in newness of life.

To be buried implies death has occurred; the plunge in is a symbolic funeral. Death of our old selves, our old ways. Fully immersed, when we rise out of the waters, we are different, changed, new. This concept culminates in Isaiah 42: 9 where God says, “See, the former things have taken place, and new things I declare”. God in water is calling us to change our ways and God means business.

Enter Acts 10: 37- When Jenny read from The Message translation earlier it said John preached about baptism as “a total life-change”. We know the act is symbolic, but we also know the power God can give to the water. There is a literal cleansing of the body; but there is another deeper cleansing of the spirit with a water that washes our hearts and calls us to greater responsibilities.

Jesus’ baptism foreshadows our own and reminds us to follow the path of the bath too. That is baptism is about being cleansed of our sin, but it is so much bigger than that and, arguably, what baptism calls us to do is one of the most serious aspects of being a Christian. Being baptized in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit means we cannot play favorites because neither does God (Acts 10:34). Being raised in newness of life through baptism means I need to be able to look you in the eye when I have wronged you, admit I wronged you, and ask you to forgive me. It means if I have done you wrong, not only do I need to listen to you, but I also humbly ask you to come to me and tell me about it so

we can figure it out together. This, and more, is what baptismal waters call us to do.

I recently checked the weather for Jericho, or Ariha to use its non-Anglicized name, the area close to where we are told Jesus was baptized and the high was 75 degrees Fahrenheit. Better outdoor baptismal weather over there right now than here in East Texas; however, the last thing most of us are thinking about in the middle of the winter is being baptized outside. I certainly cannot although that has more to do with a fear of alligators than being intimidated by the cold; however, all this talk of baptism has us reflect on how our plunge (as an infant, child, or adult) put on us certain standards for how to live our lives. We're not taking the 'polar plunge' of baptism *for Jesus* to raise money for a worthy cause or bring attention to ourselves in a public way; *we are called to baptism to be as Jesus*. We are called, through baptism, to be as the Servant of the Lord, to be the one who loves those broken reeds and hugs the shores of those lonely islands and does not play favorites so that when God looks down on you and me, he says "these are my Daughters and Sons, whom I love; with them I am well pleased." God in water is serious business. Ready to dive in?

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, One True God,
Mother of us all. Amen.