
Water is Life

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 18 February 2024

Genesis 9:8-17 • 1 Peter 3:18-22 • Mark 1:9-15



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

Today is the first Sunday in Lent. We are beginning the journey with Jesus to the cross. It is a journey of repentance, a journey of self-examination. It is a journey of growing and becoming, as we try to align our lives with God's will for us. And God's will for us is that we follow his Son, Jesus Christ. In that, we are like Jesus, for as Jesus says in John's Gospel, he follows his fathers' will in all things:

For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all those he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day. (John 6:38-40)

Jesus will lose none of us — we are with Jesus now and through eternity.

So as we make this journey, through Lent and through the readings we will hear each Sunday in this season, we are with Jesus.

Today's readings are all about water. In Genesis, God promises us that he will never again destroy all life on earth through flooding. The sign is the rainbow — isn't that beautiful? I think we are naturally drawn to the beauty of a rainbow. It always seems to me to be a special day when I see one, and maybe it's because of God's promise. The rainbow is the symbol of God's love, and it naturally feels good to be loved by God. Curious is the tradition which grew up that there is a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, for what the rainbow signifies is more precious than any gold.

Then Peter in our second reading talks about the flood, and links it to Jesus' baptism by John. He says that as God saved Noah and his family from dying in the flood through the ark, God also saves us through baptism by water. Water by itself has no power to save — it only cleans the body, it does not wash away sin. But the image has often been used. Remember from Psalm 51: "Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin." It is a plea to God for spiritual healing, but there is also a connection to the old Jewish law, which prescribed sacrifice and the avoidance of touching or doing certain things in order to remain ritually "clean." Only if you were considered clean by the temple authorities were you allowed to worship at the temple. Sin was contagion, cleanliness was righteousness — as they used to say, "Cleanliness is next to godliness." We still commonly make the connection in our minds between soil and sin: pornography is called "dirty", and when we come in contact with someone who has committed some horrible act, we claim to feel dirty or tainted.

I consider the washing in water to be the prime image for Lent. We, the baptised, were washed clean of our sins in the waters of baptism. But we have not stayed clean. We continue to commit sins — of commission (the things we do, but shouldn't) and of omission (the things we should have done, but didn't). We have not stayed true to our calling as God's children, as brothers and sisters of Christ. And so we ask God to once again wash us thoroughly, to remove the sin which we have gathered around us. We do not need another baptism with water — that is a symbol which is used only once — but we do need to be cleansed spiritually.

The power of water to cleanse us from our sin comes from the Holy Spirit. Jesus spoke more than once about water. When he met the woman at the well in the fourth chapter of John's Gospel, he told her about the living water which he could give to her:

Everyone who drinks this water [referring to the well] will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life. (John 4:13-14)

This living water is the Holy Spirit, which comes into a believer and changes him or her forever. The Spirit is life and a gift of God by his infinite grace. It gives us eternal life. Water is a good image for the Spirit within us, as our bodies are made up mostly of water — some 55-60%. It is in every part of us, and of course we cannot live without it. So, too, the Spirit inhabits every part of our body. It is God within us.

The baptism of Jesus was the beginning of his ministry on earth. Mark's Gospel has very little to say about the baptism, but we learn from Matthew's Gospel that John (known as John the Baptist or Baptiser) had been busy at the river Jordan, baptising those who became his disciples. They first confessed their sins, since John's was a baptism of repentance. It was an initiation ceremony for one joining John's group of disciples. John knew he was the forerunner of Jesus, the one preparing the way. He told the Pharisees that another baptiser was coming, one who would baptise with the Spirit. And so Jesus came to be baptised by John. And although John objected, thinking that he could not baptise one so much greater than he, Jesus insisted on it, so that he would have this in common with all his disciples to come. It was clearly in the Father's plan that Jesus be baptised by John, for God spoke from above, expressing his pleasure with Jesus' action.

All of this is a great expression of our Father's love. God sent Jesus into the world to save us from our sins. We have the model of John, who baptised our Lord; the woman at the well, who said, "Sir, give me this water!" (John 4:15); and Jesus himself, who took part in the same baptism we do, to show us the way of righteousness. Repentance and thanksgiving go hand in hand, for God gives us the way to repent, and in return we give thanks to God for his love and grace. In Jesus' name. Amen.