

**Passing Through the Waters of Change (Luke 3:15-17, 21-22)**  
**Rev. Dr. Keith D. Herron, Intentional Interim Minister**  
**First Baptist Church, Jefferson City MO**  
**The First Sunday after Epiphany (Psalm 29; Isaiah 43:1-7; Acts 8:14-17)**  
**January 9, 2022**

**WATCH/LISTEN:** [www.fbcjc.org/sermon/passing-through-the-waters-of-change](http://www.fbcjc.org/sermon/passing-through-the-waters-of-change)

When I was in the chaplaincy program at Shannon Hospital in San Angelo, I entered the room of a young Hispanic man who appeared to be about 19 or 20. He lay in the bed, unusually quiet and passive, and his young wife held his hand as she sat quietly next to him. Entering the room felt as if I had entered a sanctuary possessed by sacred time and sacred space.

I introduced myself to them and asked him why he was in the hospital. He looked exhausted and weak but showed no outward signs of accident or surgery as the others on my floor usually showed. In quiet words, he began to tell me about the picnic that he and his wife had gone on the day before at a local park along the Concho River. He said he was standing on the side of a steep bank a short distance from the car where his wife was sitting. Suddenly, the bank collapsed and he disappeared into the river. He fell so suddenly he didn't even have time to yell out to his wife before he was plunged beneath the surface. His wife never saw him fall.

The place where he fell was deep and still. Under the water, a submerged tree limb lay hidden. The shore was steep and the dry bank quickly became slick and muddy from his thrashing about. All his efforts to get a hand-hold on anything that would help him climb out were useless. On one of his lunges out of the water, his legs hung on the submerged tree limb and in frantic desperation, he tried to free himself from its clutches. He told me while trapped under the water, he could see the trees above him through the water. He could see the sky and the clouds hovering above. But he couldn't free himself to get a breath. He was trapped .... then he couldn't tell me anymore and he began to openly weep.

His wife picked up the story and told me how a young girl had seen everything and had run over to the car where she was sitting. The little girl told her excitedly, "*Your man has fallen into the water!*" She tried to convince the wife her husband had, indeed, fallen into the river but the wife didn't want to believe the little girl. She told the girl to leave her alone but the little girl persisted. Suddenly the truth of what the little girl was telling her became all too real. She ran over to the bank and saw the lifeless body of her husband under the surface of the water.

She frantically called out to the other picnickers nearby in the park and two young men jumped into the water and pulled her husband's unconscious body from the river. One of them gave him mouth-to-mouth resuscitation until the ambulance came and rushed him to the hospital.

His recovery came quickly and he apparently suffered no further damage. But the look in his eyes was all too real. It wasn't a spoken message but I could tell his life was forever changed. He was only beginning to learn what his near-death experience had meant to him.

I could tell by the way the two of them sat near each other and the gentle and loving way in which they held each other's hands that their love for each other had deepened. They knew something about what it meant to love one another because they also understood what it meant to lose one another. There would be changes as well to come in the days of further reflection. This young man and his equally young wife were only beginning to understand what death and life meant.

Maybe that's something of what our baptism is meant to be as the marking of a moment of change. The images of "life before" and "life after" are marked by the echoing reminder deep within our souls that we have died with Christ and have risen to a new life in Christ. The "near-death" experience of baptism is now something we carry with us for the remainder of our lives. It's the haunting memory we have entered the waters of death and now we live with the power of being given our lives back. And so, in a very real sense, in the waters of our baptism, we share both the identity and the destiny of Jesus.

In our Scriptures, Luke tells us when Jesus came to John the Baptist and requested to be baptized, this was something more than just the message of repentance as the motivation to be baptized. John's preaching had served as the preparation for the coming of Jesus. John warned people to get their lives in order because the Son of God would soon appear. John was so convinced of the uniqueness of the One that was coming he made a comparison between himself and the coming One. John was baptizing with water, but Jesus, as the Messiah, would come baptizing with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

Following his baptism, as he stood there dripping wet, Jesus prayed. In the middle of his prayer the heavens opened up and the Holy Spirit descended on him in the form of a dove, the ancient symbol of peace. God spoke telling everyone there: *"This is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased."*

What did it all mean? What did the identity of being God's son mean to Jesus and what does it mean to us today?

In a story called *"The River"* writer Flannery O'Connor wrote about the day Bevel, a child of alcoholic and abusive parents, was taken by his sitter to be baptized. After baptism in what the preacher called the *"river of the suffering son,"* the preacher told Bevel, *"You count now. You didn't even count before."*<sup>1</sup>

We enter the waters unformed, undeveloped. We are still young and immature about things. There is much that needs to grow up in us as new creations. But we take the name, "Christian,"

---

<sup>1</sup> "The River," from *3* By Flannery O'Connor, New York: Signet Book, 1953, 154

as a gift, knowing that we need to move forward in faith and to grow into the name. So that eventually, we grow to resemble the image we've received.

All of us, at one time or another, go through the search for identity. We have a deep need to know who we are, to know where we've come from, and to know where we are going. Perhaps a starting point for us is to stop and to look into the graceful waters of our baptism. Gazing into those still waters will give you a reflected image of who you are. Who are you? You are someone to whom a name is given.

In linking ourselves with Jesus in the waters of our baptism, we come to realize who we are. In submerging beneath the waters, we remember. It's in our conversion we get in touch with the identity that has been ours over the centuries.

But also woven into the very fabric of this story is the necessity of change. The New Testament claims that the old must pass away so the new can come. David Steinmetz says it this way, *"Every conversion has a price. Something is gained, but something is lost as well and the loss may prove to be painful .... The gospel not only resolves problems which trouble us; it creates problems which we never had before and which we would gladly avoid."*<sup>2</sup>

The truth is we change because we must. The work of the Spirit of God is such that slowly, imperceptibly, sometimes even dramatically, our old lives are challenged by the new reality of the redemption of God. We discover that because we have died with Christ and have been redeemed from that death to walk in the newness of life, we are changed people. We've been immersed under the waters of our baptism and have been plucked from the watery grave so when we rise we can begin to learn to live up to our new name, Christian.

Perhaps this kind of commitment to Christ is something you wish to make. Giving your life to God is the first step towards transformation. We mark this commitment with baptism as the step taken to signify our commitment as a follower of Christ. We will be baptizing several kids from the youth group in a few weeks. Would you like to join them?

© Rev. Dr. Keith D. Herron 2022

---

<sup>2</sup> David Steinmetz, *Theology Today*, April 1978