



**The First Sunday after the Epiphany
The Baptism of Our Lord
Matthew 3:13-17**

"Come on in! The water's (not) fine!"

When I was a very small child, my parents took all of us to the swimming pool at the YMCA on 11th Avenue in Worthington, Minnesota, my birthplace, a village of 10,000 souls. To my young eyes, this pool was a vast sea, and I remember my pride and delight when finally, finally, I was able to inch my way, hand over hand, across the shallow edge of the pool, with my mother patiently spotting me. I suppose there were moments when I only thought I was moving under my own power: I'm sure—if my mother had to hold me or catch me—I'm sure she helped me save face by not pointing out my weakness. I was just a little boy. I needed encouragement.

As I grew, this swimming pool retained its emotional hold on me. For I came to see that at the other end of the pool was a fathomless deep—nine whole feet of water...blue, dark, terrifying water! *Nine feet!* Imagine my thrill when finally, as a grade-schooler, I was able to plunge down and touch the bottom of the deep end with my toe.

And then the city of Worthington constructed a new pool—much larger, creatively designed, an outdoor pool that really was two pools, a deep one and a shallow one, with three diving boards. One of these boards was the “high-dive,” a terrifying plank that scraped the sky. Could it have been nine feet above the water? Twelve?? It was astonishing, that I knew. It was a rite of passage, to jump from the high-dive. You walk nervously to the edge, take a breath, and release yourself into the abyss, your stomach trading places with your throat, and then you're immersed in the roiling blue water. And then you do it again, dozens of times. It was a terrible, sweet loveliness, that high dive.

As a child I never made the connection between these watery experiences and the liturgical act of Holy Baptism, but I don't think you can blame me. Like lots of churches

of the time, our font was a tiny little salad bowl tucked away in the upper-right corner of the church, piously covered with a little metal dome except for the moment when an infant was actually going to be baptized. As a young acolyte, I mistakenly poured the water into the dry bowl before the service began, and overheard another altar server nervously tell the pastor, “He poured it in before I could stop him!!” The bowl was supposed to be dry, you see, until we finally had to pour water into it.

Why? No particular reason, really. It’s just that it didn’t occur to these good, conservative Lutherans that our baptismal practices had strayed quite far from the rushing rivers of the first century. It didn’t occur to them that Baptism is *supposed* to be messy, more like a terrifying plunge off the high-dive than a spritzing of raindrops on the forehead. Lutherans, like Episcopalians, take Holy Baptism seriously. But both traditions are prone to forget the sweet, terrible loveliness of it.

As I said, in Jesus’ day, baptism was a messier, more natural affair—a sloppy dip in the river. It was a ritual of purification for Jews, so in some sense Jesus was distinguished not at all by submitting to a baptism. But then something mysterious and interesting happens: Jesus experiences a theophany—he hears the voice of God: “a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” Sounds good, right? This poor peasant from a backwater town is God’s Son, God’s Beloved, the one who pleases God. But, unfortunately for Jesus, the goodness here is like the goodness of Good Friday: my friend and fellow deacon Richard Buhner puts it this way: For Jesus, Richard says, “This is not entirely good news. ‘You are my son’ confirms Jesus in his identity as the Messiah, the son of David, the King who was to come to Israel. [But] ‘You are the Beloved’ carries an entirely different weight in the language of the Bible: it means that Jesus is called to be the Suffering Servant prophesied by the prophet Isaiah, through whose wounds, we are healed.”

And...I have more bad news for us all this morning! Here it comes: we are called to follow Jesus in our own baptismal lives, our own roles as the Beloved of God. Baptism changes us...forever. It transforms our lives. Like Jesus, whose baptism marked the beginning of his ministry, our baptism marks the beginning—only the beginning—of our transformed lives as Christians. And what are these lives transformed into? What do they become? Well, let’s take a look: in the baptismal vows of our Prayer Book, we get a glimpse of what lies ahead for those who plunge into God’s waters. As you hear these questions, do you also hear a growing anxiety within yourself, an anxiety about what might need to change in your life if you accept God’s baptismal invitation? Here they come—

“Will you continue in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers? [so far, not bad, huh?]

Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord? [hmmm... okay I guess...]

Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ? [uh-oh. I'm supposed to be an example to others??]

Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself? [oh, okay fine... but do I have to seek and serve Christ in my enemies, in people who bug me, in my spouse...in my *co-workers*??]

Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being? [*sigh*...does this mean I have to go to New Orleans and Guatamala and stuff??]

Sorry, but yes, that's the general idea. It's not entirely good news to hear God's voice, to hear God saying "You are my child; you are the Beloved; you please me." It means our lives do change, and they change in many ways. When we give our assent to this, and when we give our assent to our infant children being baptized into this, we are saying Yes to a life-long process of formation.

And for that, I think we'll need some help. We're going to need a whole swimming pool full of other baptized people God calls Beloved. This is hard work, all this personal transformation. So that's why Holy Baptism is not merely an individual act, a little christening, a mere sprinkle of holy drops that are just for little me. Baptism (thankfully) plunges us into an immense pool we call community, or what we call the Body of Christ.

In this pool, we swim with old sages, young zealots, and passionate prophets. We swim with mystics, ordinary altar servers, and choral singers. We swim with grade-schoolers, college students, and accountants. We even swim with priests and deacons and other disreputable figures! We swim with homeless guys, social workers, prison inmates, and cops. Can you think of anyone else? Holy Baptism throws us in with all God's motley swimming crew. And, first into the pool, long ago but also jumping off the high-dive today, is our brother Jesus, the firstborn of the dead, one who loved God and followed God so perfectly, so completely, that he drowned in these waters, and pulls us under the waves with him. He does this so that we might re-emerge as a resurrected people, born anew in God's womb-waters, so that we might give our whole lives over to the Kingdom of God, right here on this watery earth.

And so, finally, we have one more stop on our watery journey that began in a teeny tiny baptismal font, plunged us into a YMCA swimming pool, and cast us out into the open rivers and seas. In Baptism our perspective keeps opening up: first, like me as a little boy inching along the shallow end, we don't see the whole pool, let alone all the other people swimming alongside us (and before us). Maybe, at that stage, Jesus is for us a lot like my gentle mother, helping us bob along the shallow end. But in Holy Baptism we are always pulled out, pulled deeper, ever deeper, until, finally, we realize that the whole watery planet we live on is a font of God's grace.

None of us gathered here have seen with our own eyes our home planet from a distance, but a few humans have, and so I'll close with a reflection—a reflection from an astronaut

named Charles Walker. When he first looked at planet Earth—or should we call it planet Water??—from space, he said this:

“My first view [was] a panorama of brilliant deep blue ocean, shot with shades of green and gray and white...[these were] atolls and clouds. Close to the window I could see that this Pacific scene in motion was rimmed by the great curved limb of the Earth. It had a thin halo of blue held close, and beyond, black space. I held my breath, but something was missing — I felt strangely unfulfilled. Here was a tremendous visual spectacle, but viewed in silence. There was no grand musical accompaniment; no triumphant, inspired sonata or symphony. Each one of us must write the music of this sphere for ourselves.”

“Each one of us must write the music of this sphere for ourselves.” In Holy Baptism, we come together as a community, as the Body of Christ, to write and sing this music, this watery music, together. Come, come into the water. The water’s *not* fine, I’m sorry to say. It gets cold, and deep. You may drown—you will drown. But we’re all in here. We’re all swimming in this watery sphere. Won’t you come in?

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