

## Through the Waters

A Sermon Preached by Christopher A. Joiner  
First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee  
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*Baptism of the Lord (Year A)*

Matthew 3:13-17



“Baptism...is a willingness to let go of balance and decorum and get drenched.”

So says Anne Lamott. Yet much of the time we much prefer staying dry and decent and in order. In the church I served in Memphis we had a young couple present their baby for baptism. The grandfather happened to be a retired Cumberland Presbyterian minister, and they asked if he could perform the baptism.

The morning of the baptism, I went into the sanctuary to find the grandfather/minister placing a red rose on the font.

“Is this where you normally place the rose?” he asked me.

“The rose for what?”

“To baptize the baby with.”

I must admit I had never heard of such a thing, and said as much. “What do you use?” he asked.

“My hand.”

He finally said, “You should consider a rose. It’s much less water and will keep the baby from crying. And it’s a keepsake for the parents. Plus, there’s germs.”

We proceeded on with the service, and at the appointed time, the minister dipped just the very edge of the rose in the font and lightly touched the sleeping baby’s head. “I baptize you in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.”

I had to fight the urge, when we bowed for prayer, to douse that baby.

I wanted that baby to know, as much as he could, that something is *happening* here, something of importance, something that bears in its wetness an identity that goes much deeper than all the names that will be given to him throughout his life. “You are a beloved child of God.” I want the head drenched, I want the water running down the face. I don’t want it to be only sweet, but jolting as well. The baby, or the child, youth, or adult, is being ushered into the very realm of God, receiving a calling, summoned to the Jesus way of life. A drop of water on a rose just will not do, at least for me.

If you read the accounts of Jesus’ baptism in the four Gospels, you will discover some differences in them. In Mark and Luke, Jesus hears a voice saying to him, “You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.” In Matthew, however, the voice announces for all to hear, “*This* is my Son, the Beloved.” The announcement is not for him, but for those around him, and those who would seek to follow him.

From the very beginning of the church, questions were raised about why Jesus was baptized by John, with many suggesting that if John baptized him then John was superior to him. Matthew is the only gospel that has Jesus and John interact, with John insisting that *he* should be baptized by Jesus and not the other way around.

John does not understand, as the church didn’t, and as we often still do not, that Jesus’ kingdom, the kind of Lord and Messiah he is, means precisely he will not shun these waters. He descends into them, with the poor and the rich, with the young and old, with the broken, the despised and rejected. He joins the multitude, he becomes one with us, and in this way fulfills the righteousness, the justice, of God. The incarnation we celebrate at Christmas continues as Jesus descends into these waters with us.

Jesus goes down into these waters to show that God’s sovereignty, God’s Spirit, is forever connected to sacrificial service. And when we are baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we are relationally connected to God and the work God is doing in the world. As Eugene Peterson says, “Baptism definitively places our unique and personal name in the company of the Trinity. If you want to know who I am and what makes me tick, don’t for heaven’s sake look up my I.Q. or give me a Myers-Briggs personality test. Study me in the company of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”

The scene at the Jordan must have been jolting. The Spirit falls, a voice declares that this Nazarene carpenter is the Son of God, Beloved. It is a turning point. From this point forward all who pass through these waters do so in order to follow this one who passed through them first, to join his way in the world.

Anne Lamott writes, “Most of what we do in worldly life is geared toward our staying dry, looking good, not going under. But in baptism, in lakes and pools and fonts, you agree to do something that’s a little sloppy because at the same time it’s holy, and absurd. It’s about surrender, giving in to all those things we can’t control; it’s a willingness to let go of balance and decorum and get drenched.”

In just a few moments we will gather at the font to ordain and install a new class of elders. Their calling flows out from this font, as does ours. And so they take their place as servant leaders in the name of the one who did not shun these waters. I hope the elders, and all of us, will remember that it is a calling about surrender, giving in to all those things we can’t control; letting go of balance and decorum and getting drenched.

Don’t worry, when you kneel for the prayer, I’m not going to douse you with baptismal water. You already are. And that fact alone, beloved of God, should bring us great comfort and peace, *and* a jolt of recognition that you are part of the company of the baptized, called out into the church and the world to follow this Jesus, who walks ahead of us, dripping wet. Amen.