

Nathan Brown
 “The Baptism of Our Lord” (Preached from the Baptismal Pool)
 January 11, 2009
 West Side Christian Church

Mark 1:4-11

While we were in Baltimore a couple of weeks ago, we visited the National Aquarium which rests on the inner harbor of the city. As you enter the Aquarium, the first thing that you notice is a quote on the wall, depicted in big bold letters. The quote reads, “If there is magic found on the planet it is contained in water.” (Loren Eisley).

There truly is something magical, mysterious about the element of water. On the one hand, our bodies are made up of water. We can go longer without food than we can water. Almost eighty percent of the earth’s surface is covered with water. Perhaps there is nothing more peaceful than standing on the bank of a river or on the shore of an ocean and staring out into the tranquility of water. In so many ways, water is the source of life.

Conversely, water is also dangerous, chaotic, and devastating. In the ancient world, even in our reading from Genesis about creation, the primeval disorder takes shape in the form of watery chaos. Too much rain will drown fertile soil and destroy fields of crops. Hurricanes in the U.S. and Tsunamis in the Indian Ocean remind us that standing on the edge of water can also be one of the scariest and mostly deadly places to be. Biblically speaking, God uses flood to destroy the earth in the story of Noah. In so many ways, water is also the source of death.

“If there is magic found in the planet it is contained in water.”

Just like the water of the planet, there is magic in the waters of baptism...or perhaps a better word might be *mystery*. When we read again the story of Jesus’ baptism, as we did this morning, we probably imagine the tranquility of baptism. It is a calm and peaceful scene in which an individual outwardly participates in a ritual that conveys the inward faith that he or she has begun to feel. In the case of Jesus’ baptism, most of us probably have a very pastoral image of blue sky, blue water, and a frothy, fluttery Spirit floating down to rest on Jesus’ head as he rises from the river.¹

The final words of Norman Maclean’s novella, *A River Runs Through It*, are “I am HAUNTED by water.” While most of us share the pastoral image of Jesus’ baptism, if we read again what is happening in this scene, we recognize that, in other ways, this is a sort-of haunting, disturbing scene.²

One pastor says she was eating dinner one evening, telling her husband and children about how she was working on this particular text. She described the part about

¹ Carter-Florence, Anna. *Lectionary Homiletics*. Preaching the Lesson. January 11, 2009.

² Yamada, Frank M. “Living By the Word.” *Christian Century*. December 30, 2008. Pg. 19.

the Spirit of God, descending like a dove. “Can’t you just imagine it?” I asked them, making graceful wing motions with my hands.

Immediately, her eleven year-old son interrupted and said, “Wait a minute, Mom.” That’s not how doves fly. Doves *swoop*. They’re *fast*. When they want to catch something, they don’t flutter down lightly. They zoom like a hawk: *BAM!* He demonstrated, helpfully. She caught the milk glass just before it splattered. “Oh,” she said, crest fallen. “I didn’t know that about doves. Thanks.”³

Mark writes that as Jesus was coming up from out of the water, the heavens were torn apart—not parted, divided, or subtly separated. No, the heavens were *torn* apart and the Spirit descended on him like a dove. Just as there is something tranquil about baptism there is also something haunting about baptism.

“If there is magic found in the planet it is contained in water.” Or should I say, “If there is mystery found in faith, it begins with the ritual of baptism.”

Of course, the mystery of faith does not end when we wade out of the waters of baptism. Baptism is only the beginning. Soon after we start trying to live this Christian walk we have begun, the questions begin. There seem to be contradictions at every turn. The Bible provides direction, but it is so difficult at times to understand. Others Christians tell us that we are supposed to believe certain things and yet, we are not sure that we believe those same things. Everyone else seems to have more faith than you do.

That’s the thing about mystery and magic. The mysterious causes us to be skeptical and to ask questions. I remember my first magic show. When I was about twelve years old, my dad took me to see David Copperfield at Market Square Arena in Indianapolis, Indiana. Even though Copperfield’s magic appears flawless, one cannot help but leave a magic show skeptical.

I remember leaving that particular show and talking a million miles a minute to my dad saying things like, “He didn’t really make that woman disappear, there was a trap door right?” “He didn’t really levitate did he; I mean there had to have been strings?” The further we got from the building, the more my brain raced with questions about what I had experienced.

The same is true of the mystery of baptism. The further we get from our baptism, the more we find ourselves skeptical about what we just experienced. Even if you were baptized as an infant and only learn about your baptism later in life, the moment you find out about your baptism is the moment the questions begin.

Perhaps the best example of this is in the film *Tender Mercies*. Robert Duvall plays Mac, a down-on-his-luck country songwriter who battles the bottle. He fights back with the help of a young widow who offers him room and board at her roadside Texas motel in exchange for handyman help. Grace finds a toehold in Mac’s life, and

³ Carter-Florence.

eventually both Mac and the widow's young boy, Sonny, make the decision to be baptized.

Driving home after the baptism, Sonny says to Mac: "Well, we done it Mac, we was baptized." Peering into the truck's rearview mirror, Sonny studies himself for a moment. "Everybody said I'd feel like a changed person. Do you feel like a changed person?" "Not yet," replies Mac. "You don't look any different, Mac." "Do you think I look any different?" "Not yet," answers Mac.⁴

Each year, we begin our liturgical calendar with the baptism of our Lord. We read again the story of Jesus' baptism, are encouraged to remember our own baptisms and to reflect on what our baptism continues to mean for our lives. We do this because the further we get away from our own baptisms, the more we experience in life, the more questions we seem to have and the more skeptical and cynical we can become.

Just like Sonny and Mac in the scene from *Tender Mercies*, many of us can identify with coming up out of the waters of baptism and soon thereafter already questioning the mystery of what has just taken place—"Do I feel any different?" "Do I look any different?" And as we move through life the questions only become deeper and more complicated.

Mark tells us the same is even true of Jesus. While we did not read beyond his baptism this morning, as you know, as soon as Jesus is baptized in the gospel of Mark, God drives Jesus out into the desert to be tempted—to question his identity, his purpose, what he has committed himself to as the Son of God.

If I were to ask the question of you, "What did your baptism mean?" most of you would probably give pretty standard answers. "It was the day I was saved." "It was my initiation into the Christian faith." "It was the day I could become a member of the church." Depending upon your faith tradition at that time, you might even say, "It meant I could take communion." However, I wonder if any of you would say, "It was in Baptism that I learned to trust God."

As I continue to read about becoming a parent, one of the things that I have learned is that trust is one of the earliest things learned by a child. Erik Erikson believes that trust is developed within the first few weeks of life. He sees trust as a by-product of the relationship between parent and child.

During his or her first weeks of life, a child learns that the world is a trustworthy or untrustworthy place. A child goes to sleep at night. It wakes up in the morning and cries out. Will anyone be there? Will I be abandoned? Will anyone hear my cry and come? The door opens. Mom or dad enters. Parent and child go through their special little ritual of meeting: the cooing, tickling, kissing, and caressing with which they have come to greet one another every morning.

⁴ Sholis, Barbara. "A Watery Solution." *Christian Century*. December 18, 2002. Pg. 19.

Erikson believes that these predictable, patterned rituals of meeting are crucial in a child's development. They remind the child that somebody cares, that help is always available, that the world is a place to be trusted rather than a place to be feared. Conversely, Erikson believes that if a child fails to experience these rituals of meeting and greeting, a child learns that the world is uncaring and undependable, a learning which can have tragic consequences in later life.⁵

Our ritual for meeting God: the cooing, tickling, kissing, and caressing with which we come to greet our Lord and Savior is the ritual of baptism. Go back to that moment of your ritual of baptism, whether it was in this very baptismal pool or if it took place somewhere else. If you were baptized as an infant, put yourself in the shoes of your parents who made this decision for you.

As you waded down into the water, there were perhaps nerves about what was about to happen. If you were an infant, your parents were probably a bit anxious themselves. Yet, in either case, there was also a sense of confidence. You made this decision. Your parents made this decision. There was faith in what was about to happen.

And what happened in those infantile moments of your Christian walk set the stage for whether or not you would be able to trust God. Would the minister do as he or she said they would do? Would they give you time to cover your nose? Would he or she pull you back up? Would the waters cause you to slip out of his or her grip?

As it is, my guess is that everything must have gone well enough because you are here this morning. In our baptisms, we learn what it means to give ourselves to God. In our baptisms we learn what it means to trust God. When we remember our baptisms, we remember the words that God says to Jesus upon his baptism, "You are my Son, the beloved. With you, I am well pleased."

"If there is magic found in the planet it is contained in water." "If there is mystery found in faith, it begins with the ritual of baptism." We learn in baptism that the same magic and mystery contained in that ritual is the same magic and mystery contained in life. In the midst of that magic and mystery, we discover we must trust God.

Amen.

⁵ Willimon, William. *Pulpit Resource*. Logos Productions: Inver Grove Heights, 2008. January 11, 2009.