

Knee Deep Message for January 10, 2010

There's something about going into a body of water that just makes me feel good all over. As many of you know, I'm a beach girl, and at least twice a year, I feel a strong urge to go to San Diego to just sit on a beach and stick my toes in every so often.

I grew up near water. Raised in northeastern Illinois, I was surrounded by tiny lakes which provided many hours of swimming. My favorite Aunt Esther had a small cottage near Grays Lake which we visited often during the summer, and each year my family made a trip to northern Michigan to spend a couple of weeks.

The cottage we rented there was on Bass Lake, but it was just a short drive to Lake Michigan – a big enough body of water to feel like the ocean, with waves and all – where we spent most of our days. I have lots of photos of me standing in the water up to my knees with a big, cheesy smile of pure happiness on my face.

I love the earth's water – the way it smells like fish and all things green – the first shiver I get when I plunge down into it – and in some places, how very clear it is – clear enough to see life moving around.

When I was little, it was enough to splash around in it and just be there, but as I grew older and learned you could do things like snorkel, being near a great body of water gained another whole level of status in my eyes. As an adult, it's been my delight to swim with sea turtles and crabs, amazingly colored fish and even sharks. I've been in the transparent waters of Hawaii, the Caribbean, and Tahiti – each has gifted me with the wonder of God's seas, teeming with abundant life.

The waters of the oceans hold many treasures – the best ones swim.

Life can't exist without water, and as I study and learn more about how the Bible was written and what the people did in those days long past, I find I feel even more respect for the authors of the books we share as Christians. Those early writers knew how to tell a story and teach a lesson – they used familiar metaphors of fire, earth and water to help drive home messages they believed God intended. As we'll discover today, water images abound in the Bible – from the earliest verses in Genesis straight through Revelation. Not only is water important to me - to us in our time - water also plays a strong role in God's work as described by Luke from our Scripture for today.

When I began my research for today's message, I found some pretty interesting pieces of information. I found there are whole organizations that spend serious time considering how water plays into our life here on earth and how it connects to our faith life and our stewardship to what God has given us in water.

In a speech entitled, "Water in the Bible" given at an EarthCare Forum in Tennessee in 2008, John Rossing, a Christian ecologist and pastor of Christ the King Lutheran Church in Dalton, Georgia,

marveled at how often the word “water” is mentioned in the Bible – 719 times, by a count he managed to pull from a database search in his computer. Rossing reminds listeners of some of the many times water appears throughout the Bible:

“What’s the very first image or scene in the Bible? It’s the spirit of God, brooding over the face of the waters. Before there was light or sun or moon or earth there was water. What’s the very last image in the Bible? It’s the river of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God in the new Jerusalem. And almost the very last words in the Bible are, “Let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift.” So the Bible begins with God and water and ends with God and water, and between the beginning and the end—the alpha and the omega—the Bible is chock full of testimony that links God and water in his creating, blessing, and saving work.”

Rossing goes on to discuss how water is used further in Scripture:

Water for thirsty Israelites walking in the desert – from a rod thrown upon a rock.

Water poured on their descendents, spoken of by Isaiah – so “They shall spring up like a green tamarisk, like willows by flowing streams.”

Water, again in Isaiah, as a symbol of God’s love and support as God restores Israel: “For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes.”

Water for Moses, Aaron and Ezekial – in special basins for ceremonial washing and cleansing before they enter the temple to pray.

Water for Moses again, as a babe in the rushes of a stream –to carry him to a new life...and later, water of the Dead Sea to part and offer escape for the Jews out of Egypt – water that swallows up Pharaoh’s army and brings Moses’ people to safety.

Water for Noah, the most water! And an incredible floating world full of creatures so that God might not destroy all of creation.

And more water throughout the Bible: ***“In the Psalms and in Ephesians, water symbolizes God’s word...In Hosea, spring rains are a sign of the presence of God himself. And in Amos water represents social justice in one of the great similes in the Bible: ‘Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.’”***

Rossing points out that the Old Testament is loaded with these water images – but the real good stuff happens in the New Testament...

In the New Testament, Jesus uses water everywhere to teach his lessons:

Water holds him when he walks across a lake;

Water transforms into wine at his bidding at a wedding celebration;

Cool, fresh water washes his disciples feet as he proves he is Servant for us all.

Jesus speaks of water as a metaphor for God's love and forgiveness: "Those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life."

And in the end, when his side is pierced by Roman soldiers and the water of life flows out of his body...Jesus' blood mixed with water is offered as our eternal relief from sin.

No wonder an ecologist/pastor like Rossing belongs to a group of Christians who exist to protect this amazing resource today.

He concludes his speech with this thought: ***"Water is a key concern for Christians. It is a premier—one might even say that it is the premier—earthly means by which God reveals his power and his grace. It sustains life; it purifies and transforms the world and us; it reminds us of our creator and our savior and unites us with the Spirit of God. When we take water for granted, waste it, or spoil it we suffer spiritually as well as physically; when we respect and cherish it as God's gift we not only find our rivers and reservoirs full, but we draw with joy, as Isaiah said, from the wells of salvation."***

I have to say I'd never really taken time to consider those connections before.

So having been reminded that water appears naturally in all parts of the Bible, it ripples with a special meaning when we consider water and its use in baptism. All of its meanings connected to creation, to blessing, to rescue, to cleansing and new birth, to initiation into the Family of God and to Jesus' death and resurrection, come together in the Sacrament of Baptism.

Baptism – that moment we remember in our service today when Jesus was baptized in the presence of God.

Baptism – that moment we remember when the water of God's earth touched us and we became one body in Christ, together.

When John the Baptizer began his ministry, there were many who believed he was the Messiah – his message was powerful, and he must have been very persuasive, because he baptized many souls before he got around to Jesus.

But, we find that John was very careful to remind the people that he in fact was NOT the Messiah – he was just the one who would prepare the people for the time when the true Messiah would come.

John was almost too humble - “I am not worthy to tie his sandals.” Here is one man who would not take credit for his gift to Jesus – he had respect and absolute belief in the role Jesus would play – and he was bound to share it with the people. “He who comes after me will baptize you with fire and the Holy Spirit.”

Scholars have debated the significance of this event between John and Jesus, because this is a turning point in the ministry of Jesus – the beginning of his work on the road. There’s a difference in focus: John baptized people to encourage them to repent and turn their lives around – he wanted them to be sorry for what they may have done that was wrong according to God’s will.

But after his own baptism, Jesus took it one step further, and it wasn’t until after his death and resurrection that he commissioned the disciples to baptize for the forgiveness of sin - to absolve the sinner and bring about God’s grace through the Holy Spirit. (A side note here: did Jesus do the baptisms during his ministry or did he stand by and observe as the disciples did the baptisms while they were on the road? Scholars are still working that question).

As a sacrament in most denominations, baptism takes on special significance – there are many ways to go about it, and some controversy among scholars as to what way is most meaningful or reverent.

In John the Baptizer’s time, people – whole families - waded in “living waters” – a flowing stream – and their bodies were probably immersed as they were advised to repent in the name of God.

After Jesus’ death and resurrection, (and in the absence of rivers or lakes in the deserts where converts lived), baptism was performed as people stood over a basin or in a small pool, and water was poured over the upper part of their naked bodies.

Years later, the notion of baptizing babies took hold. Concern for the salvation of their souls in the event of infant death drove this practice, which has become a mainstay for churches today - and it is with the practice of infant baptism that the most controversy comes in. Some groups, like the Lutherans, (quoting Luther) “believe that infant baptism is God-pleasing because persons so baptized were reborn and sanctified by the Holy Spirit.”

But there are denominations of believers who feel that an infant has no idea or understanding about what is happening at their baptism, and since they haven’t sinned, baptism performed on infants doesn’t really count. They prefer to baptize adults. These groups baptize members again – denominations such as the Anabaptists, the Amish and other Baptist groups are included here.

So what about us? In the spirit of the ecumenicism our denomination treasures, the United Church of Christ recognizes the any baptism and welcomes people into its churches after a ceremony renewing baptismal promises made by their families on the day they were baptized. It is one of two sacraments in our church (Communion is the other one), and it can be performed with any age person in any manner...sprinkling, splashing or dunking. We really mean it when we say, “No matter who you are...”

I find it fascinating that something as simple as a splash of water can cause so much controversy, and after studying for today, I can't help but think that perhaps what people who believe need to do is focus more on the meaning of the message that is implied with this act, not how it is presented.

In our Scripture for today, we are witness to Jesus' recognition of John's purpose in baptizing him, and we also find that God shows up for the event and declares his pride for his Son – by accepting his baptism, Jesus also accepts his fate. This is a momentous occasion – and historians generally agree that it is one incident describing the historical Jesus that can be “proven.”

With his own baptism, Jesus begins his ministry and the long walk to his eventual death as he bows his head to receive God's blessing in the waters of the Jordon River. What's important here is not where it happened, how old he was, or how much or what kind of water was used – those “facts” are meaningless when we consider the importance of who was there, what this act initiates and what is to come afterward.

The truly important fact is that water - precious, life-giving, life-cleansing, life-restoring water was poured over Jesus - as it has been poured over us. And because God's love and the Holy Spirit permeate that water – we are one in our faith family, splashing about with joy and hope in relief for the refreshment it provides.

It is God's gift of Grace to us – sinners that we are - and as God's children our hearts should feel buoyant in thankfulness for this flood of love.

Go knee deep, friends. Go ahead - take a dip – the water's fine!

Amen.