

Pulled Through the River

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Isaiah 42: 1-9

Matthew 3:13-17

Baptism of Jesus – Epiphany I

Chalmers United Church

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“Remember your baptism and be thankful.” With those ritual words, the Christian community has for a long, long time reflected on the moment of baptism. For individuals, either confirming or renewing their faith, those words – accompanied by the sprinkling of water – are part of a ritual that can be most meaningful. After a particular difficult time in life, or just at a time of real celebration, people sometimes want to renew their faith. To remember their baptism and be thankful.

Can you remember your baptism? I can't. No pictures of mine. Don't know why but there aren't.

A former colleague of mine used to tell a story about his baptism. He remembered it well because he was about eight or nine years old when it took place. Michael was a child of the manse, a preacher's kid – so some of you will be able to identify with his story. Michael's baptism took place when he was old enough to be just a bit embarrassed – perhaps, he recalls, that was his father's idea of making it a 'memorable experience'. The baptism was uneventful, except that a large amount of water was used by Michael's father, enthusiastic in the extreme. After the watery event, Michael remembers, and family lore continues to testify, this young boy walked back up the centre aisle of the church, facing dripping and scowling – a look of great humiliation and disgust to greet the joyful new life.

Can you remember your baptism? Some of you will; some of you won't. But if you don't remember your own baptism, perhaps there is a baptismal moment that is particularly meaningful for you. I was once minister to a congregation where worship, long before I arrived, took place in the Hall prior to the building of the Sanctuary. On more than one occasion, parents would proudly introduce their young adult children to me – 'she was baptized in the Hall'. There was a certain notoriety to it. A pride that not only did the event take place in the Hall, and was special in some way, but that not long after the congregation grew stronger and a beautiful sanctuary space was built. It was both a matter of family delight and congregational pride. Reflecting on baptism is a faith-forming practice – for families and for congregations. It helps us to remember and give thanks for a moment of water grace.

Imagine now, that you are watching a movie and the helicopter-mounted camera carries you in a wide-angle, long shot over some hills to a beautiful river valley. Your focus is directed from the wide shot to the centre as gradually a group of people become visible on the banks of a river. Soon you see more people out in the water, and there is a lot of splashing and people are going down in the water and coming back up with a

might force of energy. As the music on the soundtrack fades out, voices are heard, shouting, repetitive. Something is happening. The activity at the centre of the screen dissolves and the camera focuses on a man sitting on a rock in a shallow part of the river, face dripping from a watery rebirth. A voice is heard, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." A proud parental word of love.

Remember your baptism and be thankful. 'I have called you by name,' says God, 'you are mine.' Whether it is our own moment, or the moment of someone special to us, it is incredibly powerful. It can be transforming and life-changing. It can turn people around, changing their lives with a watery touch or by just watching it happen.

There is power in the waters of the river. There was another river, where a young boy found his life changed. The Mississippi. Ernest Hemingway once said that all modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. The power of that river.

You'll remember Huck. He has no mother and his father is a brutal drunkard. Huck is a liar, a thief, a rebel, a street kid on the river. But one day he encounters Jim, a runaway slave, a fellow fugitive from trouble, and in Jim, Huck discovers for the first time acceptance, love and his own sense of responsibility. He finds his social conscience, as he develops the courage to choose between violating the code of the conventional and betraying the person who needs him the most.

Huck helps Jim escape from slavery, breaking social, moral and religious codes all at once. Jim needs Huck; he grows to love him and Huck, in his own way, grows a strong attachment to Jim. But Huck, the mischievous one, plays a heartless trick on Jim one night.

They are on the mighty Mississippi, in a fog, when the two become separated. Huck is in the canoe and Jim is on the raft. Late in the night, after much calling to each other, Huck rejoins the raft, climbing aboard silently. He comes up behind Jim who is sitting on the raft's edge, his head in his hands, crying. Jim believes that Huck has drowned. When he sees Huck, he is overwhelmed with relief and joy.

Huck likes the idea of a tormenting joke. So he persuades Jim that they really weren't lost from each other. He claims to have been asleep beside Jim all the time – had Jim been dreaming, or perhaps drinking? Huck is merciless in his torment. Eventually, Jim discovers the truth – it wasn't a dream but it was a trick by Huck. Jim is deeply hurt. He gives Huck a resounding reprove, and turns away from him. Here is Huck, a while later.

It was fifteen minutes before I could work myself up to go and humble myself to Jim – but I done it and I weren't sorry for it afterwards, neither. I didn't do him no more mean tricks, and I wouldn't have done that one if I'd known it would make him feel that way.¹

There on that mighty river, the river that T.S. Eliot once called the "strong brown God", a life-changing moment took place for Huck. He was pulled through the river to a

¹ Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Signet Books, 1958), p. 90.

new life. Huck had played a cruel trick on Jim, capitalizing on his credulity. He had done so many times with his Aunt Poly, no doubt with others. But this time was different. This was Jim. Huck was at the very bottom of the social scale, but Jim – in that world – was below the bottom. Jim, who had no advantage in any respect, relied entirely on Huck. Huck had the power to turn Jim into a runaway slave, or to embrace him and give him as much life as possible. Huck could play a dreadful joke, but Jim could do nothing. But something happened there, on the river. The strong brown God, the Mississippi, pulled Huck through to new life. He was transformed, never to be the same again. Jim's face bathed in tears, Huck's wet from the river's water, both baptized to a new life. So startling in its truth, we can hardly explain it.

The moment of baptism, said Martin Luther, takes a lifetime to experience and fulfill. So we do not come by it once and once only; we revisit again and again. Remember you baptism and be thankful. Do not consider it a burden but a delight.

Here we are today with Oskar and his parents and family and friends. A few weeks ago we celebrated with Molly and her family. There are some among us who have been at grandchild baptisms in other places. By the very nature of our world today, we have in our midst people baptized in other parts of the world, in other forms of Christian churches, with other local customs and expressions. We are all part of that. We gather not by the uniqueness of a baptism in this congregation, or in The United Church of Canada, but by the uniqueness of God's gracious love for each and every one of us. It is just that big, the river is that wide and that deep. God's love is like that.

I always emphasize to parents when we meet and talk about baptism, that God's love is not restricted to baptism; it is abundantly true that God loves all children, and in fact all of us, whether baptized or not. They why baptize I am sometimes asked? It isn't something magical; it offers no passport to heaven and clearly no safety net in life. But why do we do anything of a ritual nature, why do we celebrate, reflect or mark any moment in life? Why do we honour some things and not others with a ritual filled with symbols. I think, in the case of baptism at least, it is because life is so precious and so important, that our very creation as human persons is worthy of praise, thanksgiving, symbolism and celebration. God has created us in God's own image –that's part of the biblical creation story – so we are thankful, immensely thankful to God. And in the story that we heard today, God identified with God's creation in the action of baptism, even Jesus was called to participate – much to the surprise of John the Baptist! The engagement of the Spirit, the reminder of the Servant in the Isaiah tradition, all these elements place the moment of this special event at the river in a context that is future-oriented. The voice out of heaven announces Jesus as the Son who serves, who will serve, as the long hoped-for majestic King, as the one whose rule will be different, not concerned with defeating enemies but with justice and peace and right relationships.

The voice, the energy that pulls Jesus through the river is a great and powerful force. It is not for him alone. That's Matthew's theology. Matthew believes it is for all who come to the story and hear – so it is for us who come by the font this day, who see and hear. The river, the waters, the voice – they are all calling to us: remember your baptism and be thankful. Grow in the context of family, whatever that looks like to you, and give thanks for creation. Take on the life that seeks justice, loves kindness and walks

humbly. The river pulls us in, draws us together, changes us – perhaps like that rascal Huck - and through the flowing water our life is made new.

It will take a lifetime to find all the meaning in baptism. As we go through life, we go with God, remembering the cool clean water of life – a gift, a gracious gift. Remember. And be thankful.

AMEN