

A Church of the Broken Beloved

Sunday, January 13, 2019

Isaiah 43: 1-3

Luke 3: 15-17, 21-22

Water can be a beautiful thing. These last two weeks I have enjoyed taking walks and runs along the Shelley Lake Trail. I'm used to jogging on sidewalks through suburban neighborhoods so the greenway system here that allows amateur runners like myself to enjoy the sights and sounds of nature while exercising is really something special! With the days of rain and now shine, it's been fun to watch the levels of water rise and fall over creek rocks.

On Wednesday night you all asked me if I preferred the mountains or the beach. To which I responded, "The beach! No question." What I didn't tell you is I really like the sun and the sand. I love looking at the water, but I rarely (if ever) actually get in it. A lot of folks who would choose the beach over the mountains actually get in the ocean. Not me. I have a healthy respect for the water and the waves. I respect it for its beauty and its power. If you've ever seen a storm roll in over the ocean, you probably know what I'm talking about.

Once friendly waves, seemingly made for recreation can quickly become dangerous and life threatening.

Water can be a terrifying thing. Especially when accompanied by overconfidence that one really can do whatever she sets her mind to. I can still remember one particular youth retreat, probably one of the last ones I attended as a teenager. We were at Lake Junaluska during the afternoon break, some of my friends and I decided that we should swim from one side of the cove to other. You know, rather than the tedious work of *walking* back down the path we'd taken. I can't even remember if we were wearing swimsuits or street clothes, but I do remember fully believing that I could make it across.

My friends and I jumped in and they took off ahead of me. This didn't really bother me. I'd never been a great swimmer. Never taken swimming lessons. Never swam on a team. Never really spent much time in water, actually.

I was about half way across when my friends reached the other side. The water was calm, the weather was still bright. But as I paddled along, I realized that my arms and legs were not as strong as my brain thought they were. Giving myself a little pep talk as I kicked each foot and swung each arm forth in the water, I am sure if anyone had been close by they would have heard the refrain, "*I think I can, I think I can...*" Before too long, reality set in. I might have *thought I could*, but the reality was... I actually could not. Despite my best efforts, the shoreline before me seemed to stretch farther and farther away. As the dry land distanced itself from my reach, my destiny became clear. I wasn't going to make it.

As I struggled with the water, trying to stay afloat, I yelled out to my friends on shore. They couldn't hear me until after several moments of my trying to get their attention. Once they realized what was happening, that I honestly could not make it, one of them dove back into the water and swam out to help me. Eventually, with the help of my friends, I made it to dry land. But I have never forgotten the feeling of being halfway across Lake Junaluska and recognizing that I was not as strong as I thought I was and that I could not make it alone.

In those moments as I was caught between my limited capacities and the tremendous power of mother nature a sense of fear and awe was born within me. It was one of many humbling moments in which I realized that I was not invincible or immortal, but that one day (and it really could be any day) my time would come.

Water can be a beautiful thing but water can also be a terrifying thing. Water gives us life. Water makes up over half of our body composition. Without water, most of us could not survive more than a few days. Water grows our plants and keeps creation alive. But water also threatens our security and stability. When it rains too much root systems decay and trees fall. When too much water pools we experience flooding. Ask any homeowner what their biggest fear is and I bet you they'll say, "a slow and steady, undetectable leak."

It is absolutely, 100% impossible to live your life without experiencing both the beauty and the torment of water.

Today's readings from Isaiah and Luke again remind us of the beauty and the torment of water. As good students of the Bible, we already know that water plays a prominent role in both testaments. You may remember the flood of Genesis that wiped out almost all living things. You may remember the river that saved Baby Moses from the Pharaoh. You may remember the sea that crashed in on the Egyptians when they chased the Hebrew people as they fled from slavery. You may remember the seas that offered Jesus rest after teaching crowds. And you may remember those same seas that produced pescatarian feasts and famines for the disciples. These and many other stories from the Bible remind us that water in the ancient world was as ever-present and as unpredictable as it is today.

Perhaps that is why it makes such a good metaphor for our lives?

The first Sunday after Epiphany is celebrated by many churches as the Sunday of "the Baptism of our Lord." On this Sunday, they read the same verses that we did from Isaiah and Luke. What I like about this pairing on this particular Sunday is that it reminds us of both calling and challenge right at the beginning of the year. If you read them closely, both the prophet and the Gospel describe a people who are called by God to a particular vocation - a unique identity - a specific work and witness in the world that is God-given and theirs to maintain.

The people of Israel, for whom Isaiah's words were spoken, were God's chosen people. They had been molded and formed and shaped by God's covenant, and they spent their lives in the ebb and flow of righteous living. A quick read through the book's 66 chapters will have you on a rollercoaster ride of condemnation and redemption. God saves the people, they rebel, God punishes, they repent... after a while it begins to read like a parenting journal. As a reader it's easy to judge. But a quick reality check reminds us that we aren't all that different. Just like Israel, we are broken, imperfect, and in constant need of God's grace. Isn't that what baptism is all about? We acknowledge before God and church that we are broken people in need of God's forgiveness and grace.

I suppose it's fitting that this Sunday comes in the middle of January. We are only a couple of weeks into the new year and most of us have already lost sight of our resolutions. Those daily trips to the gym have become every other day. The new diets are compromised by the stressful day at work and the need for comfort food. The arguments with our spouse that we promised not to have so often, they're back. The quiet time in the morning set aside for reading, prayer, and reflection is impossible to defend while we juggle getting the kids ready for school and restless nights leading to early alarm clocks. Here we are in the middle of January, face to face with the reality that we are broken and imperfect people. I wonder if our baptismal promises fade as quickly as our new year's resolutions? How often do we think about our commitments professed in those waters – a promise to die to self and live for God, following Jesus in the way that the disciples modeled for us.

Sometimes our brokenness feels like a trap, like we're doomed to fail from the beginning. Sometimes it seems as though the only way out is to turn around, to resign ourselves to thinking that we had set our goals too high, and that reconciliation and healthy relationships aren't really possible. I've heard folks describe this feeling as if they are drowning in the sea of life, struggling to get their feet on dry land, searching for the life boat.

Do you ever feel that way?

I remember that Junaluska experience as I think about the times in my life when I have felt myself to be drowning. Drowning in responsibilities and commitments, drowning in hopes and dreams, drowning (or feeling like I'm drowning) even when I'm on the path I believe I'm supposed to be on. As tempting as it is sometimes to turn around and find a more comfortable path, I remember that the words from Isaiah do not say "when you pass through the waters, when they get too high, retreat!" Or... "if you pass through rough waters, this may not be the right direction." No, Isaiah says, "do not fear... when you pass through the waters, I will be with you. And the waves will not overwhelm you... do not fear."

There is a forward motion and directive to God's call through the prophets. A calling that draws us deep into the water with a directive "do not fear" and a promise "I will be with

you.” And a calling that is both individual and communal. The people certainly had struggles of their own, but their lives were rooted in community. For God’s chosen people, Israel, the covenant as well as their sin and redemption was communal.

In today’s Gospel reading from Luke we meet Jesus as he, too, is stepping into the water. Joined by others in response to John’s call for a baptism of repentance and forgiveness, Jesus enters the water and is baptized. It’s important to note that in Luke’s Gospel, Jesus is not baptized alone, off, in a private moment with John. No, he joins a crowd that had already gathered and they go into the water together. This may seem like a small detail but remember that John’s theology of baptism is one of repentance and forgiveness. If we believe that Jesus is without sin then as we read this story we begin to see that Jesus’ baptism is an act of community and solidarity with the people.

Maybe Jesus’ actions in the wilderness with John and the crowds is an example of God’s own solidarity with us as we recognize our own need for forgiveness. Some of us in this room have already decided to enter the water of baptism, accepting our brokenness and publicly declaring our need for God’s forgiveness. Others may not have taken that step; but all of us – when we’re honest – recognize that we are broken and imperfect. We are broken individuals, living in broken communities, operating within broken systems, and even worshipping in broken churches. But, if Jesus is in the practice of getting into the water with us, and if the God of Isaiah promises that when we pass through the waters – all kinds of waters – That God will be with us, then shouldn’t we also have a little faith that the Spirit of God might be holding us all together even in our brokenness? Maybe the healing is in the water itself?

The text says that when Jesus emerged from the water and began to pray, the heavens opened and a voice came with the same promise that you and I receive when we receive God’s forgiveness, “you are my Beloved.” This promise echoes that of the prophet who proclaims to Israel “I have redeemed you, I have called you by name, you are mine.” In both cases the water reveals the healing promise that we are loved, we are accepted, we are claimed, and we are called forth by God.

Those ancient blessings are there and available for us if we are willing to follow Jesus into the water.

Do not fear. I have called you by name. You are mine. My beloved.

Now I know... water can be a terrifying thing. It can remind us of our inadequacies and shortcomings. It can force us to deal with the sins of our past and our present. It can cause rot; and it can threaten to take our very breath away.

But water can also be a beautiful thing. If we are willing to face our fears, admit to our weaknesses, and own our brokenness – the waters that we are most afraid of can save our lives, rebuild our communion, and restore the church as a healing force in our world.

When I think about what this looks like – I remember my friends that afternoon at Lake Junaluska who recognized that I was struggling and unable to swim the whole distance. They were the church for me that day. They saw my need, they called my name, they came to where I was and they brought me back to shore. But it demanded that they get back into the deep with me.

What if the church were like those friends of mine, those who were courageous enough to get back into the water... What if we could bring the church to life, carrying the promise that we are God's broken beloved out into the world?

We haven't been together long, but when I look at you, I see a people who are indeed broken, worn down, tossed about by the waters of life. You probably see the same in me and you can see it in each other. I also see a people who love one another and who are faithfully committed to being God's church in this world. In only a few days with you I have seen the ways that you pour out God's blessing – naming refugees, Buddy Break VIPs, caregivers, parents, grandparents, and all the others who this world has named "broken" – and you have called them beloved.

I see a people who want a church where they can gather for healing and empowerment for the week ahead. I see individuals trying to reckon with imperfection and a messy reality, and yet trying to hold onto that sacred promise that you are God's beloved.

And I see a crowd of people – not unlike that crowd that Jesus joined down by the baptismal waters – ready to love and forgive one another, ready to embrace and empower one another, and ready to move forward together as one church, broken, beloved, and beautifully proclaiming the love of God in this neighborhood, and everywhere else we may go.

Water can be a terrifying thing;
but water can also be a beautiful thing.

What do you say?

Shall we step in together?

Invitation to water

There are two bowls of water near the back doors of the sanctuary. They're there for you to touch as you leave the sanctuary today. As you leave today, you're invited to touch the water and remember your baptism. Remember your brokenness and remember your beloved-ness. And as you remember the grace and forgiveness that you have experienced in God's love, may God use you to bring that same promise "you are my beloved" into every corner of this broken world.

Benediction

As you leave the comfort of this sanctuary
Depart knowing first and foremost that God has called you Beloved
And God has promised never to leave you to tread the waters alone.

So as you go, go in peace,
Knowing the God who created you calls you deep into the water.

Go with grace,
Knowing that the God who calls you into the deep is there with you every step of the way

And go in love,
Awake, Aware, and ready to lavish the world with the love that you have received from
God made known to us in Jesus Christ.

Amen.