“Wonder Water”

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Matthew 3:13-17, The Baptism of Jesus

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## 13 Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. 14John would have prevented him, saying, ‘I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?’ 15But Jesus answered him, ‘Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness.’ Then he consented. 16And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. 17And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.’

Have you seen the movie *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* It is a whimsical retelling of Homer’s Odyssey set in 1937 rural Mississippi. Three hapless escaped convicts—Everett, Pete, and Delmar—are hiding out in the woods, running from the law. There they encounter a procession of white-robed people going down to the lake to be baptized. As those people move toward the water they sing,“Let’s go down to the river and pray…”

As the baptism ceremony begins, Delmar is overwhelmed by the beauty and mystery of this rite. He runs into the water and is baptized by the minister. As he returns to his companions, he declares that he is now saved and “neither God nor man’s got nothing on me now.” He explains that the minister has told him that all his sins have been washed away. Even, he says, when he stole the pig which had sent him to jail. “But you said you were innocent of that,” one of his fellow convicts exclaims.“I lied,” he says, “and that’s been washed away too!”

Later the three convicts steal a hot pie from a windowsill. Delmar returns and places a dollar bill on the windowsill. Delmar wasn’t made perfect by his baptism any more than the rest of us are made perfect by our baptism. However, he was aware that his baptism created an opportunity for him to have a new beginning.

Most of us sitting here have been baptized. Depending upon the Christian tradition in which we were baptized…some of us have been *dunked*…immersed in water, some of us have been *sprinkled…*had water sprinkled or poured on our head. All of us who have been baptized have had an easy time of it compared to those who were baptized in the early church. Those folks went through a 3-year education process called *catechesis* before they could be baptized.

Everyone was baptized on Easter morning as a symbol of rising with Christ and entering a new life. They walked down several steps into a pool of water and then walked up steps on the other side where a white robe was placed upon their naked body.

Water is the most valuable resource on the planet. All living things—fish, animals, plants, and humans---need water to survive. Our ancestors in the faith understood the value of water for both our physical and spiritual lives.

The Bible begins in Genesis with waters covering the face of the earth and ends in Revelation with the vision of a river that flows from the throne of God. In the Exodus story, we read of Moses floating down a river as a baby, later leading the people of Israel through the divided waters of the Red Sea, tapping a rock in the desert from which water flowed. After 40 years of wandering in the desert, Moses’ successor, Joshua, leads the people across the waters of the Jordan into the Promised Land. Jesus and his disciples, several of whom were fishermen, spent a good bit of their time around water.

Jesus walked on water, calmed a storm while they were on a boat in the Sea of Galilee,

talked about living water with a Samaritan woman who had come to the well in the middle of the day to get water for her household. When Jesus healed a man born blind by putting mud on his eyes, he told the man to wash in a pool to complete the miracle. And…at the very beginning of his ministry…Jesus went out to the waters of the Jordan River to meet his relative John, to be baptized by him.

Our baptism by water is one of the most sacred moments in our lives…and in the church’s life.

It isn’t an initiation ceremony. We aren’t joining a fraternity or sorority or the Kiwanis or the Rotary Club. We are becoming a member of the Body of Christ. It is a most holy moment and a moment that will mark us for the rest of our lives. I particularly like the way The Message version of the Bible states what the voice said as the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus as John baptized him at the Jordan River…"This is my Son, chosen and **marked by my love**, delight of my life."

By the waters of baptism, we too are **marked by God’s love**. When the waters of baptism flow over us, we, or our parents for those of us baptized as infants, are saying that God has a claim on us…we belong to God.

What does being washed in the waters of baptism…being “marked by God’s love”…mean?

Does it mean we have to make amends for our wrong doings as Delmar did when he placed the dollar bill on the windowsill for the pie he and Everett and Pete had stolen? Yes. Whenever we have wronged someone and there is some way to make amends…as people *marked by love* that *is* what we do.

However, being washed in the waters of baptism isn’t *just* about making up for the things we do wrong… it is also about acknowledging and living out *in our lives* what our baptism allows us to do. Martin Luther is known to have frequently said out loud: *“I am baptized.”*

Martin Luther needed to constantly remind himself that he was a child of God, *washed* in the waters of baptism, *marked* by God’s love. By reminding himself, *“I am baptized,”* he was able to be *and* do far more than he otherwise would have.

What about us? What does being washed in the waters of baptism…*marked by God’s love*…mean to us?

I think I know what some of your answers might be…

Because you have been washed in the waters of baptism and bear the mark of God’s love, you were able to tell the person who wanted a kickback for insuring your company was awarded a contract to get lost.

Because you have been washed in the waters of baptism and bear the mark of God’s love:

you have faced the reality of your addiction to alcohol or food or drugs or sex or pornography…and are seeking the help and support you need.

Others of you are feeling the Spirit working in you, nudging you to face your addiction and seek that help and support.

Being washed in the waters of baptism and bearing the mark of God’s love:

has given you the strength and courage to face life altering illness and disease…or stand by the side of someone who is.

Being washed in the waters of baptism and bearing the mark of God’s love:

means you have been able to put aside being focused solely on *your* needs and more focused on the needs *of others*.

Being washed in the waters of baptism and bearing the mark of God’s love:

means you volunteer at the Clifton Sanctuary Ministries shelter for homeless men by providing dinner the first Friday of each month.

Being washed in the waters of baptism and bearing the mark of God’s love:

means you are willing to step outside of your comfort zone so someone else will have the opportunity to experience the love of Jesus Christ.

We are called to exercise our faith, and when we do, the waters of our baptism flow from our pores to encourage the least, the last, and the lost. Do *we* find *comfort* in being marked by God’s love in the waters of baptism as Martin Luther did when frequently he said out loud, *“I am baptized.”*? Do *we* find *joy* in being marked by God’s love in the waters of our baptism as Delmar did when he responded, “I lied and that’s been washed away too!”?

What does it mean *to you* that you have been marked by God’s love in the waters of baptism?

What difference does it make *to anyone else* that you have been marked by God’s love in the waters of baptism?

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.