

Baptized in Muddy Water

Acts 8:14-17; Luke 3:15-22

Rev. Elliott Munn

January 10, 2016

Where I grew up in Maine, I knew plenty of rivers and streams that teemed at the edges with pure water rushing over moss-slicked rocks. Its initial coolness took your breath away as you waded deeper and deeper into the current. Look up river and you might see a canoe gliding towards you or fish popping from the surface. Pan to the shore and you'll see a mix of deciduous trees and perhaps even a deer lapping a drink from the water's edge.

Now, if this is what you think of when you hear the word river, this is about as far from what you will find at the Jordan as you can get. The land we associate with the baptismal site that extends from the banks of the Jordan River is mostly desert. The adjectives that come to my mind when describing the water are murky and rank. We can assume that the river had some more gravitas before 20th century damming, but considering how amazing story of Jesus' baptism is you would expect that they could have come up with a more picturesque setting.

In the muddy waters of the Jordan, where silt clings to your skin long after the water dries, is where Jesus came to be baptized with all of the people. Not because of his sinfulness, but because the person of God he knew as God the Father called him. And in that moment of his baptism, the third person of God, the Holy Spirit descended upon him like a dove, filling him, inspiring him to a prophetic ministry. Then God, the Father, spoke: "With you my son, I am well pleased." This Holy Spirit equipped him to survive temptation in the wilderness, perform countless miracles, and pave the way of abundant life for all. The Spirit's movement was so palpable, so tangible, it was as if God swooped down in the form of a dove before filling Jesus.

This, of course, doesn't mean the Holy Spirit is a bird. We simply feel her presence so vividly that we associate her with the realm of physical experience: wind, fire, a tingling in the arms. To be filled with the Spirit is to feel fully alive, even when your circumstances may not be so grand.

To be frank, there isn't much good we can do without the help of the Spirit. John the Baptist's words this week illustrate this very point. When he describes the messiah, he uses the image of a person separating the wheat from the chaff, winnowing fork in hand. For those of you, like me, who didn't grow up on a farm, wheat is a grass with a seed encased by a husk at its end. The seed is the part you eat, while the chaff is the casing. The separation process occurs when the wheat head flies from the winnowing fork and the head of wheat falls to the threshing floor while the wind, one of the primary biblical metaphors for the Holy Spirit, blows away the lighter chaff. Fire, yet another common metaphor for the Spirit, burns the chaff. Even the Messiah has need of the Spirit!

It doesn't matter if it occurred in muddy water or the tallest of tall steeple churches, what makes your baptism worth anything at all is the Holy Spirit. We are a church open to all and affirming of everyone's gifts for ministry, because we believe the Holy Spirit is moving all who come through these doors. The reason all members have a vote in our annual meetings is because we believe the Holy Spirit is coursing through us all. Being at her essence relationship, she binds us together by binding us to Christ.

That's what we celebrate in our baptism. In the sacramental rite, we have a visible sign of God's invisible grace. Regardless of whether you were dunked as an adult or sprinkled as a baby, the water that glistens the forehead is a visible sign of the Holy Spirit invisibly washing over the newly baptized.

Now, Christians are traditionally only baptized once with water and God promises that the Holy Spirit will always be with them, but the Spirit can feel unpredictable and at times deserting. The sacrament of Baptism does not guarantee us on a direct route to Christian perfection or comfort. We have the habit of getting in our own way and forgetting that it's the living, breathing Holy Spirit that leads our way in a world that changes so fast.

As we see in our readings from Acts this morning, when the Spirit is neglected. Philip had spread the good news to the city of Samaria, went toe to toe with the magician Simon, and baptized crowds of people there. Something was still missing—they couldn't feel the presence of the Spirit. This story is not rich with details, but you can imagine sending a letter to Peter and John, "Get down here quick. Things are getting rough around here without the Spirit. Actually it's terrible. I can't help but wonder whether the Spirit was ever truly with us here."

Now, I know many of you have been some times here at the Church that made you question whether the Spirit was truly with you. You needed the help of some outsiders to sit with you, pray with you, and remember that the Holy Spirit was indeed with you. They helped you discern how to best live into the place the Holy Spirit is calling.

This past Wednesday, I sat with the Deacons' of the church, while Geordie explained the logistics of our upcoming by-laws restructuring. Looking around the table, I saw some faces alternating between surprise and disbelief. Just as I did, they were processing how a church in which so much is going right could have by-laws that were so out of whack with the culture of the church and the culture at-large. Nevertheless, they trusted that the group of members who took step a back to see the big picture and lead them in a new direction. The by-laws team spent countless hours reviewing consultant reports and best practices worked hard to discern the movement of the Holy Spirit and to share it with us.

To put it succinctly, the group was helping us remember our Baptism. That day when water, muddy with God's grace, marked for the world to see the Holy Spirit taking root in you. How many of you remember the day you were baptized? ... I was baptized with my mother and two brothers on June 20, 1993.

It's a day to remember when you need the reminder that God's Holy Spirit has in fact never left you, even when times are tough. Whenever a wave crashes over you at the ocean or you get caught outside in the rain, there's a chance to remember your baptism. Even if you get hit square in the head with a water baptism, think of it as a chance to remind yourself, "how about that baptism!" You don't need a pristine setting. After all, even Jesus was baptized in muddy water.

Alright Geordie, how about you come to the font with me. Now, some of them don't look like they got quite wet enough this morning. So now Geordie and I are going to walk to give you just a little extra reminder. (Geordie and I sprinkle the congregation with water from the baptismal font.) Feel free to let out a loud, "how about that baptism?" If you haven't been baptized, think of this as a precursor and feel free to come and talk with Geordie or me if you would like.

Now that we've been doused with water, let's come together in prayer. Holy One, who we know in three persons, send your Holy Spirit upon us to pull us together and help us to follow your lead. Amen.

© 2015 Rev. Elliott Munn

First Church
12 South Main Street
West Hartford, CT 06107