

## **Wade in the Water**

First Congregational Church – Oshkosh, WI

January 10, 2016 – First Sunday after Epiphany

The symbols and stories that make up our collective psyche as a community are so much a part of who we are and what surrounds us that we don't notice them until we are jarred by some major upset or catastrophe such as a devastating tornado, a five hundred year flood, or worse yet, political revolution, foreign invasion, or clash of civilizations. It's when the symbols and stories that have shaped our lives are no longer available or no longer make sense that we begin to question who we are.

This is precisely what happened to ancient Israel. They were defeated by foreign powers, and sent into exile. Then, after two generations in a foreign land, where they sat down and wept when they thought of all they had lost, they were free to return to what was left of their homeland. Their experience of defeat in war and being uprooted from their homes was so overwhelming that their poetry and music was filled with images of waters and fire. The references in Isaiah to waters and rivers not only recalls those ancient stories of the Exodus out of Egypt but also their more recent memory of military destruction. Their lives had been turned upside down. Nothing was the same in Babylon as it had been in Israel.

When the opportunity came for them to return to their homeland, they were no longer certain why they would do so. The very ground beneath their former lives had shifted. More than ever they needed to know who they were. Into that period stepped the prophet Isaiah who reminded them who they were by claiming whose they were: “Now, says the Lord, the One Who created you, O Jacob, the One who formed you, O Israel...I have called you by name, you are mine.”

Who we are is constituted by whose we are. This is a profound truth. I am who I am in my relationships with and responsibilities toward others. My parents placed claims on me, and so have my children. Fanny too placed claims on me in marriage and so has the church in ordination. All of these relationships have made me who I am. The prophet taught ancient Israel that we are also constituted by God’s claim on us. The people’s identity was inseparable from their relationship with and responsibility toward God.

Throughout history, humanity has shown a tendency to draw its identity along familial, tribal, and partisan lines. Our symbols shape our identity. But, when the conditions of our lives change so dramatically that what we thought was solid begins to crack and lack coherence, some symbols will recede or die and others emerge. Only those symbols and

stories that can illuminate and help us make sense of our new reality will endure.

As a sacrament and symbol of our faith, Baptism has shaped the collective memory and psyche of the Church. The Church has often drawn its identity along familial, tribal, cultural lines. Built into the symbolic reality of Baptism are various church polities that endeavor to distinguish between who is or isn't inside the community. We have often spoken of the sacrament as though it were an initiation rite that the Church controls rather than a sacred gift from God by which the Church itself is drawn closer to a loving God. Baptism, that ancient symbolic act of faithful people since the origins of post-exilic Judaism and early Christianity, literally pushes against any attempt to draw a circle around the community of faith that might make it exclusive. In Baptism each of us is sealed by the claims of God the Creator and God's beloved creation upon us. In this sacrament who we are is constituted by whose we are.

In the earliest days of the Protestant Reformation there were numerous attempts to teach understandings of sacred rites. Catechetical courses were created, among them the Heidelberg Catechism which is an historic document of our denomination. The very first question asked in this teaching method was "*What is your only comfort in life or in*

*death?”* The answer given is one that sustained many through every trying moment of their lives:

*“I belong, body and soul, in life or in death, not to myself but to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ...”*

Baptism is the Church’s age-old sacrament that symbolizes God’s claim on us through Jesus Christ. On this First Sunday after Epiphany, the Church remembers Jesus’ baptism. In Luke’s account of that event we read earlier that a voice was heard proclaiming Jesus as God’s own. In our Church’s liturgies we often say with each administration of the Sacrament, “You are a child of God, sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism, and you belong to Jesus Christ forever.” Water and Spirit, not flesh and blood, seal our identities as children of God.

Our little church in middle Tennessee, on the Cumberland Plateau, founded by the Congregationalists at almost the same time as FCC, incorporated this into its architectural plan of the new sanctuary. A stream of water flowed in the concrete from beneath the Baptismal font, at the front of the church, meandered across the floor of the sanctuary and went out through the doors that led to the memorial garden, where cremains of many members now mix with soils of the mountains. The symbol is powerful for all to see that it is from the moment of Baptism until the moment we are transformed from this life to the next that God’s

claim upon us is unalterable and our lives move with that Spirit throughout eternity.

The three synoptic gospels testify to the baptism of Jesus. Mark's (the earliest gospel) has the briefest account. Three verses in the first chapter. John baptizes Jesus in the River Jordan. The voice comes from heaven proclaiming him to be "my son, the Beloved." And, Jesus immediately goes into the wilderness. Matthew (of whom I spoke last week) took Mark's account and added an interchange between John the Baptist and Jesus to demonstrate that it was necessary for Jesus to be baptized so that Hebraic tradition and custom be honored. As you heard read earlier, Luke alludes to the baptism of Jesus in only two verses of chapter three. He doesn't say who did it, but we assume it was John. Luke's version could be termed a post-baptismal narrative for it indicates that it was while Jesus was praying that "*the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with whom I am well pleased.'*"

John's gospel places Jesus at the River Jordan where John the Baptist is baptizing persons as a cleansing from sin. In this story Jesus is not actually baptized by anyone, but John the Baptist is credited with hearing the voice from heaven and declaring who Jesus is, *the Lamb of God*. Unlike the Synoptic gospels however, John's gospel does not

contain the story about Jesus being actually baptized nor tempted in the wilderness following his encounter with John the Baptist.

Luke's gospel is the most reasoned, calm, and orderly Gospel. It does not claim divinity for Christ, but a glorious messiahship; Jesus is the holy teacher who shows the way; he leads Israel and all the world back to a prayerful acknowledgement of the fatherhood of the one God. The coming of Jesus, attended by signs from heaven, does not interrupt sacred history of Israel; it fulfills it. But Luke's gospel, as Annie Dillard has written, *is calm and plausible only compared with the swirling bewilderments of Mark and the intergalactic leaping's of John. All of the gospels are unprecedented, unequalled, singular texts.*

In Luke, Jesus makes no claims to be the only Son of God. Luke was a monotheist: Jesus is the Son of Man (a Messianic term), but Jesus is never God's only-begotten Son, of one substance with the Father, who came down from heaven, as was the claim of the church at its Council of Nicaea three centuries after Luke wrote the gospel. Luke never claims that Jesus was begotten before all worlds as does John's gospel, nor that he was "very God of very God" as later creedal statements of the Church declared. Luke doesn't claim that Jesus' divinity is the sole path to salvation. The people whom Jesus encounters in Luke's gospel is a rogue's gallery of Hebraic and Gentile backgrounds. He saves them.

They need not, and do not, swear allegiance to creedal statements before being accepted by him.

What awaited Jesus was, as it is for us in our walk with the Lord, uncertain, unspecified. So, my friends, go ahead. Wade in the waters of this world and trust your faith that has brought you this far. Dive into the gospels and their swirling accounts of the One named Jesus and learn anew what thinking Christians have sought to teach us over the generations: that we look through these books that emerged from the first century as through a cloudy glass toward a brilliant light. The Gospel writers, whether rememberers or editors of others' memories, themselves were looking through accretions of oral and written history toward events as distant from them as World War Two is from most of us in this room. Go ahead, wade in the water children!

When Luke finished the Gospel his work was only half complete. He went on to write "The Acts of the Apostles." What a pity that the Christians came so quickly after the Christ. Here they come, flawed to the core, full of unashamed absurdity and hurried self-importance. Who can believe these people? They set out to take over the world: converting emperors, raising armies, lining their pockets and temples with gold, doing evil things, century after century. They are smug. They are busy. They are not innocent. They are not shepherds or fisherman in first

century dress. They are just like us. As Gandhi said so well, “I could believe in Christ were it not for them, the Christians.”

Who can believe, when we are honest about our own history that salvation is for Christians? It seems that Luke’s Jesus believed it. God knows we are human, full of all kinds of bad intentions, all of us, and he declares we are his people anyway. Unless those scamps and scalawags who populate the gospels were just like we; unless those pure disciples and watercolor women – who seemed to turn into Christians overnight – were as complex and selfish as we, who lived in a material world, and whose errors and evils were not pretty but ugly, and had real consequences... if they were just like we, then Christ’s words to them are also addressed to us, in full and merciful knowledge. Go ahead, wade in the water Christians. Wade in those waters today and every day until you hear the words, “You are my own, my beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

Amen.



