



## ***Caught in the Current***

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Luke 3

<sup>15</sup> As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah,<sup>[a]</sup> <sup>16</sup> John answered all of them by saying, “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with<sup>[b]</sup> the Holy Spirit and fire. <sup>17</sup> His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

<sup>21</sup> Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, <sup>22</sup> and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved;<sup>[a]</sup> with you I am well pleased.”<sup>[b]</sup>

Growing up on the Gulf Coast of Florida we spent a fair amount of time at the beach in my childhood. So did many of my friends and, as children are prone to do, we passed around scary stories we had overheard on the news – or, more likely, at a sleepover – about kids who got caught in the undertow. The moral of these stories was always the same: swim *with* the current, not against it, and you would probably turn out alright. Water is a dangerous, and a beautiful, and a powerful thing.

The Jordan River, as I understand it, is not quite the Gulf of Mexico. There would have been no undertow to speak of, but certainly there was something sweeping people away as they journeyed out to the wilderness to hear from the prophet John.

It’s important to remember that as we read this account of Jesus’ baptism today, we’re reading it in the gospel of Luke. And Luke is interested in giving us some context, setting the scene a

little, so that we will hear this story in relationship to the larger narrative of which Jesus is a part. The gospel of Luke is the only one of the gospels that gives us a glimpse into what John was teaching that was enticing enough to draw people out of the comfort and safety of their walled cities, out of the predictability of their daily lives, and into the wilderness to take a dip in the river.

In all of the gospels we hear him proclaiming that the one who is greater than he is still to come, using messianic language, preparing the way; but in Luke, John says all that and then, he offers the people some practical wisdom for how to live in light of the repentance they've symbolized in their baptism. In the verses just preceding our passage for today we find these instructions – I'm paraphrasing: If you have two coats, he says, that's one too many, and there's someone who needs the extra you've got. Same goes for food. And you tax collectors: it's great that you're here getting caught up in the religious fervor, but let me remind you that your work is the place where your faith is born out. I don't just mean being kind to your secretary, I mean that you are a part of a system that has social power to do good or to do evil, and though your part may be small you do play a part. So maybe it's the norm to inflate the tax rates a little to provide for your own family; I'm telling you to find an honest way to provide. Take no more than the amount prescribed for you – and perhaps if you find when you do that you're not making enough to sustain your lifestyle, you'll need to re-examine that lifestyle in the first place. If you're going to claim to follow this God, you're going to have to be willing to put in the work it requires to live with integrity before God.

This is the John the Baptist of Luke's gospel. (Kind of a hard-liner, right?) I have often struggled to make John the Baptist into a real person in my mind; honestly it's because in Matthew and Mark he's such a flat character, less of a man and more of a plot device. He wears camel's hair, which is, you know, weird – so that's memorable. But in Luke, we get the idea that John the Baptist is a real person – and he's got something to say. And, as is the case for most prophets, the things he's saying are not easy to hear. But for one reason or another, people keep coming.

When it's hard to hear and people still want to come hear it, that's usually how you can know you've hit on something true.

This was not how I understood the story of Jesus' baptism when I was growing up. In fact, I wouldn't even say I understood Jesus' baptism at all. I was a pretty engaged student of the Bible in my Southern Baptist upbringing. But I had graduated and gone off to college before I ever thought to ask the question – why was Jesus baptized? (Actually, I didn't even think of it myself at that point, it was a professor who asked the question.) It was just one of those stories we accepted and moved on. Maybe this isn't as much of a conundrum for you but given my understanding of baptism at the time it really put me out of sorts when I was finally presented with the question. I had been taught to understand baptism as the public indication of a private exchange that had taken place between you and God, the marker that you had prayed your sinner's prayer and your soul was now saved from hell. ...So, why did Jesus need to participate in that symbol? And for that matter, what business did John have baptizing people before Jesus had died on the cross anyway? Who was he even baptizing them in the name of?! My eighteen-year-old mind was blown.

When I think back to how puzzled I was at this question, why Jesus would participate in the ritual of baptism, I cannot help but think that I had all the wrong concerns on my mind. It's like I forgot to turn on the imaginative side of my brain. I was an English major, for goodness sakes – the imagery should have been the first thing that stood out to me. The river Jordan is by no means the first time water has played a starring role in the Bible, the scriptures are soaked through with stories of the waters:

In the opening poem of Genesis, God creates the ordered world from out of the midst of the waters of chaos;

the waters overtake the creation in the flood;

Jacob wrestles with God on the banks of the River Jabbok;

Moses parts the waters to lead the people to freedom;

it is by the rivers of Babylon that the people weep in their exile;

the psalmists and prophets speak of God's reality as a stream of water in the desert and a river of justice rolling onward.

The water itself is imbued with meaning and depth before John or Jesus ever step foot in it. The image holds power. And if this image is about more than a theological transaction, as I was beginning to believe then and fully believe now, then maybe we ought to spend some time diving into that imagery. What does it mean – what does it look like, feel like, sound like – to enter the waters of baptism?

I've told you I'm not so much a 3-point sermon preacher, but I do find that things tend to come in threes, so we'll call this a 3-image sermon. The force of the symbol and story of baptism lies in its imagery, and there are at *least* three: images of cleansing, images of burial and raising up, and images of entering into the river's flow.

As it turns out, baptism is a symbol with roots going back further than Christian tradition. (This might seem obvious if you've ever stopped to consider that there were folks ahead of Jesus in line at the river and they obviously weren't there becoming Christians.) For example, the Dead Sea Scrolls give us a glimpse into the ritual cleansing practices of the Qumran community that existed around the time of Jesus. These sectarian Jews participated in services of ritual cleansing in special pools called "mikvahs" that are preserved to this day. Spiritual cleansing is a beautiful part of the imagery of baptism, and it is a practice found in some form or another in many of the world's religions. There is something universal and deeply true about the human hunger to be wiped clean, to make a new start. Certainly Jesus' own baptism marked a kind of beginning for him, here at the outset of his ministry. Recognizing beginnings is a valuable thing.

Have you encountered any of those "One Second Everyday" videos on your Facebook feed lately? This is the time of year they show up, right around the new year, and it seems like my feed is full of them, enough so that I've gotten sucked into trying it at least for a while – we'll see how that goes. For those who aren't familiar, there's a smartphone app called "One Second Everyday" where you can store a one-second video each day for a year, and at year's end it will

stitch them all together into a little montage of the last year of your life. It's sweet, sentimental. As I was in the process of getting sucked in this week I came across a blog post a woman had written about it, and one of the benefits she pointed out was that when you see yourself a year ago, even in one-second increments, you can be reminded of the things that mattered to you then. She cited her own example of watching herself begin a recycling habit that didn't make it more than a few weeks, but in the act of watching it she was reminded of her original motivations, and inspired to give it another shot. It does seem that it is often when we are in those moments of new beginnings, of clarity and simplicity, when the slate has been wiped clean, that we are most clear on where our convictions actually lie. The cleansing imagery of baptism holds that power of clarity and focus.

Within the Christian tradition, when we participate in a baptism service the language often used is that of being "buried with Christ" and "raised to walk in newness of life." The practice of baptism by immersion (better known as "dunking"), as we here at Northminster practice in the bayou, so I've been told, gives us a visible reminder of this symbolism as the new Christian is momentarily "buried" under the water, and then physically raised back up to symbolize the raising up of the soul into a new kind of life, an abundant life.

Obviously this wasn't what John the Baptist intended with his baptizing as Christ had not yet been buried or raised. But for us on the other side of the story, there is a world of meaning to pull out of this image of all the things we are dying to – the attitudes, the habits, the inclinations, the fears – and all the different forms resurrection can take. I invite you to spend some time with that image this week, because it is an image that will look different for each one of us.

The image I want to spend the most time with has less to do with the act of baptizing and more with the setting in which it takes place: the river. On a literary level, in the gospel of Luke, Jesus' baptism scene serves the purpose of emphasizing the succession of Jesus over and above John the Baptist, as a way of saying that yes, Jesus is greater than John the Baptist (because that was

a thing some people were concerned about in the first century). At the same time, it also emphasizes that Jesus is in line with the larger tradition of which John the Baptist was also a part. So when Jesus gets caught up in the flow of that tradition through listening to John's preaching and taking his place in the baptismal line – you remember what John was preaching – that ought to tell us something about what we're getting ourselves into when we follow Jesus in baptism.

The waters of the Jordan are fluid, they are constantly in motion. As the great poet Pocahontas once said, "What I love most about rivers is you can't step in the same river twice." (It was the animated Pocahontas.) And yet in the same moment that we recognize the ever-changing nature of the river, that we will never see the same drop of water from one moment to the next, we can't help but recognize that the river itself remains a constant. It has a character of its own, a history; it is more than the sum of its parts.

I suppose what I am suggesting is that the river may be just as much a character in this story as John – or his cousin. The river is this tradition of Christ, of John the Baptist, of the Hebrew prophets, and Jesus beckons us to follow him and come on in, knowing that when we do, we too will be caught in the current.

Because the gospel has a momentum to it.

It is possible to wade in the shallows, keeping our toes in the water and not much else. But if we allow ourselves to release what's holding us to the shore, we too are caught up in the current of God's love, of God's care for the poor and marginalized, of a call toward integrity and justice and righteousness that goes beyond our pious attitudes and polite civility in the narthex.

The call of the river, the flow of the river, the momentum of this river is one that must lead us ever onward toward the image of the kingdom of God that Luke would paint in such physical, tangible language throughout his gospel. It is in Luke's gospel that Jesus would preach not just

about the “poor in spirit” but the poor, period. It’s in this gospel that we find the radically subversive accounts of the women who were at Jesus’ side, supporting him financially, leading in ministry, the last at the cross, the first at the tomb. It’s in this gospel that we’ve already seen the good news told first to those in the lowest strata of society, to the shepherds in the fields, so that the news of the arrival of the great king of kings is offered first to those who have the least business hearing about it, and yet they are the heralds of the breaking in of this new age. This is the river that Jesus is stepping into. And when we join him in the waters of baptism, it’s the river we find ourselves in, as well.

As a part of this river, as drops in this endless river of life, we can draw strength from the knowledge that there are so many strong heroes upstream from us, so many from whom we can draw wisdom and inspiration, who have walked this road before us. We also can take solace in the knowledge that the river will flow on with or without our help, that no one mistake that we make or inadequacy that we bear is enough to dam up the wellspring that is its source; but we have to first do our part and jump on in.

So, where will the current carry us from here?

Amen.