

Haydenville Congregational Church
The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian
January 11, 2009
Mark 1:4-11

“...my soul has grown deep like the rivers...”

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

“In our family, there was no clear line between religion and fly fishing.” That is the first sentence of the novella *A River Runs Through It* by Norman Maclean. The opening paragraph continues: “We lived at the junction of great trout rivers in western Montana, and our father was a Presbyterian minister and a fly fisherman who tied his own flies and taught others. He told us about Christ’s disciples being fishermen, and we were left to assume, as my brother and I did, that all first-class fishermen on the Sea of Galilee were fly fishermen and that John, the favorite, was a dry-fly fisherman.”

Maclean’s story describes the crafts of fly fishing and forestry with beauty, humor and grace. He writes about family, friends, love, death and men working hard in the woods and fishing long hours on the water. The story moves from the Bitterroot Mountains to the wilderness of the Selway and Lochsa rivers to the headwaters of the Missouri and finally to the Big Blackfoot, the river that “runs through it.” Throughout the story, there are rivers and fishermen and fish and life lessons. The last line of the novella reads simply, “I am haunted by waters.”

It is—fortunately or unfortunately—a good line for us, as Christians, to remember and repeat...for waters also haunt all of us who profess the Christian faith. Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament, water imagery is present, powerful, and meaningful. Simply put: water is a part of the most dramatic stories in the Bible—the Spirit hovers over dark, chaotic water and brings forth creation; all of humankind (except Noah’s family) was wiped from the face of the earth in the flood; the chariots of Pharaoh were washed away after Moses parted the Red Sea; Jesus calls fishermen (maybe fly fishermen) as his disciples; Jesus walks on the water and Peter tries and sinks; Jesus calms a raging storm. Notice the water images in the Bible are rarely comforting—they represent

danger, risk, and sometimes new life. “The human imagination is consumed with images of water,” writes Pastor and Old Testament scholar Frank Yamada.

Like Norman Maclean, Langston Hughes reflected on water and rivers and their meaning in his poem “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,”

I've known rivers:

*I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow
of human blood in human veins.*

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.

I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.

I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.

*I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went
down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy bosom turn
all golden in the sunset.*

I've known rivers:

Ancient, dusky rivers.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

Just as Langston Hughes described in his fine poem, Jesus’ soul grew deep like the rivers. Jesus’ ministry began in a river. The story of Jesus’ ministry—not his birth but his ministry—begins in the River Jordan. At age 30, Jesus is baptized by John the Baptizer in the muddy Jordan. Although the story of Jesus’ baptism in the Book of Mark is often recounted as a nice story, a bucolic scene, it should not be stripped of its sense of drama and risk. Notice that the sky does not just open up when Jesus is baptized, it is “torn apart.” This is not insignificant in a Gospel that uses the same violent verb only one other time—to describe the temple curtain being torn apart when Jesus died. And Biblical scholar Elton Brown writes of a “dive-bombing Holy Spirit” that swoops in and names Jesus as God’s son.

The supposedly nice pastoral scene of Jesus’ baptism takes on new meaning when we consider the formidable interpretation in the African American spiritual “Wade in the Water” that warns, “Wade in the water, wade in the water, children, wade in the water, God’s gonna trouble the waters.”

And God did trouble the waters.

After Jesus’ momentous baptism in the Jordan when the heavens were “torn apart,” he departs—not for a triumphal, ceremonial beginning of his ministry—no, he is “driven” (the Bible says) into the wilderness for forty days where he is tempted by

Satan. The swirling waters of the Jordan and the baptism by John for the repentance of sins quickly move to Jesus' temptation in the wilderness—an ominous beginning to a powerful ministry that, in the Book of Mark, moves steadily and relentlessly to Jerusalem and the cross.

And so today, as we reflect on the story of Jesus immersed in the Jordan with John and we grasp the reality that water imagery in our world, in our literature, in our imaginations and in our Bible is filled with meaning and message, we pause to reflect on the significance of baptism—Jesus' and ours.

So what does baptism mean? The United Church of Christ recognizes only two sacraments—baptism and holy communion. We recognize just these two sacraments because we believe Jesus participated in them both—in others words, they both were a part of Jesus' own life—he was baptized by John and he broke and blessed bread with his disciples at the Last Supper.

Biblical scholar and teacher Marcus Borg writes, “Ritual immersion in water (both in Judaism and other cultures) can have two different meanings. When repeated frequently (as it was among the Essenes), it has the meaning of washing or purification. When it is a once-only ritual (as it was for John the Baptist) it may also be a purification, but its primary meaning is as an initiation ritual which symbolizes and confers a new identity.”

It is that new identity that I want to highlight now—the new identity of baptism that is evident in Jesus' own baptism and is available to us today. Mark tells us that just as Jesus is coming up out of the water, he sees the heavens torn apart and the Holy Spirit descends on him like a dove. And a voice from heaven says, “You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.” (Mk 1:9-11)

The significance for us is that at Jesus' baptism God accepts Jesus as his Son. Jesus is God's Son, the Beloved. Jesus was then and is for us now the Word of God in human form...the Way, the Truth, the Life...God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God. At Jesus' baptism, his true identity is revealed. And **THE SAME IS TRUE FOR US.** In the sacrament of baptism, we are connected to the body of Christ—the universal community of Christians that is nothing less than the flesh-and-blood physical presence of Jesus in the world today.

Pastor Bob Kaylor writes elegantly about the meaning of baptism for us today. He says, **“In this sacrament, we become children of God, no less loved and accepted than Jesus Christ himself.”**

Take that in deeply.

The water of baptism is a physical manifestation, a tangible reminder, a living symbol that we too are children of God, no less loved, no less accepted than Jesus himself.

Jesus was immersed in the dark and churning waters of the Jordan, and the heavens were torn apart and a voice broke forth from above saying, “You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.” Just as his new identity was proclaimed from on high, so it is with us. God names us and claims us as God’s Beloved with whom God is well pleased.

And once we know, really know, deeply know, that God has named us and claimed us and loves us as God’s own Beloved, our souls grow deep like the rivers. We move away from the safety of the shallows near the shore and into the deep waters of faith and a life of meaning and struggle and service. We claim the identity we know is our birthright—as God’s Beloved.

Again the words of Pastor Frank Yamada reflecting on the meaning of baptism: “When I remember my baptism, I reach back to hear the voice that speaks to me out of the waters—the voice that proclaims to a world of conflict that we are all “very good” and claims us all as “beloved.” The Spirit moves in and out of our busy lives, and there are times when I recognize the Spirit’s hovering presence beckoning all to a different order, to a new creation. As I reach for the water, whether in a font or on the ocean’s edge, I find myself trying to connect to the chaotic, life-giving and mysterious power that resides in its depths.”

Like Langston Hughes, we have known rivers. As Christians, we have known rivers, “ancient, dusky rivers.” And our souls—longing for God and connected to God—grow deep like the rivers.

And so when we feel that we are drowning—overwhelmed by the flood of the world’s anguish, pain and loss, when we are drowning because there is too much suffering around us or in our own hearts, when we are drowning in the reality that living life as a person of faith means living each day with a broken heart—we know we can be raised up, brought back to the surface gasping for air, and we can be and we will be filled by the breath of God.

That is the meaning of baptism. It is an ancient ritual that publicly declares that we are named and claimed by God, that we are God’s beloved, no less loved and accepted than Jesus himself. When we feel we are drowning, for whatever reason,

we can be raised up...wet, gasping, exhausted and frightened but raised up and filled with the breath of God.

And so it is accurate to say, I was baptized, that is true.

But it is also important to assert, "I AM baptized."

You would not say "I was married" if you still are. You would say "I am married" because it is an ongoing state, a current and lived reality.

So too with your baptism. It is a current and lived reality.

You are named and claimed by God.

You are God's beloved.

You are raised up and filled with the breath of the divine.

You ARE baptized.

And so my precious sisters and brothers, let us remember that as Christians, we are haunted and blessed by waters, as disciples, we are descendants of fishermen, as God's beloveds, we are never in danger of drowning. And as people of faith, our souls grow deep, like the rivers. Amen.