“Cleansing Waters”

Matthew 3:1-17

Rev. Rebecca Weaver Longino

First Presbyterian Church, Luling, TX

January 11, 2015

Whenever I read a story from the Bible, I like to think about the characters and their point of view. It can be helpful to insert ourselves into the story, discerning who it is that we relate to. It allows our imaginations to take flight with the Biblical narrative.

As we read this story of Jesus’ Baptism, which character do we relate to?

Are we like John the Baptizer? That oddball guy out in the wilderness with the weird clothing and the diet that would intrigue even the most adventurous foodie. He is the one who prepares the way, letting the people know that the kingdom of heaven is near. Just a note to clarify his message, he isn’t an apocalyptic prophet, claiming the end of the world is nigh. He states the Kingdom of Heaven is near. We’ll hear this phrase frequently in the Gospel of Matthew. The writer chooses to use this wording instead of “Kingdom of God” because he was writing to a Jewish audience who didn’t speak or write the word “God” out of respect and reverence for their Lord. When we hear Kingdom of Heaven, we can think Kingdom of God, which isn’t a location in the sky with pearly gates and clouds for chairs. John is not telling folks to get ready for the next life. He is telling them to get ready for in breaking of God’s kingdom in the world. He’s telling folks that the Messiah is coming and the world is about to change, big time.

Perhaps you relate to John the Baptizer. I confess I don’t. I’m not really the type to stand on the street corner and tell the masses to repent because Jesus is coming. I’m a tried and true Presbyterian, and my frozen chosen roots run too deep.

Are we like the Pharisees and Sadducees, coming to disrupt the baptisms and put a halt to anything that might threaten the empire? Let’s hope we’re not like them. I’m sure we have our days when we pose a threat to Christ’s work in the world. We get in the way and disrupt the work of the kingdom. But surely we’re not like the Pharisees and Sadducees who want to interfere with Jesus’ initiation into ministry. Hopefully we’re not that extreme.

But what about the crowd? They are another character in this story. The nameless people who ventured out to the wilderness from Judea and Jerusalem to hear John preach and to baptized. They only get a brief mention in this story, but their role is so intriguing. What led them to go out there with John? How did they hear about his message and why did they believe him? What was happening in their lives that they chose to repent of their sin and be baptized, with very little hesitation?

They must have been so downtrodden, so frustrated by their lot in life, that there was no need to hesitate. They and their families had suffered for centuries. The promises of worldly leaders had been empty and broken. The world had failed them. And so they sought hope in a higher power. Their hearts were stirred by this message that the Kingdom of Heaven is near. And so they venture out into that wilderness. Taking those steps of faith, one after the other, in hopes that the message is sincere. That God is about to do something radical for them. They hear John’s words. They wade out into the water, allowing God’s grace to be poured over them. They are thirsty for a better life.

The crowds venturing out into the wilderness remind me of the last time I was in Washington D.C. This is a sort of Mecca for many in our nation. Citizens are drawn there by the history and wonder of the nation’s capital.

I was there for a conference, but opted to arrive two days early so I could check out the museums and memorials. Like most people visiting that week, I was struck by the history and magnitude of the artifacts. It is a city which contains a tremendous about of meaning for our country. Visiting D.C. was a surreal experience. Just being there was enough for me. I didn’t expect anything huge or monumental to happen while I was touring around.

But one night I ventured out to find something for dinner and found myself caught up in a large crowd. There were police keeping people on the sidewalk and blocking traffic. I asked a woman nearby if she knew what was going on. She said the president was attending a show at the Lincoln Theater and he would arrive any minute. I suppose I assumed the president would be out of town while I was there, taking care of some diplomatic matter. I certainly didn’t expect to find myself 30 feet from where he’d be entering the Lincoln Theater. I decided to stick around and see if I could catch a glimpse of our nation’s leader and the first lady. Standing there, I listened to the crowd, excitedly talking about the moment. None of them knew that the president was going to be there. Like me, they were wandering around and just stumbled upon this opportunity to see him. I got the impression that there were Democrats and Republicans and Apathetic folks alike in the crowd. Regardless of political affiliation, everyone expressed excitement at this chance to see the president so close. We did get to see him as he stepped out of his limousine, waved to the crowd, and entered the building. The crowd cheered and expressed delight at this unexpected encounter.

I have to wonder if the crowd at the River Jordan had a similar reaction when Jesus showed up to be baptized. The crowd went to the wilderness, expecting a message of hope, and the opportunity to be baptized into this new reality of the Kingdom of God. They certainly didn’t expect to see the Messiah arrive, and to witness his baptism. They must have been awestruck as Jesus entered the water, the heavens opened up and that dove descends. A voice speaks declaring that Jesus is God’s son, confirming that he is the Lord.

Imagine being in the crowd and experiencing this sight. What an unexpected thrill to witness such a momentous event. To experience the official beginning of Jesus’ ministry on earth. To watch him go into that river to be baptized – not because he has to – he is sinless, after all, but because he wants to be in solidarity with humanity. He wants to make it clear that he is with us and one of us in this messy and broken world.

What an overwhelming encounter at those cleansing waters.

If you think about it, the crowd got to be part of the climax of Jesus’ story. This is the one moment where everything seems perfect. God has entered the world and is promising freedom and redemption. If we end the story here, we might believe that all is good and well and we can forget about the challenges that come afterward. Next week we will hear about his temptation in the wilderness. In the weeks to come we’ll hear about his persecution, his time on the cross and his death. Things go downhill after this scene at the Jordan River.

Before all of that happens, there is this one beautiful moment at the river where God is in solidarity with us. We in the crowd get to experience the wonder of being in God’s presence and witnessing the in breaking of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Whenever we encounter water, whether it is in a baptismal font or not, we can be reminded of this solidarity. That God has made a loving claim on us. We are accepted and loved, no matter what.

The water cleanses us from sin, but it also cleanses that divided relationship between us and God. The brokenness between God and humanity is repaired and made whole. We’re brought into the kingdom completely.

It’s rather profound that water is the element used for baptism. Such a simple thing. Something that we encounter daily through bathing and cooking and weather events. Each of these encounters with water can serve as a reminder of our own baptisms. We may not be overwhelmed with wonder as the crowd was that day at the Jordan, but if we’re thinking about it, we can turn any encounter with water into a moment to reflect on God’s claim upon our lives. A moment to consider how Gods acceptance of us comes through grace and love.

If your heart isn’t stirred to think about baptism every time you boil a pot of water or watch rain fall down, that’s okay. That’s probably pretty normal, actually. But I want to encourage each of us to ponder our baptisms more frequently. To think about the transformation that happens in that water. To marvel at the radical work God is doing in us thanks to the water of baptism.

If you’d like some help with that, there are stones in the baptismal font this morning. When you come to the Table for communion, and have consumed the elements of bread and cup, I invite you to dip your hand into the font and take a stone. Keep it in your pocket or purse or in a place where you’ll see it often. Let it serve as a reminder that God has an abundance of love for you. That you are claimed and accepted.

The crowds at the Jordan River didn’t expect such an extraordinary encounter that day. Likewise, we might find ourselves caught off guard by the ways God shows up in our lives. May a remembrance of our baptism help foster this awe and wonder for us each day.