

**Coming Up For Air**  
**A Sermon by Louise Westfall**  
**Fairmount Presbyterian Church**  
**Cleveland Heights, Ohio**  
**9 January 2005    *Baptism of Jesus***  
**Text: Matthew 3:13-17**

The immense power of water has been realized with fresh horror in the aftermath of the Southeast Asian tsunamis. The wholesale destruction of life, land, and property has devastated the region, prompting an outpouring of aid from every corner of the world. Water—from the persistent river that carves out a deep canyon, to tidal waves hurling towards land at 500 miles an hour—water changes whatever it touches.

Of course water is a critical element for life as well. There is fearful symmetry in the Creator's craft, for sea water and amniotic fluid—the waters of the womb—have the exact same chemical composition. Potency and potential are two sides of the same coin. We are nurtured in the water that can drown us. We are vulnerable in the water that brings us to life.

...which ups the ante on the Christian sacrament of baptism. The waters in this font evoke danger and risk alongside love and belonging. We usually don't think of that as we moisten the heads of sweet babies, wide-eyed confirmands, or newly-aware adults. We forget about water's transforming power, often until a crisis of tsunami proportion threatens to overwhelm us.

Today the Christian Church remembers the particular baptism of Jesus, at the very beginning of his earthly ministry. All the gospel accounts portray Jesus' baptism by John as divine authorization of his identity and mission. He goes under the waters of the Jordan River and comes up a new man; or maybe that's not quite right. Into the deep Jesus is buried and arises out of the waters as the Beloved Son, blessed, strengthened, and launched on a spiritual mission of similar transformation. Witness the word of God in the reading from the gospel according to Matthew, in the third chapter at the 13<sup>th</sup> verse.

[Matthew 3:13-17]

The account of Jesus' baptism we just read varies in one significant detail from the other gospel narratives. In Mark and Luke, the voice from heaven speaks in the second person, directly to Jesus: *You are my Son, my beloved...* Here, however, the third person is used: *This is my Son, the Beloved...* the designation seems less intended as Jesus' confirmation of his identity, and more for the benefit of those around

him, and by extension, all the followers who would come later. In other words, it's not Jesus who must learn who he is, but the Church.

Who is Jesus for you, for me, for the people called by his name? Son of God, Beloved One, authorized by the Holy Spirit to fulfill a particular mission as the fulfillment of the long-promised Jewish Messiah, bringer of justice, the light of the world. If you gave any of those responses, you'd have answered the question in a manner that would satisfy the most orthodox of Christians. The Book of Order itself doesn't say it any better!

But what does that really mean for us, living our lives in these complex and chaotic times; striving to get it right, trying to figure out what our own lives mean, and what we can do to make them count? What does that really mean for us as "church"—committed to building a community that cares for one another, and making a difference in the world? The explicit naming of Jesus as the beloved Son of God offers insight, but I believe a more important clue is to be found in the exchange between Jesus and John. Jesus, remember, *asks* to be baptized. John initially resists, in awe because he senses Jesus to be the "more powerful one" who was coming to save the people. Look at Jesus' response: *Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.* In other words, Jesus understood his ministry as one shared with all believers. Instead of exalting himself as one with special divine status, he chose instead to identify with human brothers and sisters. Jesus' baptism was an expression of his humanity, a demonstration of God's intention for all people. To John's utter amazement, his question, *...and do you come to me?* is answered with a resounding "YES." While we may imagine that an interminable gulf lies between ourselves and God, our faith tells us the gulf has been closed. God has come to us, in the person of Jesus. God is willing to become vulnerable, to be subject to the same contingencies of human life that we are. Every storm. Every heartbreak. Vulnerable, even unto death. Jesus' baptism reveals a God who risks it all, to show us the breadth and length and height and depth of God's love.

Our baptisms, then, link us to Jesus. We come up from these holy waters just as he did: as sons and daughters of the Most High God, beloved and cherished and commissioned for service. The Holy Spirit has descended upon us, touching us with Divine power, blessing us beyond anything we can imagine.

I sat spellbound for two hours a couple of weeks ago when PBS aired a documentary by Susan and Alan Raymond entitled, "The Congregation," based on a year in the life of First United Methodist Church of Germantown, Pennsylvania. The congregation mirrors countless other

large, mainline Protestant churches in upper-middle-class communities. Its members are affluent and educated. They are active in community outreach and mission. Church School and youth groups are valued as crucial elements in passing the torch of faith to succeeding generations. The documentary focused on how the congregation dealt with change, both expected and unexpected. We saw excerpts from sermons being delivered, discussions with the governing board; even scenes from committee meetings! We heard congregational debate, hymn-singing, and prayer. The filmmakers' portrayal was pitch-perfect in describing both the pettiness and generosity of church folk. The dirty linen was revealed as well as the angel wings. I watched with complete resonance: *this is us; this is who we are!* One of the worship services happened to be youth Sunday and the young woman who was preaching quoted the former minister's explanation of Church life: It's like living in Noah's Ark: you can't stand the smell inside, but if you go outside, you'll get drowned.

Friends, the church's only boast is its perfect Lord; our only hope is in the One who came to us in all our imperfection and claimed us as God's own. We are baptized! We have gone through dangerous waters and come up for air; the breath of the Spirit in-spiring us and giving us new life.

Today, at the beginning of a new year, you and I are invited to renew our baptismal vows and re-commit ourselves to following Jesus. We make those vows as individuals and also as a community known as "the body of Christ"---the "flesh and blood" representation of God in the world. We are an imperfect reflection of our Maker, yet we trust the gracious power of this baptismal water to transform us continually to be more and more like Jesus.

We know tsunamis happen. The waters of life can drown; we need a way that will help us survive storms of all kinds, a way that will move us to extend an outstretched hand to others who are hurting or adrift. Following our brother Jesus, let us take a deep breath; plunge in, and come alive.

Let us pray: Eternal God, you call us to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. And let the people of God say Amen.

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