

Through the waters

Pastor Cynthia Lapp
Lent 1: March 1, 2009
Baptism of Hope Olson

Mark 1: 9-15
I Peter 3: 18-22

The first Sunday of Lent. The next six weeks we will retell and ponder portions of the story of Jesus' life and ministry. Of course as Christians, we are always retelling and reliving the story of Jesus' life and ministry. During Lent, it takes on a different significance as we look through the lens of what comes at the end, Jesus' death and resurrection. It all **begins** with his baptism in the river Jordan. We might say the *whole bible begins in the water*, with God brooding over the surface of the deep waters.

Water is a theme throughout the bible:
too much water in the flood,
going through water to escape slavery,
the people berating Moses in the desert because there is no water and then miraculously water comes from a rock.

The people of Israel cross the Jordan River into the Promised Land.
We have the stories of Jesus' own baptism
and Jesus turning water into wine at a wedding.
Jesus gives living water to the woman at the well.
And we can't ignore the prophets and epistle writers interpreting for us the meaning of the water stories, as we heard in the passage from I Peter today.

Why water? Why not water? As humans much of our own bodies are water and planet Earth, the body on which we reside, is also majority water. Our relationship with water defines us as humans; we are born from the waters of our mothers' womb, we wash in it, we drink it, we cook with it. We need water to grow our food. We fight over it in Israel/Palestine where there is not enough water. Dirty water makes us sick as in the cholera outbreak in Zimbabwe.

If water helps to define life in this human body why shouldn't water define us religiously as well? Water brings us into the body of Christ. We say that the waters of baptism purify us. We say that through the water we rise to new life just as Jesus rose to life after he was dead.

But water can also be dangerous. We know the story of the flood that destroyed the world. We know the story of Jonah who chose to jump into the roiling tempest rather than listen to God's call. Jesus invites Peter to walk on water and he falls in, nearly drowning. In baptism we look back on these biblical stories and see that the waters of baptism are all of these: birthing, cleansing, saving and even dangerous.

There is no escaping the water. There is no bridge over this troubled water, no detour around the water. To find new life, like our heroes in the faith, we have to go through the water. But getting through the water does not make everything perfect again. Noah and his family made it through the flood but it must have been miserable, for 40 days and though God promised never to destroy the Earth again through flood, Noah and his children were not always faithful. The Children of Israel walk straight through the waters, but wander in the

wilderness for 40 years. Jesus received baptism from his cousin John, only to be propelled into the wilderness for 40 days of temptation.

For Anabaptists, the danger is not only biblical, it is historical. Our ancestors in the faith received “baptisms” that put an end to life on this earth. The early Anabaptist leader, Felix Manz, was drowned in the Limmat River. Others were burned at the stake. It is for this reason that as Mennonites we say that baptism has three parts: the water, the spirit and the blood. We receive the waters of baptism as a public sign of our commitment that joins us to a community of believers; we receive the Holy Spirit which empowers an inner transformation toward grace and forgiveness. And as we follow in Jesus’ footsteps we may be led to places of risk, to places of suffering and bloodshed for certainly this is where Jesus’ own baptism led him.

In choosing baptism we jump into the stream that leads quite circuitously from the waters of creation, to Moses in a basket in the river, to the children of Israel crossing the sea of reeds, to Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan, to Anabaptists in the Limmat River in Switzerland, to Mennonites in the United States, planting and watering crops and churches and suffering as they resisted military participation.

Baptism is a choice we make, to voluntarily throw our lot in with this long line of stories of people who have gone through the water. And Hope, your choice to be baptized today at Hyattsville is another small piece of this faith story.

We, who were baptized years ago, know that baptism is no magic cure for our own ills or for the worlds either. Baptism is the simple, and quite complex,

sign that we are joining the path that Jesus traveled. We are walking this path with sisters and brothers in the faith, following as God leads us forward.

This journey is not predictable and certainly not easy. But there is joy and grace, love and companionship, mingled with the suffering that may come. And it starts with the words and assurance that Jesus heard at his own baptism, “You are my beloved child.” We are the beloved children of God, in the waters of our birth, in the waters of our baptism and when we come to our end.

It has been my privilege to walk with a beloved child of God the past six months as I met with Hope. If you haven’t noticed, Hope is very engaged in our life together here at church. She helps care for the younger children and assists with the microphone. She is involved with the junior youth group, is an usher and makes herself available in other ways. While all this is going on, she is also paying close attention to what happens in worship. Each time we got together Hope brought a list of questions, things that she heard in the sermon or in church and wondered about. She also brought questions that came up for her from her own reading of scripture.

Hope and I have talked about the bible, where it comes from, how we read it, what it means to us. We have read the bible together, looking at the different gospels. We have talked about communion, baptism, the Mennonite Confession of Faith and what it means to be a follower of Jesus. We have prayed together, wondered together and learned together. There are a lot of things that Hope is still learning — about God, about Jesus, the bible, prayer, life in community, about discipleship. I hope that all of us who are already baptized can say the

same thing. We are still learning and growing; we are always discovering anew what it means to be a follower of the way of Jesus.

Over the last six months, I have seen Hope earnestly seeking to follow Jesus. She takes her faith seriously and her family takes her questions seriously. I am pleased to welcome Hope to share her own thoughts about her faith and her choice to be baptized this morning.