

Sermon "Signposts"
Kirk of St James
Sunday January 22nd, 2023
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In the ancient world water mattered. It was necessary for survival, for rituals, and life. I shared this quote from Rachel Held Evans a number of years ago and rediscovered it this week, I thought it was beautifully written. She wrote "For people whose survival depended on the inscrutable moods of the Tigris, Euphrates, and Nile, water represented both life and death. Oceans teemed with monsters, unruly spirits, and giant fish that could swallow a man whole. Rivers brimmed with fickle possibility--of yielding crops, of boosting trade, of drying up. Into this world, God spoke the language of water, turning the rivers of enemies into blood, calling forth springs from desert rocks, playing matchmaker around wells, and promising a future in which justice would roll down like water and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream...we know as our ancestors did, both the danger and necessity of water. Water knits us together in our mothers' womb...water courses through our bodies and makes our planet blue. It is water that lifts cars like leaves when a tsunami rages to shore, water that in a moment can swallow a ship and in eons carve a canyon...But just as water carried Moses to his destiny down the Nile, so water carried another baby from a woman's body into an expectant world. Wrapped now in flesh, the God who once hovered over the waters was plunged beneath them at the hands of a wild-eyed wilderness preacher. When Jesus emerged, he spoke of living water that forever satisfies and of being born again. He went fishing and washed his friends' feet. He touched the ceremonially unclean. He spit in the dirt, cast demons into the ocean, and strolled across an angry sea. He got thirsty and he wept. After the government washed its hands of him, Jesus hung on a cross where blood and water flowed from his side. Like Jonah he got swallowed up for three days. Then God beat death. God rose from the depths and breathed air once again. When he found his friends on

the shoreline, he told them not to be afraid but to go out and baptize the whole world. The spirit that once hovered over the waters had inhabited them. Now every drop is holy."

I love these words by Rachel Evans because they sum up so beautifully the reality of water and baptism. Living on the island we know that calmer seas make for better fishing seasons, and that rain is necessary for a healthy potato harvest. We know the relief a long-awaited rain can bring to our parched gardens, or the healing of a swim in the ocean at the end of a long summer day. Whether we come to the water as a sleepy infant, wiggly toddler, uncertain young adult, or questioning grown up, baptism is always a gift. We cannot do it ourselves; it is a gift that can only be received. There is nothing we do to earn the life-giving waters of baptism. Baptism is both death and life--it is the death of our old way life, and the start of a new way of life. It is both a beginning and a belonging.

The amount of water that we use in baptism is also something we often talk about. Having attended a Baptist University before Presbyterian College a lot of my Baptist friends used to tease me about how we only "sprinkle" water at baptism. One of my favourite stories at Acadia Divinity College was about a Presbyterian student on the day they were going to practice full immersion baptisms and they came out wearing a mask and snorkel. It was a lot of fun studying with different denominations and talking about our practices. One of the other big discussions around baptism was the fact that as Presbyterians we practice infant baptism and people would often ask why. The Revised Book of Common Worship describes baptism "as initiation into the household of God; a new family relationship is formed. The promise of God's faithfulness supports us even while we are infants in the faith. Our age at baptism is not significant. Whether we are baptized as infants or adults, we are as babes in the faith, called to grow and mature into full stature with Christ. We are children of the covenant." At whatever

age we come to baptism we are declaring that we belong to God. We are created in His image, we are uniquely made, and we have our own gifts and talents. Whether we say the vow ourselves or our parents or guardians say them for us we are simply claiming that belonging. We are born under the covenant of God, and we are claimed.

That does not mean that after baptism we have a checklist and we start to automatically do everything right and, baptism certainly does not make us perfect. Rather baptism is like the first step of a journey we will make over the rest of our lives. The *Living Faith* statement put out by the Presbyterian Church in Canada describes it as follows "Baptism is the sacrament not of what we do but of what God has done for us in Christ. God's grace and our response to it are not tied to the moment of baptism but continue and deepen throughout life." It is a seed that is planted and then throughout our lives we work at watering and tending it, sometimes we do that a little more faithfully than others but, still it remains.

Out of the four gospels John's account of Jesus' baptism is unique. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke we get a fuller set of details, and in Matthew Jesus speaks. However, John the evangelist records a first-person reflection by John the Baptist on the experience. It is a distinct perspective but not without purpose. The gospel of John is primarily concerned with focusing on the signs that point to Jesus being the Messiah—that "the word made flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory." John the Baptist plays a vital role in this gospel because he is providing testimony as to who Jesus is and points the way so that others may come to see him. We also see this in the description of John standing with two of his disciples, and when he proclaims that Jesus is the lamb of God the two disciples leave John and begin to follow Jesus. John was the one making the path in the wilderness and when Jesus--the very person he had been promising arrives he makes sure those around him know it.

When Jesus rose out of the waters of baptism it was a moment of profound grace and promise. We belong to a God who sent his son into the world to live, die and rise again. A God who would hold nothing back. A God who calls us his beloved. That is who we belong to and that is the promise we cling to. Sometimes when we think of baptism, we think of it as something that has happened in the past. But, during the vows of a baptism service we are always encouraged to remember our baptism and give thanks. I have often wondered what means exactly. One writer said that a few years ago WWJD—what would Jesus do, was a slogan that a lot of Christians used and was printed on everything from book bags to bracelets. But the author I was reading said perhaps it should be WWJBD—what would John the Baptist do? John who used his life to point the way to Jesus Christ through his words, actions, and life. Who told everyone around him “This is the Messiah who was promised, this is the guy who is going to change our lives and the world. You should pay attention and follow him.” John who was a signpost to the lifegiving promises of the Messiah and who did not hold back anyone—not even his own disciples when it came to following Jesus.

In baptism the holy and the human meet face to face. It is where the grace of God meets us, acknowledges the dark corners of our lives, and then loves us through them. May we remember our baptism and give thanks as best we can. May our lives point others to the peace, joy, love, and hope that is to be found in Jesus Christ. May we use our hands, hearts, and lives to live the lives God calls us to and embrace the mysteries of the Kingdom.

As Rachel Evans said "Death and resurrection. It's the impossibility around which every other impossibility of the Christian faith orbits. Baptism declares that God is in the business of bringing dead things back to life, so if you want in on God's business, you better prepare to follow God to all the rock-bottom, scorched earth, dead-on-arrival corners of this world--including those in your heart--because that is where God works, that's where God gardens...in the ritual of baptism, we act out the bizarre truth of the Christian identity: we are people who stand totally exposed before evil and death and declare them powerless against love."