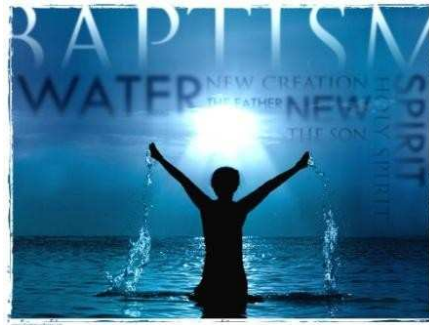


Baptism Watered Down

Mark 1: 4 - 11

Newtonbrook United Church – January 11, 2009



Our scriptures tell us the story of the baptism of Jesus. There isn't much detail in Mark's account of what we now consider a sacrament. John simply says that:

*"In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan."*¹

There is a bit of foreshadowing in the story as Mark has described the ministry of John the Baptist. Mark wrote that John was baptizing people in the Jordan River and that John had proclaimed;

*"The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; ... I have baptized you with water but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."*²

One of the questions raised by this story is why did Jesus need to be baptized? We could have a sermon on that topic – but an excellent reflection on the question has already been written by Rev. Sandra Beardsall and you can read it on page 49 of the January, 2009 edition of The United Church Observer. If that is the question that you have of this text – "Why did Jesus need to be baptized?" – I'll refer you to our national church magazine.

John was using water for baptism – as we do.

Have we ever stopped to note the role of the water in the story of the baptism of Jesus?

In our baptism rituals we refer to the baptism font as a "font of living water"³ We also routinely repeat the words that water cleanses, and water nurtures⁴ life. Sometimes in our United Church congregations baptism rituals we read scripture passages that refer to water. Our liturgical resource lists 14 possible readings from both the Hebrew and Christian scriptures⁵.

How are we caring for the waters of our baptism so that they will be nurturing, cleansing, and a "font of living water"?

For me, that is a spiritual question. It also is a question that touches our spirituality. When I say "**spirituality**" I am taking a definition from Margaret Guenther who wrote that:

¹ Mark 1:9

² Mark 1: 7,8

³ Celebrate God's Presence, page 328

⁴ Celebrate God's Presence, page 344

⁵ Celebrate God's Presence, page 330

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“Our spirituality is not what we profess to believe, but how we order our lives. Our stewardship of time, energy, material things, and relationship to our fellow creatures reflects the way we express that ordering of our lives.”⁶

Our relationship with water is a part of our spirituality!

How are we caring for the waters of our baptism? Has our baptism been “watered down”?

“Blue Covenant⁷” is NOT the title of a theological text. Blue Covenant may use theological language as its title, but it is a book that uses the word “covenant” in a legal manner, as in a covenant that we have made with each other as residents of God’s earth.

In Blue Covenant there is a summary of how the world is running out of fresh water. *“The global population tripled in the twentieth century, but water consumption went up sevenfold.”⁸*

We can see evidence of the waters of our baptism disappearing if we look at these photos that Heather has located:

PowerPoint Photos of Lake Chad, Aral Sea, Mount Kilimanjaro Athabaska Glacier retreating

Each of these glaciers / lakes have, in the past, been a source of life-giving water.

There is also a world-wide issue about the purity of the waters of our baptism – not just in Walkerton. It has been estimated that every eight seconds a child dies from drinking dirty water.⁹ Yes – that is a statistic. BUT, let’s remember that every one of those children are our sisters and bothers. We are all a part of this human family and as the apostle Paul wrote, when one suffers, we all suffer¹⁰. Statistics or numbers are simply people with the tears dried off.

How are we caring for the waters of our baptism? Has our baptism been “watered down”?

In February 1991 I had the privilege of meeting an economist from Latin America whose name was Pepé Tavara. Meeting Pepé changed my life. I had been assigned to be his host for a day in Toronto and at noontime we were taking a walk around Queen’s Park Crescent.

⁶ Margaret Guenther, “The Practice of Prayer”

⁷ Maude Barlow, “Blue Covenant: The global water crisis and the coming battle for the right to water. The concept of “Covenant” is set out on pages 156-164

⁸ Blue Covenant, page 3

⁹ Blue Covenant, page 3

¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 12:26

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Up to that point in time my concept of social justice had been shaped by people like the Methodist minister, J.S. Woodsworth, and his prayer that, “*What we desire for ourselves we wish for all.*”

Waving my hand in an arc to illustrate the business towers and luxury condominiums of downtown Toronto, I said to Pepé, (and I am still embarrassed by this), “*Wouldn’t it be nice if the whole world could live like this?*”

There was a long silence. It gave me time to think about what I had said that was so wrong?

Finally Pepé simply said; “*Allan; if the whole world lived this way it would be dead.*”

As I said, that simple statement changed my perspective on life and convinced me of the wisdom in the statement that we must:

“live simply that others may simply live”

In a sermon at Emmanuel College David Hallman put it this way:

“*We need a sufficiency revolution.*”¹¹

How are we caring for the waters of our baptism so that they will be nurturing, cleansing, and a “font of living water”?

There is little we can do about children dying at the foot of Mt. Kilimanjaro because of dirty water. HOWEVER, the coming lack of water from the glaciers of Kilimanjaro is caused by and large by the warming of the climate world-wide. We all know that energy use, and energy waste, by affluent Canadians – that’s us – has played a role in the warming of the atmosphere. Some of that waste has to do with our recreation – something that is within our control to reduce and live more simply.

Here in Toronto we are receiving many suggestions on how to save on our use of water – I don’t need to go into all of those. Some examples are:

- use cold water to do our laundry – saving energy
- stop dumping drinking water on lawns during the spring and summer months
- install low-flow toilets

Those are things that we can do as individuals. They can become a part of our spirituality! Remember, our spirituality is “how we order our lives.”

How we live with water is also a part of the question for us as a community of God’s children. How is water used here at Newtonbrook United Church? Many of us have already installed low-

¹¹ David Hallman, Emmanuel College, October 10, 2007

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flow toilets in our homes. Have we installed low-flow toilets in this building to reduce our water footprint¹²? I suspect that there are more “flushes” here on a daily basis than in our homes.

What are we saying about conserving the waters of our baptism when we do not have low-flow toilets?

This is a part of how we live with respect in creation.

However, the Administration Committee cannot install low-flow toilets UNLESS we give them the financial resources to do it. Together, we have the power to make a statement to the community about how we act to conserve the waters of our baptism. Will we empower the Administration Committee to install these toilets?

On this Sunday, when we remember the baptism of Jesus, let’s think about the role of the water in his baptism – and ours. Our relationship with water is a part of our spirituality!

Have we ever stopped to note the role of the water in the story of the baptism of Jesus?

How are we caring for the waters of our baptism so that they will be nurturing, cleansing, and a “font of living water”? Will, “living simply so that others may simply live” be a part of our spirituality?

If our relationship with water is a part of our spirituality, what does our relationship with water say to others about what we believe?

Let’s talk about these questions with one another so that our common faith may be strengthened and informed.

#376 – Spirit of the Living God

Prayers for God’s Family and creation – January 11, 2009

You call our names, O God
and you speak them in love.

Each one of us is known and held by you,
affirming our place in your heart.

In water, we are bound together;
in love, we are made one;
in grace, we are renewed.

¹² See www.waterfootprint.com for a commercial (SLOAN) resource on how to calculate your household water footprint

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So, may we celebrate our belonging,
to the world-wide Christian family,
through our baptism,
and through our heritage as children of God.

May we all hear the story of Jesus,
an listen to the call to follow the way of Christ.

God of mercy and compassion,
of grace and reconciliation,
pour your Spirit upon all your children in the Middle East.
Let hatred be turned into love; fear into trust;
despair into hope; oppression into freedom;
occupation into liberation,
that violent encounters may be replaced by loving embraces,
and peace with justice may be experienced by all.

We live in a complex world, O God,
a world where people seek stability,
and a vision for the future.
Your world, where people seek an assurance of your presence
when they come home from a medical test;
or from a radiation or chemotherapy treatment;
or from a funeral for a loved one;
or from interviews for new employment;
or from a meeting with a financial consultant.
Be there for us God. Help us feel the presence of your Spirit,
the Spirit that descended upon Jesus.

In the small things, O God,
in water,
in bread and wine, and in your Word,
we find your promises.
May we pour it, break it, speak it, live it,
that your world may be renewed. Amen

