

January 7, 2023 Sermon Essay by Laurie Buehler

Journey With Jesus

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Wild Water

By Debie Thomas. Posted 03 January 2021.

If I asked you to describe the sacrament of baptism, what adjectives would you choose? Beautiful? Solemn? Ancient? Holy? Maybe you'd describe sculpted marble fonts, lacy christening gowns, wiggly babies, and delighted godparents. But would my question prompt you to use the word "wild?" As in: baptism is one of the wildest things Christians do? Has it ever occurred to you that this watery, two-thousand-year-old ritual of the Church is *wild*?

On this first Sunday after the Epiphany, the lectionary invites us to witness Jesus's baptism, and reflect on our own. But the language the Scriptures give us is not the language of churchy decorum. It is feral language. The language of the untamed and the unpredictable.

Our reading from Genesis describes a formless void and a deep, impenetrable darkness. It is not a polished basin of warm water the Spirit hovers over; it is an elemental, undifferentiated "face," brimming with promise and risk. Our Psalm, meanwhile, conjures a God of storms, flames, and "mighty waters." This God "thunders," "causes the oaks to whirl," and "shakes the wilderness." In our reading from the New Testament, St. Paul baptizes a group of Ephesian disciples, causing their tongues to break loose into languages of prophecy they never knew they could speak. And in our Gospel from St. Mark, we read that when John baptized Jesus, the heavens were visibly "torn apart," the Spirit dive-bombed out of the skies, and the very voice of God filled the desert air.

What does this mean? Why frame Jesus's baptism — and, by extension, our own — in the language of wildness? Here are a few reasons:

For Sunday January 10, 2021

Lectionary Readings (Revised Common Lectionary, Year B)

Genesis 1:1-5

Psalm 29

Acts 19:1-7

Mark 1:4-11

- **There is wildness at the margins.** Mark's Gospel makes a point of telling us that John the Baptizer appeared "in the wilderness." That is to say, he did *not* conduct his ministry in Jerusalem, at the temple, in the center of his people's religious life. Instead, he drew the crowds *away* from the center, asking them to repent and receive baptism in the wilderness.



Astonishingly, the crowds responded to his irreverent invitation: "People from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem" went out to meet John at the Jordan River. Think about this for a moment. John the camel-wearing, locust-eating prophet *emptied the city*.

Removed as we are from the cultural context of first century Palestine, it is easy for us to miss the significance of the mass exodus St. Mark describes. Jerusalem was the beating heart of Israel's spiritual life. The temple was *the* place to go to meet God, and rituals of purification by water were already a feature of Jewish devotional life.

But something in John's message compelled a whole population to leave their religious epicenter for spiritual nourishment and rebirth. Something authentic and fresh resonated for them in the movement away from the center of institutionalized dogma and authority. Whatever God was about to do necessitated a decentering. A disruption. A shift away from business as usual.

Does that "something" resonate for us as well? I am not suggesting that genuine faith always necessitates a movement away from the institutions we cherish. But isn't it often the case that the most compelling and daring calls for justice, truth-telling, peacemaking, and healing come to us, not from the institutionalized "inside," but from the outside? Not from the official places, but from the marginal ones? Haven't we seen countless "centers" in our cultural, political, and religious lives lose their prophetic edges to complacency, corruption, stodginess, or fear? Haven't we heard new voices speaking to us from wild and unexpected places, calling us to repentance and renewal?

Jesus was baptized in a wild place. Far away from the safe, the routine, and the familiar. If we want to follow him in our own baptisms, we, too, need to listen to voices crying out in the desert. We, too, need to leave the "cities" that make up our comfort zones. We, too, need to allow a good but wild God to disrupt us.

There is wildness in solidarity: According to Christian historian John Dominic Crossan, Jesus's baptism was an "acute embarrassment" for the early Church. This is evident in the unease we detect in all four Gospel accounts. Mark keeps his version of the story as spare as possible. Matthew insists that John tried hard to dissuade Jesus from receiving the rite he offered the crowds. Luke skips the identity of the Baptizer altogether. And the fourth Gospel doesn't even mention Jesus's baptism.

Apparently, what scandalized the Gospel writers was Jesus's decision to receive a baptism of *repentance*. Repentance for what? Wasn't the Son of God perfect? Sinless? Holy? What was the Messiah doing in the murky water of the Jordan River, aligning himself with the great unwashed? And why did God choose *that* sordid moment to tear the cosmos apart and call Jesus "beloved?"



Why, indeed? Why *did* the Son of the Most High get in line for baptism behind the tax collectors and sinners — the very folks who could sully his reputation? Why didn't he care about appearances? About disgrace? About guilt by association? Aren't God's children supposed to care about such things?

Apparently not, because Jesus's first public act was an act of radical solidarity. An act of stepping into intimate, inextricable, "shameful" relationship with sinful humanity. Instead of holding himself apart, instead of protecting his own purity, Jesus stepped into the same water we stand in, and wedded his reputation and his destiny to ours.

In his baptism, Jesus entered into the full, unwieldy messiness of the human family. In one watery act, he stepped into the whole Story of God's work on earth, and allowed that story to resonate, deepen, and find completion. In our baptisms, we vow to do the same. In the wild waters of our immersion, we join our beings to *all* beings, and throw our lot in with theirs. If this doesn't startle you, you need to pay closer attention.

To embrace Christ's baptism story is to embrace the wild truth that we are united, interdependent, connected, *one*. Whether we like it or not, the bond God seals by water and by the Spirit is truer and deeper than all others. It makes a stronger claim on our lives and loyalties than all prior claims of race, gender, tribe, nationality, politics, preference, or affinity. It asks that we bear all the risks of belonging. The risk that others might hurt us. The risk that others will change. The risk that they will change *us*.

- Is it easy to honor such a staggering claim? No. Do we have a choice? No. Are we (the Church) known for doing this well? No. But that is not because God's claim is optional; it is because we have tamed baptism, turning it into something merely ritualistic and decorative. But the truth is, we *can't* have the water without the kinship. We can't receive the sacrament without surrendering our separateness. It doesn't matter one bit if we're "non-joiners" by temperament. Our baptism is our belonging.

There is wildness in God's geography: In a beautiful essay entitled, "Holy Water Everywhere," *Christian Century* editor, Steve Thorngate, describes baptism as a sacrament that straddles the "locative" and the "liberative." We are baptized *locally*, in a specific time and place, into the spiritual life of a particular parish or faith community. This aspect of baptism pushes against all attempts to treat Christianity as a cerebral, otherworldly abstraction. Baptism insists that "this place, here — this ground, this water — is holy."

At the same time, baptism *liberates* us into the global, the universal, and the timeless. The water we step into at baptism is connected to all bodies of water, everywhere, which means we cannot contain or constrict the sacred within any walls of denomination, dogma, liturgy, or practice.

Baptism, Thorngate writes, creates its own map: "It is not a local map that stresses boundaries and the dangerous unknown that lies beyond them; nor is it a globe that erases everything particular, small, and nearby."



This is why our lectionary this week juxtaposes the Creation story, a Psalm of God's overwhelming power over nature, and a story of the early church, with Jesus's baptism. When Jesus consents to the waters of the Jordan River, he consents to both the locative and the liberative, to both the particular and the universal. He enters into a holy geography that includes the unformed waters of Creation; the storied landscapes of his poet-ancestor, David; and every font, pool, lake, river, and ocean his followers — from St. Paul onwards — immerse themselves in after Jesus's time on earth is over. The Spirit who hovered over the unformed earth at the dawn of Creation is the same Spirit who hovers over us today. The Lord who thundered over the mighty waters during

King David's reign is the same God who "sits enthroned" now. The God who loosened the

tongues of first-century believers to speak truth to power is the same God who raises up prophets today. In other words, the geography of baptism is vast. It spans all times and all worlds. It is far too large and wild a thing for us to tame or control.

During this brief liturgical season between Christmas and Lent, we are invited to leave miraculous births and angel choirs behind, and seek the love, majesty, and power of God in seemingly mundane things. Rivers. Voices. Doves. Clouds. Holy hands covering ours, lowering us into the water of repentance and new life. In the Gospel stories we will read during this season, God will part the curtain for brief, shimmering moments, allowing us to look beneath and beyond the ordinary surfaces of our lives, and catch glimpses of the wild and the extraordinary. This, of course, is another way of describing the sacrament of baptism itself: it is a place and a moment where the "extraordinary" of God's grace blesses the ordinary water we stand in.

May we, during this season and always, join Jesus as he stands in line at the water's edge, willing to immerse himself in shame and scandal so that all the wild wonder of God might be ours to cherish. May we, too, hear the delighted Voice that tells us who we are and whose we are in the sacrament of baptism. Even in the wild, untameable water we stand in, may we know ourselves as God's Beloved.

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