

With the Touch of Holy Water
January 12, 2014
Pastor Laura Hehner

I remember walking out from the trees.

They were everywhere---a thick cove of lush green in the middle of all of that dry, dusty dirt.

Everywhere else we'd been, let off this sort of matted, yellow glow into the air.

...But here, the ground was soft, moist.

There were so many comfortable shadows to walk through to stay out of the sun,

...and the space under all of that shade was not only cool, but damp.

A soothing feeling against the skin in that desert air.

Here and there, between all of these trees, were scattered ruins.

...Hellenistic and Roman era structures, crumbling, but still there.

I've mentioned this place only briefly, before...

that spot where God blessed me with the privilege

of praying over the bread and wine for communion for the first time.

Caesarea Philippi. Also known as the Banyas. Such a beautiful place.

Known as supposedly being the place where Jesus asked the disciples

who they believed he was, and Peter answered he was the messiah.

After communion, I'd wandered away from the people I'd just eaten the bread, with.

They all went exploring through the forest, and I decided to do the same on my own,

so I could spend some time alone with God.

I'd walked over those rope bridges, and through those Roman tunnels,

and I found myself standing there, outside of the shade of those trees.

They still surrounded me, all over, but I'd come to the edge of a river.

In front of me, the Jordan rushed gently past the banks, and in the middle of that moving water,

Were seven people, all dressed in long white robes.

Now don't worry, this was no hallucination. Absolutely real.

But it did force me to wonder if I should've trusted that guy with the Turkish coffee, back in Jerusalem.

Anyway, the seven people in the white robes were all gathered together,

in the middle of the current,

Holding another man's back with their palms and lowering him,

slowly, slowly, into the cool waters.

Seeing this, I stepped back a little, as if I'd accidentally

encroached on some sacred space... because that's exactly what I'd just done.

He was in the middle of receiving the sacrament of holy baptism.

Right there, in the Jordan River.

And I felt almost washed over, with him, watching such a beautiful thing.

Nobody else was with me, so I just stood there, from a distance, and looked for a while.

Saw him get dunked.

Saw them lift him back out... his mouth smiling so wide. Everyone else smiling with him,

Hushed chuckles falling between.

Saw him wipe that water from his face, still sitting in it,

then rise to walk from the river with the rest, celebrating with him.

I remember sitting there, under one of those trees for a while, after.
Still spending that time with God, and just staring out at that water.
And I remember wishing that I could remember my own baptism.
What an amazingly beautiful and intimate moment it must be,
to experience something like that with God...knowingly. Consciously.
When you're a kid you don't even really realize you exist,
never mind hold enough complexity up here
to wonder about theology or something as abstract as spirit.
Only thing I knew about my first baptism---
--and only because my parents *told* me and laughed about it for years---
Was the fact that I nearly gave the priest a heart attack
when I blew out my baptismal candle as soon as it was lit.
(He probably thought I was the Anti-Christ or something,
and I probably thought it was my birthday...)
Anyway, I sat there, with God, and I stared out at that water,
and I wondered why I couldn't just get up and go do it myself.
After all, I was with God. I was with God in a holy place.
A place I knew I'd likely never stand again.
In the middle of all of those lush trees, right there, by the rushing Jordan.
So I stood up and I looked around. Finding only God in the nearby area,
I walked up to the bank of that river, and lied down along its edge.
I didn't have any books to read aloud fancy liturgy.

I didn't have a white robe and dry clothes waiting.

But it didn't matter.

I rolled my sleeve past my shoulder, and I talked to God, right there, on the side of that river.

In that quiet, I told God how much I loved Whoever God was,

because I knew *whatever* God was, *whoever* God was,

I somehow knew It deep in my heart, and It somehow knew me, too.

And I whispered to that listening Life,

that I knew God was more of a friend to me, and shared a deeper love and knowledge of me,

than I'd ever find in any of the smaller fragments of God's soul

I met as I walked around.

On the side of the river I told God that God was all things to me, always,

and that I was blessed to be in God's company, and realize where I stood.

...I thanked God for this. Then I told God I knew I was His, and dunked my arm in deep.

I remember the water was cold. Startlingly cold for a current running through the desert.

I remember keeping my hand in there for awhile, trying to feel every moment of meaning.

Trying so hard to fully grasp that my skin

was submerged in the holy water of the Jordan River.

But I couldn't.

All of this trying-to-examine-the-meaning was only a distraction from the moment,

It was only keeping me from really feeling God and the water.

So I let go. I pulled my arm to the surface, cupping that holy water there in my palm, and I washed my face and my skin with it, three times.

Then I thanked God again, and sat back against that tree, and I smiled.

...What is baptism?

What are we doing, when we experience it?

This is something we'll reflect on together, today, as we come out of this moment

Jesus was baptized by John in chapter 3 of the Gospel of Matthew.

It's not something we think about a lot, on our own,

because most of us were baptized as infants, just as I was.

No memory of it.

And it's even kind of lost its depth of meaning in our *adult* minds,

because of the fact that it seems like only a *ritual*, really.

Sometimes coming off as just a plain old act---a habit---when it's most often given to

little ones who have no choice in the matter. ...No thoughts about what they're doing.

...Of course, the church as a whole, thinks about it a lot.

A little *too* much, maybe.

Lots of controversies and debates over such a simply beautiful thing.

Some churches will *only* baptize babies. Some churches will only baptize *adults*.

Some churches come up with some really weird ideas like a baby

must be baptized or they'll go to h-e-double hockey sticks, if they die in infancy.

The Methodist Church does *not* believe this, as an FYI.

(Though we're glad to baptize any babies in the hospital
if *parents* believe this, and fear the worst).

And the Methodists also baptize both adults *and* children,

Not for fear of hell... but because, as a group, they believe in the very personal,
sacred significance of the event to a newly transformed soul,

At the same time as recognizing the value in the *welcoming*
a child receives from his/her spiritual community, just after birth...

Even if *they* have no idea what on earth is going on.

Anyway... that's all doctrine. Gets kinda twisted.

...Lots of *talk*. Lots of debate, which kinda seems to miss the *point*, in my opinion,

---Like in that moment at the side of the river,

our sense of God gets lost real quick in the clutter of our minds;

So we have to be careful not to build too much fake stuff around the reality of the holy.

(Christianity 101. ...A class lots of us church leaders unfortunately seemed to have
skipped.)

But okay... if we're not talking *doctrine*, then what is it?

If not to the church, what is baptism to *us*?

To you and to me?

Some see it as a cleansing moment.

Something having to do with washing away our past mistakes

and making ourselves fresh for a new life in God.

A life in which there are sure to be *more* mistakes,

but one in which *all* acts---the good and the bad---

are always considered in connection with the heart of God.

...Not too bad. I liked that one, though the focus on “sin,”

is definitely not the only place our attention should go, when we think about God.

I flipped through some *more* pages before sitting down

to write this sermon, to look into some of the ways other people see it.

Here were some other ones I liked. Some thoughts I could identify with:

“In baptism we are named and claimed as beloved sons and daughters of God. Filled with the Spirit, our lives are never the same again. In baptism God has called each of us by name, claimed each of us as God's own, and with such radical love washing over us and through us, we are transformed and strengthened to go out and transform the world.”

Another one:

“In baptism we open our soul to the indwelling presence of God. And we give ourselves to work with God to accomplish the holy will and purpose for all of creation and history. To be human as God intended is to have loving fellowship with God and to reflect God's love in our lives as fully as possible; and we open ourselves to this new way of living in the water.”

And the last I'll read:

“Baptism is a ritual action of a sacrament which does not merely *point* to God's presence in the world, but also *participates* in it and becomes a vehicle for conveying that reality. God's presence in the water is real, but it must be accepted by human faith if it is to transform human lives. The act does not convey grace either magically or irrevocably, but it is a powerful channel through which God has chosen to make God's Self available to us.”

Do we think about this stuff while we're being held there, in our parents' arms?

Sporting the latest trend in soggy diapers around our waists?

There's so much in this moment of baptism, but so few of us get that rare chance to feel it.

Did I think about these things at the side of the Jordan River, at age 18?

... Yeah, I think I did. Some of it. And maybe not in those words.

Like I said, I tried not to get too distracted from God by my own thoughts,

But those *intentions* were there, in that holy quiet.

To me, baptism is both a deeply *personal* moment, and a moment

in which we connect ourselves tightly to *all* of that life scattered all around us.

A moment we come to not only *understand*, but *communicate*

that we know we're a part of something much larger than just ourselves.

... Between you and God, in that silence, it's a very loud,

cosmically penetrating whisper into the *heart* of God...

... Telling God that you *know* of God....

... That you see God all around you and that you will always *seek* God, only wanting to see more.

It's a fragment in time you set aside to take in

the understanding that you are a part of the All and the All is a part of you.

---That All who is the Creator, the Redeemer,

and the Sustainer of your life, and always will be.

With or without fancy liturgy or the hand of a priest,

It's a candid *sharing* of yourself with God, letting God know that you've

Consciously and willingly, and gratefully opened your soul *wide*

to an experience of God's life in yours.

And not just in that one moment, but through *all* of the moments after..

...through every minute of the emotion, and confusion,

and faithful-following that comes with being in relationship with that Holy One you love.

And we just don't get a chance to say those things to God,

in our soul, when we're baptized as babies.

So as we sit together, today, remembering the moment Jesus was baptized by John,

I'd like to invite you to open your soul to a meditation

on these sacred moments we share with God, *now*.

---To sense the way you sense God in your own life.

...As a growing and forming person, much further along in your journey through the world.

And I'd like to open a door in your mind to think about

the ways you let God in, and sometimes push God out...

...and what it might mean to you to take a special moment, a sacred second,

to invite God back inside those personal places in your mind and heart that mean the most.

In remembrance of the moment of Jesus' baptism, today we remember our *own*.

Even if we were too young to have a memory,

we're gonna take some time to recall what it means

to talk with God and remember God, and welcome God in...

In only a simple second. No need for liturgy, or white robes.

Though I did bring some of the Jordan with me, to share with you.

[explanation]

[Remembering Our Baptism]

As we each receive the water, just let yourself feel God.

Let yourself be with God, without the clutter of too much thought.

Let yourself feel the Life of God inside You,

and let yourself love and welcome the feeling for just a moment.

Blessing: "In the name of the Creator, the Redeemer, and the Sustainer... your God who loved you before, loves you now, and will love you past all afters."