

“OF WATER, DOVES, AND OTHER SACRAMENTAL THINGS”

Psalm 8

Matthew 3:13-17

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On the Sunday after Epiphany, the lectionary speeds us away from the Magi's adoration of the infant Jesus straight to John's baptism of Jesus on the shore of the River Jordan. In Matthew's rendering of the life of Jesus we are moved at whirlwind pace through the early years of his life—the magi's visit, in fact, is the only childhood story we hear before we encounter Jesus by the river. In this passage Matthew seems to highlight the sense that baptism is the critical beginning in the life and ministry of Jesus. And it is true, because in his baptism Jesus claims his ministry and God claims Jesus—and both the event and those involved are marked as sacred.

There is an interesting turn of events here as John both cedes his place and anoints his successor when he baptizes Jesus, but John seems strangely well-prepared for the moment. Earlier verses in Matthew tell us that he has been busy telling the Sadducees and the Pharisees that *“the kingdom of heaven is near,”* and *“I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”* So there is no drama or jealousy here. CNN would be so disappointed! Instead, as Jesus emerges from the water, he takes hold of the responsibilities of his ministry and we know it is right when the Spirit of God descends like a dove and the voice of God announces, *“This is my son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”* Now the scene is set: God's booming voice has called out from the heavens and Jesus is anointed. Here stands the king: sure, he is a little wet, but he is ready!

Now, for as much as this story is about Jesus—and it is—today I would like to say that it is also about creation, about God's plan for creation. The baptism of Jesus is about being immersed, literally and figuratively, in the blessedness of all that God commands; and finally, and perhaps most importantly, the baptism of Jesus—that long ago event—is about us as contemporary people living amid all the sacramental things that God has created.

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines the word sacrament as *“a Christian rite that is believed to have been ordained by Christ and held to be a means of divine grace or a sign or symbol of a spiritual reality.”* In this church we hold baptism and communion to be our sacraments. Interestingly, both of these are deeply connected to God's creative impulse, the same one beautifully described in the first creation story in Genesis and praised in the words we heard from Psalm 8.

The sacrament of baptism depends upon water, and the sacrament of communion is a feast built upon the grains and fruits of the earth. And thus, in our sacraments, we are taken back to God separating the land and sea; to God creating the plants of the earth; and, most importantly, to God giving humankind the responsibility to care for it all. So often we speak of our sacraments as *“simple observances made up of simple things,”* and while it may on the surface be true, the reality is that our sacraments and the sacramental elements employed in them aren't simple at all. Grains for our breads, grapes for juice,

water for our baptismal font: these elements require care. And on this Sunday when we celebrate the baptism of Jesus, and when we have baptized Mary Ann Som using the sacramental waters that flow from the tap right here in our building, I believe we need to be reminded of what sacramental things mean and what they are all about: they surround us, and they also ache for our care.

Let me give you an example. This past August there was a triathlon planned for Portland, Oregon. The swimming portion of the race was to take place in the Willamette River that bi-sects the city. The race organizers had spent years planning for this race because it was to be in celebration of the work that was done by citizens and cities to clean up the Willamette over the last 40 years. At one time the massive amounts of pollution in the Willamette River led to it being classified a “dead” waterway. Forty years of work has brought it back to life, and the race organizers wanted to celebrate with hundreds of people swimming in the waters of the Willamette. But then three days before the race came news that due to a computer error the city of Portland had accidentally released raw sewage into the river just upstream from where swimmers would enter the water. The swimming portion of the race had to be cancelled, which drew renewed attention to the fragility of our waterways and the ease with which we can damage them. The Willamette River is no longer dead, but it still aches for our care; and it is every bit as sacramental as the Jordan was on the day when Jesus was baptized. We want and need our sacraments, but our sacramental elements need someone to speak for them, to protect them, to nurture them. Imagine Jesus and John standing beside the shore of the Willamette and discovering it wasn’t safe for triathlons or baptisms either.

When Jesus was baptized, Matthew notes that the voice of God said “This is my son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” Traditional theology tells us that this is an announcement of Jesus’ divinity, of God’s pleasure that he has “answered the bell.” However, I believe that every time someone is baptized, every time someone reconciles their life with God, every time someone decides “whoever I am I am now God’s” that God announces “This is my child, my beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” I believe this because each and every one of us is “of God”; each and every one of us is divine in the way that God is surely pleased when we say “yes” to God—and God likewise says “yes” to us. We are sacramental; that is, we are “a means of divine grace,” and as we take up our place within this faith we are intimately connected to our creator God. And thus taking care of one another, taking care of this local community that we call home, and taking care of this island Earth is exactly what we are called to do. We cannot gather today and celebrate with the holy and sacramental waters of baptism and then go out and poison gallons of water with our insecticides if we take seriously the idea that we are all, at our essence, sacramental. We cannot use more than our fair share, we cannot make policies that ignore the needs of animals and those downstream if we are to say we truly value God’s gift that comes in the form of water. The sacramental waters that sustain us for baptism and for drinking must be clean, flowing with fish and other species, and available for all. In the same way, the lands where the grains and grapes grow to feed us for both our holy and our less-than-holy feasts must be protected; they must be free of toxins; they must be used in careful, faithful, and just ways; and they must be loved as a sign of our love for the One who calls us “beloved.”

There is a great deal of energy and money currently being poured into research on climate change. There is a great deal of passionate debate about how the United States might best address climate

change and sustainability issues while balancing economic and political stability. Many people are operating out of fear concerning the idea that humankind may be too late in addressing critical issues of fuel consumption, green-houses gases, CO-2 emissions, and sustainable living. I have absorbed a great deal of information from many different perspectives on these issues, and the way forward that I see is one that combines diligent science with faithful living. We need diligent science to give us the facts about the products we should use and those we should not. We need science to give us the empirical data about weather patterns, global temperatures, and options for new cleaner energy. We need diligent science to test our ideas, to reject our failures, to encourage our dreams of new ideas and new and better ways of living.

However, we also need faith and faithful living because there are no easy answers concerning how best to use our planet. When God set Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden at least they were told “don’t eat from that tree.” We, on the other hand, spend our time flailing about on this earth, creating new and better products, hoping to make life better and, often, there are unintended consequences that harm us and God’s creation. But still—and this is the good news—I believe God repeatedly announces that we are God’s beloved children and we are taken in and loved even as we so often destroy what we have been given. As faithful people, we bring something important to the table where the conversation about caring for the earth is happening. We bring proclamations of grace, hope, and love; and while these may seem trite or trivial, I believe there is an immense need for our faithful voices in this conversation. The baptism of Jesus marked a pivotal moment in the life of our faith: it was the moment when Jesus chose to immerse himself in the sacramental. As people of faith—sustained by the grace, hope, and love of our faith tradition—we are called to come with our truths into this conversation and speak courageously for all that is sacramental; for all that is a sign or symbol of divine grace; for all that God has created! And why, you ask, does naming the sacramental things matter in this conversation? Because I dare you to take a walk, to have a conversation with a neighbor or friend, to fill your grocery cart with produce, to take a deep breath, to look up at the stars...and not see that which is sacramental. I simply believe it cannot be done; because everywhere you look is God’s creation demanding to be cared for. Perhaps we have waited too long, but today I ask you to say that we will not wait any longer. Rise up, and come out of the sacramental waters of your baptism. Let us join hearts, hands, and voices to care for this sacramental place given by our beloved creator God. There is no better way to remember and celebrate our baptisms!

Thanks be to God for all the sacramental things that surround us! Amen.