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“Change is in the Water”

A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth
Genesis 1: 1-5; Mark 1: 4-11

January 11, 2009

Change is in the water these days.

Do you notice it? Can you feel it? It's all around us.

It's a new year: 2008 has cascaded into 2009.

It's a week of historic political proportions:

the state of North Carolina has sworn-in our first female governor;
and the United States of America will inaugurate our first non-white president
a week from Tuesday.

Those once oppressed and disenfranchised

are stepping into roles of vision and leadership.

And all of us are anticipating that many positive changes will follow

that will speak hope to those long-suffering

from prejudice and poverty's devastating deprivations.

Over the holidays, our daughter, Emily,

received a strange invitation and request from a Sunday School class;
from the Fellowship Class at Covenant Presbyterian Church in Charlotte,
my home church, and the class which my father taught for years.

Emily received an invitation to play the flute for their class

on the Sunday after Christmas, in honor of her grandfather.
And they asked her specifically if she would come
and play some songs for them.....about John the Baptist.
"Mom," she said on the telephone when she called to tell me,
"you've got to come with me.
I can't think of any songs about John the Baptist!"
"Are you sure you heard them right?" I asked.
"We've already had two Sundays in Advent pertaining to John the Baptist;
surely they have had enough of him already."

"No." she said, "Their Present Word lesson after Christmas
is about John the Baptist,
and they want some songs that go with the lesson."
Well, none rolled off my tongue immediately,
but I told her I'd look around and report back to her,
which sent me tumbling down the rabbit hole in search of
those elusive hymns about John the Baptist.
So I began to pull out red hymnals and blue hymnals,
old hymnals and new hymnals, Moravian, RCA, and Canadian hymnals,
moldy and mildewed hymnals,
and to my surprise, I found quite a few JTB hymns.
I found Advent hymns, like "On Jordan's Bank the Baptist's Cry",
"Wild and Lone the Prophet's Voice," and "Prepare the Way"
alluding to the prophetic voice,
heralding after more than 200 years of silence,
to make preparation for coming the kingdom of the Lord.
I found Christmas hymns like "It Came Upon a Midnight Clear" and
"Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming" declaring
that the One promised by all the prophets
has now fulfilled that promise and come among us as God incarnate.

And I found hymns like "When Jesus Came to Jordan" that speak
of John's role in baptizing Jesus, inaugurating his ministry on earth,
forming and shaping the nature of that early ministry.

One baptismal hymn, with lyrics by Thomas Troeger,
is absolutely beautiful imagery and poetry,
giving word to one of the many paradoxes arising from
the Holy One, Jesus being baptized by the wilderness prophet, John:

*What king would wade through murky streams
And bow beneath the wave,
Ignoring how the world esteems
The powerful and brave?
Water, River, Spirit, Grace,
Sweep over me, sweep over me!
Recarve the depths your fingers traced
In sculpting me.*

*Christ gleams with water brown with clay
From land the prophets trod.
Above while heaven's clouds give way
Descends the dove of God.
Water, River, Spirit, Grace,
Sweep over me, sweep over me!
Recarve the depths your fingers traced
In sculpting me.*

*Come bow beneath the flowing wave.
Christ stands here at your side,
And raises you as from the grave
God raised the crucified.
Water, River, Spirit, Grace,
Sweep over me, sweep over me!
Recarve the depths your fingers traced
In sculpting me.*

So, what I discovered in my tumble down the rabbit hole
is John the Baptist's importance
to the introduction and inauguration of Jesus in all four Gospels.

John serves as a fulcrum, a pivot point, that situates Jesus
in the past, present, and future of God's salvific activity in the world.

As wilderness preacher and witness,

John links Jesus to God's milk and honey promises of Israel's exilic past;
as prophet, John also points forward to God's immanent intervention
in human history to confer hope to a broken humanity;

And as teacher and mentor, John shapes the newborn ministry of Jesus

even as Jesus shakes the murky water off his face,
shoos the dove off his head,

and sputters the first words of his own nascent ministry,

"The time has come. The kingdom of God is near.

Repent and believe the good news." (Mark 1: 15)

These first words, of Jesus' early proclamation in Mark,

practically lip sync John the Baptist's previous pronouncement,
calling people to *repentance*,
metanoia, in Greek, which means *to turn, to change*.

The Spirit of God is hovering over the water,

and change is in the water, Jesus intimates.

Change is all around Jesus, just like it's all around us today.

It's old creation spilling over into new creation.

And it is good, because it is *of God*.

Besides the king-in-murky-streams paradox,

the other paradox especially troubling to the early church,
is why this sinless one, the Christ, chose to be baptized?

Did baptism cleanse Jesus in some way, or as a rite of repentance,

did it change Jesus in some way that eventually changes
everyone he comes to rub shoulders with;
everyone who rises dripping from the font?

Ignatius of Antioch said that Jesus was baptized, "that he might hallow water",

make it holy, purify it for all who follow.

(Placher, *Jesus the Savior*, p. 183)

Other early church fathers said that in being baptized, Jesus cleansed the waters,
so that it can in turn cleanse us of our sins.

"For when the Lord, as human, was washed in Jordan,
it was we who were washed in him and by him," Athanasius said.

(Placher, p. 183)

Contemporary scholar Marcus Borg dates the real beginning of Jesus' ministry,
to John's arrest, which suggests minimally that,
with his mentor in prison, Jesus stepped in
to carry on for John – hence the similarity of their messages.

But, Borg notes, "We may wonder if the arrest and execution
of the Baptizer were even more significant for Jesus.

In any case, it is in the connection with John that Jesus' personal
story became public history."

(Marcus Borg. *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, p. 28)

John the Baptizer is pivotal in Jesus' earthly ministry, no doubt,
and the tragic end of John is so traumatizing to Jesus, perhaps,
that it triggers the *metanoia*, the turning and change in his ministry
that were previously set in motion by his murky water bath,
by his brush with the dive-bombing dove,
and by his affirmation through the heavenly voice
that claims and acclaims him "beloved" and "pleasing" beyond measure.

Jesus is changed by his baptism, I think, in that he *turns away*
from taking cues from his beloved role model, John,
and *turns toward* God alone as his role model.

He *turns from* fulfilling the prophetic ministry of John,
and *turns toward* fulfilling his Father's will
for his own unique ministry

of pulling victory from the troubled waters of suffering,
of pulling life from the drowning waters of death.

In this way, Jesus is baptized to participate and to lead all believers
in a movement toward God.

As he comes out of the water,
he opens and surrenders his heart life to God.

He becomes the "perfectly open sign" that theologian Rebecca Chopp
talks about, perfectly open to the power and freedom of God;
perfectly open to needs of the yearning masses surrounding him;
the perfectly open sign to us of God-neighborliness.

(Anna Carter Florence. *Preaching As Testimony*. p. 95)

As he comes out of the water,
the heavens are opened to him, and as one ancient manuscript puts it,
"a reconciliation takes place between the visible and the invisible.
The celestial orders are filled with joy, the diseases of earth healed,
secret things made known, those at enmity restored to amity."

(*The Discourse on the Holy Theophany*. 6)

Jesus is changed by his baptism.

He begins his ministry as a follower of John,
and he turns and becomes a leader who calls his own disciples
to follow him (Mark 1:17) .

He begins his ministry with the things of humanity in mind,
and he turns and dedicates himself wholly
to the things of God (Mark 8:33).

He begins his ministry emulating John and using John's own message,
and he turns to craft his own message of victorious redemption
through rejection, through suffering,
through death and third-day resurrection. (Mark 8:31)

I have to tell you about the highlight of my Christmas experience
here at First Presbyterian Church.

There is always one moment that "shines" for me above all the others.

This year it was little Gregory Dickerson, in the Christmas Pageant,
playing the part of the third tree in *A Tale of Three Trees*.

Gregory's character is the tree who never wants to leave the mountaintop,
but who wants to grow so tall that when people stop to look at him,
they will raise their eyes to heaven and think of God.

But like all the other trees with lofty intentions, Gregory gets the axe,
and he ends up as lumber, eventually used to fashion a cross,
an instrument of torture for an innocent man.

The last words of the pageant go something like this....

The narrator says, "One Friday morning, the third tree was startled
when his beams were yanked from the forgotten woodpile.

He flinched as he was carried through an angry, jeering crowd.
He shuddered when soldiers nailed a man's hands to him.

He felt ugly and harsh and cruel."

And Gregory slouched with his arms stretched out parallel to the ground,
His palms facing down, his head bowed.

And the narrator continues,

"But early on Sunday morning, when the sun rose
and the earth trembled with joy beneath him,
the third tree knew that God's love had changed everything."

And when Gregory heard his cue, *that God's love has changed everything*,
he stood tall and turned his palms upward towards God,
and raised his head to gaze upwards, and smiled.

And I wanted to yell out, "Preach it, brother. Preach it with you life...."
that God's love has changed everything for you,
and for Matthew, and Deanna, and Celia,
and for our whole congregation because of you.

Change is in the water these days. Do you notice it? Can you feel it?

Change is in the baptismal waters, because it changed even Jesus,
who is calling us to follow him in a movement toward God.

Old creation is spilling over into new creation.

Possibilities with God are pouring into impossibilities.

And the Spirit of God's love is hovering over these waters of change.

Come bow beneath the flowing wave.

Christ stands here at your side

And raises you as from the grave

God raised the crucified.

Water, River, Spirit Grace,

Sweep over me, sweep over me!

Recarve the depths your fingers traced,

In sculpting me.

Amen.