

“Where’s the Water?”

Luke 3:21-22

Baptism of the Lord

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As I’m sure all of you can imagine, prior to a worship service taking place on a Sunday morning, there are all sorts of behind-the-scenes details—details that need to be taken care of, to help ensure that all runs smoothly.

I doubt that any of you are eager to get in the weeds with those details during the sermon, but here’s one that I’d like to share with you right now. Whenever a baptism is scheduled, it is the job of the head usher to make sure that there is water in the baptismal font before the service starts.

Now I am happy to say that in my experience, the head ushers at Westminster are batting 1.000! Straight A record with this—not once have I run into the problem of no water in the font.

But I have a confession: sometimes, before the head usher arrives, sometimes I decide to fill the baptismal font with water MYSELF.

Why?

Because I’m afraid of that one time when communication breaks down, and we on the pastoral staff assume the head usher is doing it, and the head usher assumes it’s already been done, and we don’t have water in the font for a baptism.

By the way, this over-functioning habit of mine, putting water in the baptismal font...it’s been with me for almost 23 years! Ever since I was ordained, I’ve done this at every church I’ve served.

It just makes me nervous, the idea of not having water in the font!

So why am I sharing this with you?

I'm giving you this "behind-the-scenes" peek at my own pre-worship habits because I'd like you to consider this morning what's important,

what's **ABSOLUTELY ESSENTIAL**
when it comes to baptism.

You have to have water, right?

It can be tap water, it can be water in an immersion tank, like in a Baptist church, it can be river water, like John the Baptist baptizing at the Jordan long ago.

But you can't have a baptism without water.
Water seems to be the most important thing.
Is water the most important thing, when it comes to baptism?

Years ago, I was on the Committee on Preparation for Ministry in the first Presbytery I served. It's the committee that helps shepherd people who want to become pastors through the multi-year process of preparing for ordination, and the committee checks at various points along the way to make sure candidates for ordination have their theology straight.

There was a retired pastor on this committee years ago, and on one occasion, with a twinkle in his eye, he asked a candidate whether water was required for a baptism.

The candidate kind of sat there stunned.
Uh...yes?!!

And this retired pastor remarked, again with a twinkle in his eye, that it was a good thing the Apostle Paul wasn't on the committee.

Because in Paul's theology of baptism, he said, there isn't a single DROP of water. You could be baptized with SAND, this pastor said, and Paul would be just fine with it.

According to Paul, the most essential part of baptism is cross and resurrection—dying to an old life, and rising to one that's NEW.

I'm glad that neither Paul nor that pastor were on the Committee on Preparation for Ministry when I was going through the ordination process.

Can you imagine having sand in the baptismal font?
I cannot imagine that.

What I would like you to imagine or think about today is what's essential, what's most important when it comes to baptism.

Is water the most important thing?
It wasn't essential to Paul.
And I'm not convinced it was all that important to Luke.

In our text from Luke for today, the baptism of Jesus is very brief.
Two verses—it's over like that!

Luke writes:
“Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the Holy Spirit descended...”

In other words, it's when Jesus is out of the water, when Jesus' baptism is already over
—that's when the Holy Spirit arrives.

It's almost like the baptism is PRELUDE.
Prelude to what?
A prelude to this:

that “x” or “y” is who you have to be?

On the face of it, it doesn’t sound like something we would welcome.

Our identity is something that we want to be able to construct through our own abilities, our own gifts, according to our values and our interests and goals.

For example, I was saddened to learn about the death of the actor Sidney Poitier this past Friday, one of the great legends of American film.

As one of his obituaries put it:

“Although often simmering with repressed anger, his characters responded to injustice with quiet determination. They met hatred with reason and forgiveness...exposing Mr. Poitier to attack...when the civil rights movement took a more militant turn in the late 1960s.

“It’s a choice, a clear choice,” Poitier said of his film roles in an interview back then.

“If the fabric of the society were different, I would scream to high heaven to play villains and to deal with different [aspects of Black life] that would be more dimensional.”¹

But he goes on to say that he did not think those were the particular roles he needed to play for that particular time.

¹ William Grimes, “Sidney Poitier, Who Paved the Way for Black Actors in Film, Dies at 94,” *The New York Times*, January 7, 2022.

In other words, Poitier carefully selected the characters that he decided to play, and he wasn't about to be pushed into doing something he didn't want to do.

No critic was going to tell Sidney Poitier:
this is who you have to be!

Of course, that desire to determine who we are and what we do—it's in every heart in this room. We don't want someone else TELLING US who we are, right?

Or is that right?
Maybe it all depends on who's doing the speaking.

In the movie *The Way, Way Back*, Duncan is a 14-year-old boy who really doesn't like his mother's boyfriend, and with good reason.

The movie opens with Duncan and his mom traveling with Trent—that's the boyfriend—and Trent's daughter to their beach house.

While the others are asleep in the car, Trent asks Duncan an INSANE question: how would you rate yourself, on a scale of 1-10?

What? Duncan responds.
How would you rate yourself? Give me a number, says Trent.

And Duncan says, I guess a 6.
And Trent replies, I think you're a 3.

Trent packages his response as motivation for Duncan to improve himself, but it's a terrible thing to say. So of course, Trent's words stick with Duncan throughout the summer. But during the summer, Duncan gets to know Owen, the 30-something guy who runs a water park near

the beach house. And Owen becomes, in some ways, like a mentor, an older brother, maybe even a surrogate father figure to Duncan.

Owen gives Duncan a job at the water park.

Duncan makes employee of the month.

Owen introduces Duncan to the other regulars at the park, and Duncan makes new friends.

Owen shepherds him in many ways, so that after a while, Duncan confides to Owen that this feels like home, and he doesn't want to leave the water park. That he's not happy at home, because he hates him.

"Who?" asks Owen.

Trent, says Duncan. My mother's boyfriend.

He said that I'm a 3!

And Owen says: He doesn't know you. That's all about him. You can't buy into that [and here I can't repeat the words from the pulpit that Owen uses to describe Trent]! You've got to go your own way."

And as the final scene in the movie (which I won't reveal here) makes clear, those were just the words that Duncan needed to hear...

What did Duncan need to hear?

He needed to hear someone else tell him—THIS is who you really are!

Do you see how receiving your identity, being told this is who you are...it's not always a bad thing.

Sometimes, it's a very important thing.

How many of you remember Moses?

When people who were gay were scared that being gay was a sin, that they would end up in hell, because that's what their church had told them all their life, and Evans told them no, not a sin, she stood side by side with them.

During the course of her far-too-brief life, Evans saved people from despair, saved people's lives because of what she wrote.²

In other words, Rachel Held Evans had a gift.
A gift for saying to people:

This is who you are.
This is who God made you to be!

But you don't have to be a best-selling author to do this.

I said at the beginning of the sermon that one of my fears is forgetting to put water in the baptismal font...but I suppose if we did get down there and there was no water, I would say to you, "I'm so sorry, we forgot the water"—and the bowl would get filled lickety-split.

It would be slightly embarrassing, but you would forgive the mistake, and it would be a memorable Sunday that everyone would talk about for weeks afterward.

I don't want that to happen, and I don't think it will, because water is hard to forget.

You know what's easier to forget, when it comes to baptism?

² Some of this section on Rachel Held Evans is indebted to "The Life and Legacy of Rachel Held Evans," by David Remnick, on The New Yorker Radio Hour podcast, found at [The Life and Legacy of Rachel Held Evans | The New Yorker Radio Hour | WNYC Studios](#).

The identity that God has given each of us.

Our identity as forgiving people.

As hopeful people.

As generous and welcoming people.

As people who are committed to treating everyone in this room as God's child, and everyone out there as God's child.

At Westminster, it's the head usher's job to remember the water for baptism.

It's the job of EVERYONE in this room
to be a living reminder to everyone else in this room
of the people whom God created us to be.

Amen.