

January 8, 2023
Isaiah 42:1-9
Matthew 3:13-17

Drop It at the Water

The heavens opened, it says. The heavens opened and a dove came down as Jesus was baptized in the river Jordan. The heavens have opened for us, but it is rain that has come down. Rain and rain and more rain. There has been flooding and traffic snarls and messes to clean up. The rain keeps coming in California. The meteorologists say they are in what's called an atmospheric river. Excess water in the sky leading to excess water in the streets. The heavens have opened, and water is everywhere.

In our scripture today, there is water everywhere. We are at the Jordan river, and John the Baptist is inviting people to come and be emersed in the water. To clean up and start again and let what is old be washed away. To begin a new life with God. The idea of baptism is not a new thing. It was not John the Baptist who invented it. In the Jewish tradition, people regularly washed themselves ritually. Before meals, before prayers, after encountering something unclean. In a special structure called a mikvah, people who submerge themselves to be pure

before God again. It would cleanse their body and mind. This kind of washing has been around for a long time. Because we know how messy life gets. We know the grimy layers that pile up; the mistakes, the guilt and fear and shame. We need a way to wash it all off. To let it go. To be forgiven and start again. Let the heavens be opened and waters make us clean.

That's what baptism is about. That's why we come to the water. That's why Jesus goes to John at the Jordan river. Because he knows things need to be cleaned up and washed off. He knows he must be part of a movement that brings the world back to itself. That starts life over. To help us remember life is not about being bigger, faster, and better. God did not create us to love money and power and possessions and being popular. God created us to love. And this week, we were all baptized with that knowledge. If you 've been following the story of Damar Hamlin, the Buffalo Bills football player. His heart stopped during a game on Monday. The game stopped. Everything stopped. People prayed. They remembered the players are people. And what matters isn't winning, what matters is life itself.

Sometimes the heavens open and we are cleansed and born into life again. We remember what matters. That's what these waters are for. They are the waters of the flood, the waters of rebirth. They flow over us, pushing us out into a new world. I don't remember my own entry into the world at MY birth. But I remember the birth of my children. I knew it was coming, but still I was surprised. I was terrified and excited and worried. There was so little I could control. And I was so glad there were other people helping me through it. And finally, there was this little person. This wonder who for the last nine months had been kicking me in the ribs and stomping on my bladder. Born to care for and to love. Baptism is like birth. It is starting over and beginning again. We all become a baby again. Weak and trusting and dependent on God. Jesus comes to be baptized himself. To begin again as a baby in the arms of God. And John wonders why. "Why Jesus? Why if you are the one to lead us?" Jesus says it is because they must do things right. "Because we must start from the same place," Jesus says. And as Jesus goes into the water and emerges again, the heavens open and a voice says, "This is my Son. My beloved with whom I am pleased." It's the kind of words you

say about a baby. It's the fundamental thing we must remember about ourselves, and about the world around us. That God made us and we are God's own. We are here for something bigger, something greater than ourselves. The prophet Isaiah speaks with the same voice: "Here is my chosen, in whom my soul delights. This one will know what matters. This one will love justice and will help release captives and will be a light in the darkness." This is who we are born to be. And in baptism, God announces to us as God announced to Jesus. "You are going to do great things. You'll always be mine and I'll always be yours. Together, we've got this."

In the waters of baptism, we are born again. Our old life is left behind, a new life begins. We let go of what was and who we thought we were, to receive who we are. And we can be reborn not once, but many times.

Over and over. With every new year, every new day. We can start over and be God's own. In our community, in our work. With our friends, and our loved ones. It is always possible to begin again. Because of baptism, we remember the heavens open, and God's Spirit descends. And things can be different.

Today, we remember our baptism. We remember what our life is about and who God calls us to be. These waters are a passageway. They help us come clean and let go and shed what needs to be left behind. These waters are not magic. They don't change God's mind about us. They don't make God love us any more than God already does. They let us be born into life again. The life of joy and hope. The life where resurrection is always possible. We only need to surrender and let go.

What life is God asking us to leave behind? What needs to be washed away? What needs to be cleansed? What do we need to die to in order to be reborn? Maybe it's our sense of perfection. Our need to prove ourselves. Our judgment of others. Our idea of who we ought to be.

Today, God invites you to remember who you are and what matters.

That means surrendering who we aren't and what doesn't matter. Even Jesus let go of things. So did John. They both had to let go of who they thought God's Messiah should be. They had to let go of what they thought God's Chosen One should do. They were both starting over, at the very beginning of things. And having to trust God completely.

The rebirth of baptism is active all the time. Every day, we are called to remember who we are and what matters. Usually, when I think of myself, I think pastor, scholar, spiritual counselor. I did not think of myself as president of the PTO. But there I was last year, suddenly, the face of our elementary school's parent teacher organization, doing new things like managing fundraisers and doing recruiting events. Now, I am not a natural salesperson. And I was not entirely comfortable. But here I was doing this new thing.

Being reborn can be hard. We might not like it at first. We might feel like kicking and screaming like a newborn. We want life to be cozy and contained. We want faith to make things safe and controlled, but instead, it breaks us and remakes us. We are back at the beginning. Starting over. Learning everything again. Like what it means to grow things. And how important a meal is. And that the hungry understand food. And refugees understand home. Those with the purest hearts don't mind washing your feet or hands or clothes. And the least are the greatest. And the last are first. And the most significant thing to you can do is forgive and let go

and start again. Because that's what God does with us. Real life, abundant life come from plunging into the abundant grace of God. That's why we come to this water. That's why we gather here together; to remember who we are and what matters most. We have been born again together into something new. We are brothers and sisters now in Christ. A new kind of family. Having family is wonderful, but let's face it, it can also be hard. Living with siblings can be difficult. With that other person in your space, bothering you, breathing on you. Always comparing everything with you; and who is better at sports and who got better grades and who got a bigger piece of cake. Being brothers and sisters can be hard. But it can be also good. Especially when we stick together. When we show up for each other. When we are there to remind one another of who we are and what matters most.

That's why we are here. We feel that call to something different, something new. A life that is real and deep. A life where we can surrender to something bigger than ourselves and hope bravely and love with abandon, knowing that we are God's beloved. And that God believes in us and has faith in us. And all we need to do is have faith in

God. To let the heavens open and the Spirit come down. And drop everything else at the water, to let grace wash over us. To be reborn again and again in God's mercy.

Today, the heavens are open. The Spirit is poured out and there is new life waiting through these waters. Today, remember your baptism. It's the car wash, removing all the road salt. It is the pressure washer, spraying off the funky buildup. It's the birth canal, delivering us from what used to be. Delivering us from old assumptions and bad habits.

From how things have always been to have things just might be possible with God. From our separateness and aloneness, into a whole new family connected by love.

Today we remember who we are and what matters. We remember that it is God's grace that saves us, not our own. We stop trying to hold it all together and let God hold it together. We drop everything at the water.

Our worry, and doubt and shame. Our regrets over what we should have done. Our fear of what others think and that we aren't enough. Leave it all at water and let the waters wash over you. Let them wash away what has held you captive. Let them deliver you from death into life again. It

is the river that carries you. It is the ocean that supports you. God's love surrounds you and holds you and all of creation.