

“LIVING WET”

Rev. Dr. Floyd Churn

January 10, 2010

Scripture: Isaiah 43: 1-7, Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

In the captivating and somewhat quirky movie of a decade ago, “O Brother, Where Art Thou,” Everett, Pete, and Delmar have escaped from the Mississippi chain gang, and deep in the woods, are plotting a way to get back to what they believe is buried treasure. As they sit around a campfire dining on roasted gopher, they suddenly begin hearing a haunting music coming from among the trees and see whited-robed men and women making their way through the woods as they sing.

“What in the world is that?” asks Everett.

“It appears to be some kind of congregation,” says Delmar.

And they stand speechless transfixed by this woodland choir wending their way to the river that runs nearby.

Suddenly Delmar is drawn irresistably toward the minister baptizing the white-robed singers and splashes his way into the water to be baptized.

“Well, I’ll be a son of a gun,” says Pete, “Delmar’s been saved!”

Emerging radiant in his wet clothes, Delmar declares,

“Well, that’s it boys, I’ve been redeemed! The preacher done washed away all my sins and transgressions. It’s the straight and narrow from here on out – and heaven everlastin’s my reward.”

To a somewhat skeptical reaction from Everett, Delmar adds,

“The preacher said all my sins is washed away, includin’ that Piggly Wiggly knocked off over in Yazoo.”

“I thought you said you was innocent of those charges,” Everett challenges.

“Well, I was lyin’ – and the preacher said that that sin’s been washed away too!”

And then, looking like a man bathed in glory, Delmar says,

“Come on in boys. The water is fine.”

The water is fine! – and there’s plenty of it, even in these tiny Presbyterian baptismal fonts that can only suggest for us the flowing river of blessing that the waters of baptism means for us all.

We *are* redeemed of our sins and transgression, though we still sin and transgress; we *are* washed clean of all that would otherwise keep us on the outside of God’s household, though we are far from spotless. Let there be ample water! I remember a baptism service I once attended in a Presbyterian church. You would have thought the community was in the midst of the severest drought. The minister dabbed his fingers in a small bowl and then gently tapped the baby’s head three times as he pronounced the Trinitarian formula, never returning his hand to the font after the first dip. No water to be seen or heard; I’m sure there were some drops of water present, but I had difficulty conjuring up the notion of grace flowing freely and abundantly available for God’s people. This particular washing and cleansing seemed more like a “dry cleaning” than that envisioned by the injunction of our Directory for Worship, that “the water should be applied visibly and generously.”¹

When we come to the waters of baptism as an infant we are brought in the innocence of new life, as yet unstained by the “sins and transgressions” that Delmar or any of us must include on our spiritual résumé if we are honest with ourselves. That face of ours, as Oswald McCall writes,

which once lay smooth in our baby crib, like an unwritten page, inevitably takes to itself lines, and stills more lines, as the parchment of an old historian who jealously sets down all the story. And for that innocent face at the font, some of that unfolding story will invariably be the brokenness and failure that taints the goodness and the faithfulness of our life as God created it to be.

So we are a people ever in need of renewal – and part of that renewal is remembering. When Martin Luther felt discouraged or afraid, overwhelmed by life or parched of faith, he reportedly would splash some water on himself and declare, “But I am baptized!” And that would be enough. John Calvin, our Presbyterian patriarch, advised readers depressed by evil to “reflect that they are still on the way” to the “complete victory” that God promises in baptism.ⁱⁱ “Baptism signifies the beginning of a life in Christ, not its completion.”ⁱⁱⁱ One of the powerful symbols of our baptism is that of dying and rising with Christ: because we have been claimed by God in baptism, God is never through with us because we are God’s beloved children. And so, we die again and again to old ways and are raised to newness of life in the renewing power of Christ’s resurrection – always “works in progress” on our baptismal journey.

That baptismal journey through all the changing scenery and the changing weather of life is an exercise in “living wet,” letting water in whatever form remind us of God’s beauty and sustaining love in which our lives are wrapped in baptism. There are reminders all around if we can see and experience them as such. Perhaps it’s when we’re caught in an unexpected sudden downpour without an umbrella ...or maybe it’s that refreshing morning shower or that long, lazy soak in a warm tub of water after a hard day...maybe we’re reminded in the laughter of children running back and forth through a backyard sprinkler on a hot summer day...sharing a cold bottle of water with a hiking companion at trail’s end...diving head-first or belly flopping into a swimming pool of clear, cold water... or seeing a young child, head dripping, at the baptismal font. Reminders all around us...and in this area, surrounded on many sides by water, the reminders are abundant.

In remembering and renewing our baptismal vows, we remember who we are as we journey through a life in which so many people and causes and agencies would like to tell us who we are and claim us as theirs. Some of those that would claim us are quite good and beneficial, but only God has the final claim on those who remember that they have been “sealed by the Spirit and marked as Christ’s own forever” in baptism; so “who we are” is really “whose we are.” We all share the same last name in this family: “God-Child.” Jesus’ identity is what his baptism by John was all about: not that he needed to repent of sin, but as the epiphany, or unveiling, of Jesus as God’s own: “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

Jokes are often made about the reprobate who responds to the call to be saved at every revival service and gets re-baptized frequently. We don’t re-baptize in our tradition, believing that baptism is God’s act and God’s work doesn’t need redoing. But we do have opportunities to seek spiritual refreshment and renewal by coming to the table, the Lord’s Table, frequently for the sacrament of grace – and by coming to the waters in a renewal of our baptism vows. The invitation today, just days into a New Year, is to do both: the Table is set...the Font is filled with living water, and the water is fine! Amen.

ⁱ Directory for Worship in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Book of Order, Chapter III, 3b(4). (3.3605)

ⁱⁱ As reported in the article, “Remembering Baptisms,” at the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship. (http://www.calvin.edu/worship/stories/remembering_baptism.php#secondstory)

ⁱⁱⁱ Directory for Worship, Chapter II, 3 (2.3008).