

“Jumping Into the Deep End of the Pool”
Isaiah 42: 1 – 9 Matthew 3: 13 – 17
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There are so many important Sunday's in the church calendar. On this particular one we celebrate the fact that Jesus made a conscious choice to be baptized, even though John the Baptist was reluctant to perform the task. As we look at this event in Jesus' life, we could easily focus on the last part of his experience of baptism by seeing Jesus as “the light of the world” coming up out of the water. We can easily connect that with our Scripture reading from Isaiah in which God refers to the “chosen servant”, the one who is given as “light to the nations”. That perspective makes for a good sermon that has been preached many times, by many ministers. But, being who I am, I am choosing to look at another part of this event that takes place earlier.

I begin with the question of why Jesus chose to be baptized in the first place. It often has been argued that Jesus' baptism was unnecessary because he had nothing to repent from. That is a point we can argue in favor of if we look from a particularly moralistic perspective at Jesus and his baptism. But, I believe that no matter what else Jesus was, he was a real human being. He had real feelings, real hopes, real relationships, and the very real experience of taking the first concrete step into his ministry. Once he takes those steps; once he goes into and then comes out of the water, everything in his life changes. And it changes fast!

Even though this event happened 2000 years ago in a far away country, we can still relate to his experience. Do you remember the experience of learning how to dive? I can. I can still feel what was like to stand on the end of that diving board, trying to find the courage to launch myself into the air and then down into the water. I really wasn't that far up. But it felt like I was a hundred feet over the surface of the water. Finally, I found my courage and did the dive. It wasn't pretty, but after I had done it the first time it turned out to be relatively easy to do it again. But that first time, now that was hard. As I think about it now only one of the issues facing me was what I was going to do with my body while I was flying through the air. The other issue was that the water is always the deepest right underneath the diving board. How was I going to keep myself from drowning once I was in the water? I knew how to swim, but somehow going into the water this way was scarier.

Spiritual transformation is often like that. It usually requires us to leave a secure position in order to launch ourselves through an unknown space towards a deep and even more unknown landing. It's a risky thing to do. And even though we have seen a hundred people do it before us, there is still no guarantee of what will happen when it's our turn. We hope that sooner or later we work up the courage. Then, while flying through the air, we realize at some level that we have made ourselves extremely vulnerable to what happens next. We know about the life we have just left, but we cannot know for sure what our new life will be like when we arrive.

I suggest to you that the spiritual life is very much like diving into the deep end of the pool. Assuming we manage to get ourselves into the water, we still have to swim or else we sink. When we finally get to the side and climb out of the water we realize that we will never be the same again. We have taken a risky step into the fullness of life.

We have read and heard the stories about Jesus so many times that we may already know all the twists and turns and outcomes. Because we know how things turn out, it can be easy to forget that he was a human being doing these things. Yes, perhaps he had a special relationship with God, a mystical connection perhaps, but he also knew that there were some unpredictable risks involved in his journey. It is likely that Jesus had a strong emotional reaction to many aspects of his ministry, and it is clear, particularly during his prayer in the garden of Gethsemane before his arrest that he knew he had embarked on a very difficult and dangerous journey. Even though, after his baptism, he came up out of the water, he never really was “out of deep water” from then on.

I believe firmly that Jesus does not call us to go anyplace he has not already gone or do anything that he has not already done. Jesus is a leader who leads by example more than by directive. We are required to take no risks that he has not already taken before us.

How, then, do we understand what happened when he came up out of the water? As we have read, the spirit of God descended upon him like a dove. A voice was heard proclaiming, “You are my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased”. At least this is the version that we find in the Gospel of Mark. The Gospels are curiously varied in how they report this event. Mark and Luke report the voice of God saying, “You are my beloved son”, while Matthew and John say, “This is my beloved son”. So, I wonder. Is this a statement that just Jesus hears or is it a proclamation to the crowd about who Jesus is?

It seems to me that either way, the one who benefits the most from the statement is Jesus himself. He has just taken this huge risk by stepping into the river and opening himself up to this call to ministry. When he receives his acknowledgement from God, is it simply a recognition of his identity, or is it a recognition of the courageous step that Jesus has just taken? We can never know the answer to that question directly because we cannot know God directly. Nevertheless, our speculation can be useful. While we can argue that his choice to be baptized was risky, I don't believe it made him into a daredevil (if you pardon the expression). Rather, I believe Jesus made a conscious decision to follow the path that he knew was his, and a conscious decision to trust the process that God had put into motion. He chose to believe that he could trust God to remain with him and to prepare him adequately for the journey ahead. It makes perfect sense then, that right after his baptism, Jesus went into the wilderness to be tempted. (But we'll talk more about that at a later time.)

Today, our service of worship is about Jesus' baptism and about how we can reaffirm our own. I would like us to affirm today what a risky step baptism can be. We believe that God leads in all journeys, even though we don't know where the road leads, and we don't know what dangers we will face. What we do know and affirm today is that God has sent Jesus as our “light to the nations” and we affirm that God's creative process is still at work.

We live in a challenging world, with problems and conflicts that are enormously complex. We cannot imagine how things can turn out, but we may know in our hearts that we have to be involved somehow. The water is deep and we wonder what perils face us as we go into it. But, Jesus demonstrates to us how to have faith, how to put one foot in front of the other toward an uncertain future. And he teaches us how to prepare ourselves for the challenges ahead. Jesus invites us to be educated, compassionate, and faithful. Jesus invites those who receive baptism and who reaffirm their baptism to jump off the diving board, into the deep end of the pool. I promise you that we will find him there.

As we all reaffirm our baptism today, whether through the ritual of water after the service or in our own hearts and minds, I invite all of you to hear the words that God said to Jesus and I would like you to consider that these words are spoken to you as well. The voice of God says, “You are my beloved child. And with you am I well pleased!”