

January 10, 2021 Baptism of the Lord Sunday

Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church

Psalm 29, Matthew 3:13-17

"God of the Storm"

Douglas T. King

I love baptismal fonts in all shapes and sizes. I love them, from the most ornate to the simple, clean, symmetry of the one we have here at Ladue Chapel. I love to watch families gather around them filled with joy for the new life in our midst. I love it when they are placed front and center in sanctuaries, a reminder of how central baptism is to each of us as a child of God.

But, I also hate baptismal fonts, all of them. No, you did not mishear me. I said I hate baptismal fonts. I hate them for the way they so carefully hold the water within them. I hate how little water they hold. I hate how they tame and domesticate the water as if they were finger bowls at fancy parties; as if the water were there merely for us to lightly cleanse the tips of our fingers.

Baptisms are a favorite for many of us. We revel in the cooing infants, and the proud parents; the liturgy welcoming these little ones into the household of God and the way they are carried around the congregation for all to see. So what's my problem? Why am I so judgmental of fonts which allow for such poignantly touching moments? In my defense I turn to the words

of Annie Dillard as she reminds us of what is truly at stake in worship. She writes,

"On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return. "

(Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*)

Yes, Annie Dillard has a flair for the dramatic, but she raises a good point about how matter-of-factly comfortable we are calling on the name of God Almighty. I am a little jealous of our Baptist friends. Immersing someone in water when they are baptized probably does a better job of capturing what is occurring when we acknowledge we are claimed by God than a few delicate drops across the brow ever could. After all, we are being brought into direct contact with the mighty power of God.

I think the fashioners of the lectionary readings for the day are giving us a nudge in this direction. The choice of Psalm 29, which occurs in all three years of the lectionary for this day, is pretty significant. It is often called "Hymn to the God of the Storm" and the title is appropriate. It is believed to be the oldest of all the psalms and it brings a most primary message about our God. If you had to sum it up in a

sentence I would say it is, "The Lord reigns." It is called an enthronement psalm and I do not need to tell you why. God's supreme strength is exalted.

"The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars...The voice of the Lord flashes forth flames of fire...The voice of the Lord shakes the wilderness...The voice of the Lord causes the oaks to whirl, and strips the forest bare; and in God's temple all say, 'Glory!'"

How can being claimed by this God be demonstrated with a thimbleful of water? To get any sense of what great power is claiming us in baptism we should be flung headlong into the Mississippi River. Being brought that dangerously close to such immense power should take our breath away; it should drive us to our knees; it should stun us.

And yet, when we turn to the gospel of Matthew and Jesus' baptism we do not get overwhelmed by the power of God. In fact what we get is Jesus, the Son of God, submitting himself to John and requesting that he be baptized. Upon Jesus being baptized, the heavens open, but we do not get thunder and lightning, no raging fire, we do not get an earthshaking, booming voice. We get the Spirit descending as a dove, a gentle bird gliding downward to earth and landing benignly upon him. We get no universal command or demand. We receive a simple and direct announcement of parental affection, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." I can imagine the divine offering these words intensely, but sotto voce. As that gentle dove descends upon Jesus I do not hear the voice of the Lord we

get in Psalm 29. This voice is not toppling trees and nations, it is expressing affection for a child.

So has the voice of the Lord lost its power? Has God aged some since the creation of Psalm 29? After all, a one hundred decibel announcement that Jesus is God's very Son would have been a much better PR move. If God still has the power, why is God not putting the power to work for God's purposes?

I am reminded of the concept of tzimtzum, try saying that three times fast. The concept of tzimtzum was proffered by the Jewish mystic Isaac Luria. Luria argued that for God to set creation into motion the divine needed some room to work. With all of existence completely infused and filled with the divine there was no room for anything else. Tzimtzum means contraction or withdrawal in Hebrew. Luria states that God needed to take a half-step back in order for there to be room for the existence of a physical world and mortal creatures like you and me. This sacrifice by God allowed for this wondrous creation of ours and the likes of you and me to live and move and have our being. Unfortunately, it also allows for all that can go wrong in a world in which God does not overwhelm every square inch. We find ourselves faced with car accidents, and cancer, violence, and poverty, and disease.

When the Son of God requests to having John the Baptist baptize him it is not driven by a lack of power. When God alights down on Jesus as a dove with a quiet announcement, rather than in a techni-color light show seen across the continents with an amplification system to match, it is not

driven by a lack of power but by a decision to use that power differently.

So what does it mean when we are baptized? When the Almighty One, who does not often reveal to us that almighty power, lays claim to us? If I am going to be a child of God I would prefer to experience God as large and in charge, as an immense buffer to all that might harm or disappoint me, guaranteeing me a life of safety and ease, and dreams fulfilled. But that is not the way in which our God functions in this world. And according to Isaac Luria, God could not function in the world in that way. There would be no room for us to exist if God's power surged at full force through every corner of the universe.

But the lack of a booming, powerful voice does not demonstrate that God is not present nor that God is lacking in ultimate power. I find myself returning to our baptismal font for guidance. Earlier I complained that it held too little water to demonstrate what a momentous event is occurring when we recognize being claimed by our Almighty God. But as I think about the water in that font I am reminded of what water often symbolizes in the Bible. Water represents the powers of chaos, of all that is beyond our control in this life. Raging storms, floods, crashing surf, treacherous rapids, one and all a reminder that we cannot control this world.

But in this font, water rests tamely in a bowl. What is tamed is not God's almighty power, but the place in which chaos plays in our lives. As we know, our baptism does not inoculate

us to the unforeseen circumstances of this life. What it does is serve to remind us that for all of the chaos we may experience or fear experiencing in this life, the psalmist was correct, "The Lord sits enthroned above the flood." All the chaos of this world can be cupped in God's divine hand. It is indeed mere drops of water in the light of God's supreme power. We may not be protected from all harm by God's power but we are guaranteed our ultimate outcomes. In the end chaos will never prevail.

Today as we recognize and remember all of our baptisms, we imagine God's descent upon us and that gentle yet profound announcement, "These are my beloved children, in whom I am well pleased." And nothing in this life can ever take away that loving delight that is placed upon our foreheads.

We come to the font remembering how tenderly we are claimed by our God. We come to the font with joyful gratitude that we are the beloved Children of God. We come to the font knowing that whatever may come in this life. We have been promised a home in the household of God.

Thanks be to God. Amen.