

*A River Runs Through It*

*A sermon for the Baptism of our Lord*

*by The Rev. Dr. Charlene Rachuy Cox ©2002*

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Beloved in Christ, this is of the word of God: Grace unto you and peace this day, in the name of +Jesus. Amen.

In many ways,  
The story about Jesus' baptism  
Seems like the same old thing.  
Same old words.  
Same old story.  
Same old song.  
So why read it today?  
Why think on it again?

To help us wonder about all this,  
I invite you to imagine with me this morning -  
Imagine a picture entitled "The River."  
This is no ordinary picture.  
This is not a picture  
Which can be afforded a cursory glance,  
And then dismissed  
Out of hand -  
Forgotten  
As something of no importance.

Instead, this picture is all around you -  
A cyclorama -  
In every direction that you turn  
The picture continues.  
In each direction that you look,  
The picture persists -  
It comes back to meet itself  
At the beginning,  
And the beginning becomes the ending  
Just as the ending becomes the beginning.

This picture is grand  
In its vision  
And in its scope.  
Unlike a photograph,  
Which appears to put each item

Into perspective,  
Into limited cropped proportion,  
This picture has a perspective that is actually askew –  
Everything appears to be  
Present,  
Up front,  
Right here.  
And, throughout the picture,  
A river –  
Long,  
Winding,  
Swirling,  
Moving,  
Twisting,  
Turning,  
Churning –  
A river runs through it.

In one place,  
At what might be a horizon,  
A farmer is tending a garden of vegetables.

At another place,  
A scientist sits at a computer.

At another place,  
A group of people –  
Refugees perhaps –  
Carry knapsacks on their backs  
With sorrowful,  
Hopeful,  
Exhausted looks in their eyes.

At another place,  
Women are weeping,  
And children are running,  
And money is being exchanged,  
And someone is hiding,  
And another is voting,  
And another is dressed in fatigues and carrying a gun,  
And another is laying concrete,  
And another is reading a book,  
And still another is bandaging a wound,  
And young people appear to be in conversation with someone who may be a teacher –

And on, and on it goes ...

And in one place,  
There stand the figures of John and Jesus –  
In the midst of the river –  
Both dripping with water  
From their hair  
and their faces  
and their clothes.

*And a river runs through it all.*

But what River is this?  
Is it one,  
Or is it many?  
Or is it all the rivers  
Of the earth,  
Flowing together  
As one water –  
Transcending time,  
And binding people together?

Whatever river it is,  
It must be important –  
At least to the artist who created this work.  
So many people crowd this river's banks!  
The details that you see are remarkable:  
You see brown eyes,  
Green eyes,  
And blue.  
You see faces lined with wrinkles of joy  
And wrinkles of heartache.  
You see hands young and tender,  
And hands knotted and worn.  
You see backs stooped in age,  
And bodies young in agility.  
You see faces that are  
Bronze,  
And ebony,  
And cream,  
And sand.

They seem like a disconnected lot –  
The ones in this picture –

The ones along this river.  
They seem to represent folk  
From every race and every nation,  
Every time and every place,  
People who would have no reason to be assembled  
Into one gathering.  
But for all of these portrayed,  
For all in the picture,  
There is one constant –  
The river.

Again,  
What river might this be?  
Maybe a river in the Garden of Eden.  
Perhaps the river Jabbock, upon whose banks  
Jacob wrestled with the angel of God.  
Or might it be the Jordan –  
John and Jesus in its midst  
Would seem to suggest that it is so.  
Or perhaps it is the river of life  
That flows from the throne  
Of the Lamb of God.  
What river might this be?

We know that throughout history,  
The people of God have forded many rivers –  
And have repeatedly found life in their waters,  
But what river is *this*  
That meanders from *this* artist's brush?

Regardless of its name or location,  
Regardless of whether it is one  
Or many –  
For this picture,  
And its story –  
*A river runs through it.*

It is not only an imaginary image,  
However,  
That is traversed by an ever-flowing river:  
*A river runs through all our stories –*  
Yours,  
Mine –  
All of us.

Perhaps that is the message of the artist  
Who has given us  
This image  
That we see  
In our mind's eye  
As we gaze with our hearts  
Upon this painting that  
Surrounds us.

It is the river  
That connects us with one another.  
It is the river that connects us  
With the saints who have gone before.  
It is the river that connects us  
With those who are yet to be.  
It is the river  
That intimately embraces us  
Into the heart of God.  
It is the river of  
*The Water and the Word.*

Our Gospel reading for today  
Brings us to the River Jordan,  
And the Baptism of Jesus.  
The picture of the river  
In the cyclorama that surrounds  
Your mind's eye  
Has captured the moment  
That Jesus emerges  
From the baptismal waters.  
As you see the images  
Of this immense –  
And yet intimate portrayal,  
Listen and hear the voice which speaks:  
"You are My Child, the Beloved;  
With you I am well pleased!"

Sense the power of the Spirit  
Alight upon Jesus  
Like a dove!

Feel and know  
That which moves unto us –  
Unto you –

Through this story –  
Like water in a river –  
Connecting you to Jesus,  
And Jesus to you.

For you see,  
*A river does run through it* –  
Your story,  
My story,  
The story of the people of God  
In every time  
And in every place –  
It all connects because of  
Jesus' baptism in the river.

When we come to be baptized into Christ Jesus,  
We come to know the fullness of life –  
New,  
Rich,  
Full,  
Abundant –  
Eternal.

When Jesus came to be baptized by John,  
He came to enter into the fullness  
Of the whole earthly experience –  
To be born,  
To live,  
And to die.

When we come to be baptized into Christ Jesus,  
We come to be immersed  
Into the completeness of Love.  
When Jesus came to be baptized by John,  
He came to fill those waters *with* Love  
So that all who are washed in them  
Might be born anew  
By Love  
Into Love  
And For Love.

When we come to be baptized into Christ Jesus,  
We come to renounce  
All the forces of evil  
That strive against

The goodness of God,  
And to be clothed in the call  
To strive for justice and peace in all the earth.  
When Jesus came to be baptized by John,  
He came to embody  
Good news to the poor,  
Release to the captives,  
Recovery of sight to the blind,  
Freedom of the oppressed,  
And the time of God's favor.

When we come to be baptized,  
We come to be made *new* –  
Burying all that separates us  
From God  
And from one another,  
And rising from those waters,  
New creatures,  
Born of water and the Spirit  
To a *new* life.  
When Jesus came to be baptized by John,  
He came to enter into the old –  
Entering completely  
Into what is,  
So that we can completely enter into -  
And become -  
What will be.

*And from this time forth  
And forevermore  
A river runs through it all.*

Everything Jesus does  
From this time forward  
Is caught up in the flow  
Of the baptismal river.  
Because he was immersed in us  
And in our humanity,  
His life poured fully  
Upon the sick  
To give them health.  
His Spirit moved with power  
To cast out demons.  
His giving of his life

Brings about the resurrection of the dead.

Jesus was committed to all  
That flowed forth  
From the waters into which he was plunged.  
Jesus came into the world  
To do precisely what the waters would ordain –  
To save,  
To liberate,  
To cleanse,  
To restore,  
To make new.  
And so we believe,  
That Jesus stands in the river –  
And so do we –  
Bound together in baptismal waters,  
Bound together in grace,  
Bound together in mission,  
Bound together in justice –  
By a river –  
The river of Water and the Word.

As you continue to gaze upon  
The picture of the river  
That you see in your imagination,  
Your eyes meet with some surprises  
For your soul...  
You see more than a myriad of faces:  
You see individual people,  
With individual lives being lived,  
Individual stories to tell.

The picture that surrounds you now  
Seems to have come to life –  
Moving,  
Developing,  
Changing –  
Even as the river itself  
Flows through the picture.

You continue to look at this dramatic portrayal of life,  
And there before your very eyes,  
You see yourself along the river.  
You see in your own eyes,

Your own story of life.  
As you gaze upon this image of yourself  
Beside the river of God,  
You see time of joy in your life  
And times of sorrow.  
You see times of great happiness  
When life flowed full and free,  
And you see times of deep grief  
And disappointment  
When the river gathered your tears.  
From your own form  
In the picture,  
You are brought back to places  
You have been,  
People you have known,  
Decisions you have made,  
Questions you have asked,  
Crossroads at which you have stood,  
The life which you have lived.

As you continue to be absorbed  
By what this image of yourself  
At the river reveals to you,  
You hear a sound coming into the center of your consciousness.  
At first,  
The sound is simply there –  
Like the babbling sound of the river,  
And then slowly,  
But surely,  
The sound becomes more distinct –  
More clear –  
It is an audible voice,  
Speaking through the current of the water.  
The images of your life  
Continue to flood your view,  
And the voice continually becomes more distinct.  
Finally,  
You are able to understand the words:  
*“You are my beloved child.*  
*With you I am well pleased.”*  
The words are spoken repeatedly,  
As the water splashes,  
And moves,  
And swirls,

And envelopes all the images of your life.

Here,  
In this picture,  
You see that your whole life  
Is caught up in the river of God's grace.  
Your whole life is bathed in the waters  
That flow from Jesus' immersion  
*Into* your life.  
Through everything that you have known –  
Everything that you do know –  
And Everything that you will know –  
The voice of God continues to speak to you –  
*"You are my beloved child."*

*And a river runs through it all.  
It is the river of God.*

Through everything that you have experienced –  
Everything that you do experience –  
And everything that you will experience –  
The voice of God continues to speak to you –  
*"You are my beloved child."*

*And a river runs through it all.  
It is the river of life,  
Flowing from the throne of the Lamb of God.*

Through everything that you have been –  
Everything that you are –  
And everything that you will become –  
The voice of God continues to speak to you –  
*"You are my beloved child."*

*And a river runs through it all.  
The river runs through you,  
Pouring forth God's word of grace  
Upon you  
And from you.*

In many ways,  
This story does seem like  
The same old thing.  
Same old words.

Same old story.  
Same old song.  
But maybe,  
That is the point of it all.  
When God speaks,  
God says the same old thing,  
Over,  
And over,  
And over again:  
*"You are my beloved child.  
With you I am well pleased."*

Say that with me,  
Would you please?  
*"You are my beloved child.  
With you I am well pleased."*

As the river of Jesus  
Flows through the entirety  
Of your existence,  
May the Holy Spirit ever open your heart  
That you might be graced  
Endlessly anew  
By the same old thing  
Bringing you changed,  
New life  
*As a river runs through it.*

In the name of +Jesus.  
Amen.

We sing together, "Shall We Gather at the River."