

A River Runs Through It

A sermon for the Baptism of our Lord

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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 Jabbok, 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."