

Jon Hauerwas – January 13, 2019 – “A Voice”
Isaiah 43:1-2, 5-7 and Luke 3:15-16, 21-22

“Eleven-year-old Darren stood at the edge of the diving board at the local YMCA... for 25 minutes. His swimming teacher was treading water in the deep end, calling out to him to no longer hesitate and jump in. His classmates were clinging to the pool wall encouraging him, ‘You got this, Darren! You’re the man!’ His mother was looking through the glass in the observation nook squeezing her rosary, praying to Jesus that her son would just finally go for it.”¹

“But ‘do not fear’ is ‘easier said than done.’ Regardless of assurances from strong, supportive sources, none of us lives free from fear. Fears come in all sorts of shapes and sizes, and abstract assurances are cold comfort.”² “Some fears persist as incapacitating chronic anxieties.” On the one hand, “fears can be rational and realistic – essential to the health of those they seem to threaten.” And on the other, “fears can be grounded in misinformation, misrepresentation, and projection.”³

“‘Ok, ok,’ Darren said with a tremble in his voice. He took a tiny step forward and then three steps backward. ‘No, no I can’t,’ he shrieked. A collective groan

¹ Samantha Gonzalez-Black, “Let the Journey Begin,” *Journal for Preachers*, Advent 2018, 17.

² David J. Schlafer, “Baptism of the Lord,” *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year C, Volume 1*, ed. Joel B. Green, (Westminster John Knox Press: 2018), 162.

³ *Ibid.*, 163.

echoed throughout the pool room. No one was sure if he would ever brave the water. Water is dramatic. For all of us, water possesses this dualistic nature. It can be terrifying. It can be refreshing. It can be life-killing. It can be life-saving.”⁴

“Since the beginning of time (when the Spirit of the Lord blew over the watery chaos to create life), water has been a source of unpredictable power. It has sent sailors to the bottom of the sea and brought explorers to unexpected places. It has drawn strangers together at the well, and it has covered cities and islands like a blanket. Too often when we come to the font, we like to focus on the sweetness of water: that which refreshes us, restores us, redeems us. We don’t like to lift up what is dangerous about water. So, we tame it. We control it.”⁵

“When we speak about baptism, we express that it is a symbol of our new life in Christ. But we forget that baptism also represents a significant loss – something goes missing. The old life vanishes so a new life can be born. The earliest Christian baptismal fonts were shaped like tombs. Jesus’ followers would walk into the tomb bath and immerse themselves in the water, metaphorically dying with the crucified

⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 17.

Christ below the surface. And then they would walk up and out, a fresh new soul resurrected through the power of the Holy Spirit.”⁶

Recently, and on the occasion of the death of long-time Westminster member Frances Keller, her family came to meet with me at the church as is customary to share their memories, and to plan the service. And as we were making our way through the sanctuary, one of Fran’s daughters asked me a question that I have never received before. “Would it be okay,” she wondered, “if we could celebrate the sacrament of baptism as part of my mother’s funeral service?”

Soon, a number of scriptures were racing through my mind. Take this one, for example, from First Peter, “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, whose great mercy gave us new birth into a living hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead!” Or this one, from Romans, “When we were baptized in Christ Jesus, we were baptized into his death. We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that, as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live a new life.”

⁶ *Ibid.*, 18.

Theologically, the request fit because while “baptism water marks the end of something, it also marks the beginning of that which is endless.”⁷ When Jesus appeared before John in the wilderness of Judea and submitted himself to the waters of baptism, God was there. And, as Luke presents it, when Jesus prayed, “heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’”

Friends, the message here is that Jesus was not only a great moral teacher, and a deeply spiritual person; he was also “God’s Son, the Beloved, the Messiah in whom the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.”⁸ And in his witness, we are reminded that through prayer, worship, and the celebration of the sacraments, the seemingly great chasm between heaven and earth gives way as God draws near to us and we draw near to God.

“Darren frantically tip-toed around the diving board,” while “his teacher called out to him, ‘Darren, You can do this! We believe in you!’ Finally, Darren took a breath, closed his eyes, held his nose, and took the tiniest, tenderest jump off the

⁷ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁸ Will Willimon, *Lectionary Sermon Resource, Year C, Part 1*, “The Baptism of our Lord,” (Abingdon Press: 2018), 95.

board. When he felt his feet in the air, his mouth dropped; and when he burst through the top of the water, he took in a great big gulp of lukewarm chlorine. He panicked and began to move his hands and feet about. Finally, he felt two arms wrap tightly across his belly and pull him up to the surface. He inhaled a gust of fresh air with the same joy one feels when reuniting with an old friend. And in that moment, he'd never felt more alive, more afraid, more exhilarated. He had done it. He was immersed in water – for the first time. And he wasn't done yet. 'Now kick,' his teacher said. 'Kick hard.'"⁹

Today, we “remember that Jesus never asked anybody to simply think about him or agree with him.” Instead, “he asked people to follow him, and to do what he said.” The Christian faith, therefore, is more than “a set of principles, a set of ideas to think about, or a set of convictions to be mastered.” Our faith is “a set of practices, things that we do, a way of life, something that we take up and follow, a way of walking behind Jesus of Nazareth, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.”¹⁰ May it be so and all thanks be to God both now and forever. Amen.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 98.