

**January 10, 2016**

**TEXT: Luke 3:15–22**

**TITLE: Word and Water**

Consider this: What types of things do we learn faster—negative things or positive things? Not surprisingly, humans are programmed to respond quicker to negative stimuli rather than positive stimuli. It's a survival instinct. The problem is that it is not a very precise form of learning. Mark Twain said, *A cat who sits on a hot stove will never sit on a hot stove again. But he won't sit on a cold stove either.* Negative experiences have powerful, even irrational effects on us. The cat's experience of the hot stove now keeps it from cold stoves as well, even those there's nothing to fear from a cold stove. Years ago I made the mistake of parking in the strip mall lot here on Highland although my family was going to the ice cream parlor across the street. We came out with our ice cream in time to see a tow truck about to pull away our car. The kids were frightened; I was angry; and it was an expensive lesson to learn. However, to this day I won't park in that lot or patronize that strip mall because of the negative associations I have with that place. I know that's an irrational response. But it would take a pretty dramatic positive experience to override the negative feelings I carry around from that one fateful ice cream excursion.

Cats, stoves, ice cream, parking lots: all of which brings us to our gospel lesson for today—the story of Jesus' baptism. If you were to capture Jesus' baptism in a stained glass window, it would make a wonderful image. Jesus surrounded by the water of the Jordan River against a backdrop of a sunny blue sky while a white dove representing the Holy Spirit descends from overhead. You can almost hear the heavenly voice announcing, "*This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased.*" We re-tell this story every time a child or adult is baptized with water from our baptism font. It's a vivid story full of details that we can almost physically sense just through how the event is described—warm sunshine, cool water, the sound of dove's wings, a voice like thunder rumbling in the sky.

But what the stained-glass window cannot capture is the lead-up to Jesus' baptism. The window can't show why Jesus chose to be baptized—why this one who was without sin stepped into the waters to receive the washing away of sin. For that detail, we need to focus on John the Baptist, the other important character in this drama. If Jesus is best depicted in stained-glass, John the Baptist is best captured in Dolby surround-sound speakers. He is the voice crying out in the wilderness, literally. He doesn't mince words. He calls the crowd a 'brood of vipers' trying to flee the wrath to come. He's for radical redistribution of wealth, saying whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none. John was a challenger of the status quo, a discomfiting prophet, a truth-teller. In many ways, he's the negative stimulus that gets our attention so that we will be focused later when the positive stimulus finally comes our way.

Several current movies feature people who are uncomfortable, John the Baptist-type truth-tellers. *Concussion* tells about the willful, often damaging cover-up of health risks in the NFL. *The Big Short* tells about the willful, often fraudulent behavior in the financial sector before the Great Recession. *Spotlight* tells about the willful, always destructive secrets about child abuse within the church. Something in the systems of sports, the stock market, even the church got distorted; each needed someone to point out these distortions so that things could be repaired—so that healing could occur and justice and trust be restored.

There will always be a need for John the Baptists because there will always be distortion and brokenness in the world around us. That's what is meant by the concept of original sin. Too often original sin is tied to the story of Adam eating the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden, believing that because he messed up long ago, that stain of sin now marks all of humanity including us. Original sin is more systemic than personal. It is the brokenness that precedes us in life - that surrounds us in this world of violence, racism and war and bends us away from what God has named good.<sup>1</sup> Original sin bends us, distorts us tragically, and would conquer us were it not for voices crying in the wilderness, and more importantly, were it not for God's power and might and grace active to save us.

Back in 1902, Ivan Pavlov noticed something unusual about the dogs he kept in his lab for scientific experiments. He noticed that they began to salivate whenever his assistant entered the room where they were caged. True, that assistant was the one who fed them, but he did not always enter the room just for that purpose. Pavlov wondered if he could change an *unconditioned response*—saliva being generated by the smell of food—into a *conditioned response*—saliva being produced when there's no food around. His famous experiment of ringing a bell whenever the dogs were fed—and later simply ringing a bell to make them salivate as if they were going to be fed—proved the truth of his theory. The dogs learned something. The bell made them anticipate something good. They learned “hope.”

There's an important lesson here for us. Cats sitting on hot stoves avoid all stoves, both hot and cold. One bad experience getting ice cream prompts me always to avoid one parking lot. Isolated acts of violence in the world lead us to live in fear of all the world, teaching us through negative stimuli to despair, badgered by fear-mongering politicians to be cynical and distrustful. Sadly, through original sin and imperfect survival instincts, we lead distorted, defensive lives until faith re-trains us. Until an amazing grace revives us. By faith we “learn hope.” We are set free to see the world differently and thus live differently. And a powerful expression of that hope is found in the word and water of baptism.

When Luke describes Jesus' baptism, he begins with John the Baptist shouting in the wilderness near the Jordan River. John names original sin—names the fear and brokenness that marks life and calls people to correct their propensity to sin and return to what is right and good and healing. He baptizes with water,

although he points to one who would baptize with more powerful agents—fire and the Holy Spirit. He told about a winnowing fork that would toss people like grain being tossed in the air—good seed and bad chaff alike. The status quo, the way things are, will be disrupted but what is good will remain and bear fruit. John's words were troubling—truth-tellers are always troubling. He ends up in jail, thrown there by Herod—the guy on the throne, the one profiting from things staying the way they've always been, with others being too afraid to try to change it.

Into that world of original sin, God became flesh in Jesus and joined us here on earth. In the fullness of time, God in Christ stood with all the rest of us in that line of broken souls waiting out in the wilderness to receive the promise of baptism. And when his turn came to step into the water, Jesus did just that. As the water glistened on his skin, he prayed. In that moment the words and water together became something precious—they became hope incarnate. God's answer to our prayer came when the voice said *This is my beloved with whom I am well pleased*. Stronger than every negative stimuli, every painful, sinful and fearful memory, came this pronouncement for Christ and for us—*This is my beloved*.

Those words of God's reassuring, grace-full love plus the water that washes us clean so we can step away from the old broken, fearful, sinful ways of doing things—that is how we learn hope. God's life-giving hope. With your baptism, that reassurance spoken by the prophet Isaiah, spoken over Jesus, is spoken to you as well. Why? Because your life is rooted in the loving intention of God. You are part of God's plan. That is the basis of our hope.

That good news gives us courage to straighten whatever is crooked in us and around us and walk with confidence into the future. It helps us chase away the shadows and cast off the fears that would confine us and everyone beside us. Your life is rooted in the loving intention of God, who says to you each morning *This is my beloved, my child, with whom I am well pleased*. That is the hope that comes from God's word and baptismal water to each of us. Thanks be to God.

AMEN

---

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Margaret Suchocki, *Divinity and Diversity*, 2003, p. 106; quoted in *Feasting on the Word*, Baptism of the Lord, year C, p. 238.