

January 13, 2019

TEXT: Luke 3:15–18, 21–22

TITLE: Waters of Trust

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

Just over a year ago, a 39 year old woman named Jada Yuan got what many would consider to be a dream job. The New York Times annually makes a list of the 52 places in the world most worth visiting—from New Orleans to Fiji, Bolivia to the beaches of Cambodia. Out of 13,000 applicants, Ms. Yuan was given the assignment to visit all 52 spots in one year. She took on this challenge, basically organizing her itinerary to travel from west to east around the globe. It was both amazing and amazingly hard. Early on she called friends sobbing, feeling over-whelmed by the physical demands of travel, the logistical challenges of global transportation and the unrelenting burden of having to submit stories back to the paper. Her friends told her to hang in there and to remember that a year is short.

Recently Jada reflected on her short, frenetic year of global travel. She said that she started out determined to do it all—eat all the new foods, visit every mountain temple in South Korea, hike to the sea caves in remote Tasmania. But in the end what she remembered most were the moments of human connections: the man in Lucerne, Switzerland who returned her laptop when she'd left it on a bridge in the rain. The army of concerned travelers who helped her navigate impossible train connections in Chandigarh, India. She wrote this: *“Trust has been the through-line that has emerged from it all. Trust in myself, trust that as a solo female traveler, I could watch my back without walling myself off from experiences, and trust in the fundamental goodness of people.”*¹

At first glance, there doesn't seem to be much connection between the story of Jada Yuan and the story of John the Baptist. Jada talked about trust and seeing the fundamental connections that exist among all people. John talked about one who was coming who wielded a winnowing fork—a type of pronged rake used to toss wheat husks in the air, which forced the lighter chaff to blow away but caused the heavier grains to fall onto the ground to be gathered up afterwards. John talked about good seeds going into the granary and unneeded chaff being burnt in fire. It is a compelling message, but not necessarily a unifying, comforting message.

Granted, John's message was secondary to what came next, namely, that people would take part in a ritual washing—a type of Jewish “mikveh”, a washing away of impurities, which we have come to call “baptism.” Usually the “mikveh” bath occurs before a significant event, such as going to Sabbath services or getting married. It is always preceded by a time of preparation—of intense washing, self-cleaning; in modern days, shampooing and scrubbing so there is nothing on the skin when a person finally steps into the pool of water.

At the Jordan River, John's call to enter the waters basically demanded that people do a spiritual cleansing prior to their baptism. He told them to have faith in God, to trust in the

Lord's plans for goodness and holiness, and then to step into the waters as a mark of expectation— of being washed in preparation for a time soon to come when the Messiah would finish the work of the Lord's creation.

The initial part of the story of John the Baptist feels a bit contradictory. There's an invitation that fills people with expectation— "Come to the waters" —but also there's his unsettling language about separating wheat into granaries and burning chaff with unquenchable fire. It almost feels like the oppressive, divisive language we hear around us in American politics: one side is good, one side is evil, and never the two shall meet. The British writer David Goodhart, in reflecting on the Trump election in America and the Brexit vote in England, described how there seems to be two groups in modern society contending with one another—the Anywheres and the Somewheres. The Anywheres are people who do well in school and university, who gain credentials and experiences that are portable, of value anywhere in the world—so they are comfortable in new places and with new people. Somewheres are more rooted and have more geographically situated identities. They have deep connections to a specific vocation and specific location; they have less portable credentials and less flexible career options. They are not always socially conservative, but having been buffeted by the winds of change over the past years, Somewheres cling harder to spaces where they have control and dominance.²

Anywheres are outspoken advocates for diversity, inclusion, and change, but too often they speak so loud that they fail to hear the voices of the Somewheres dislocated by change. In the same way, Somewheres have found their voice in today's populist and nationalist movements, but their rhetoric can be guilty of xenophobic and racist fears unsupported by facts or reality. Anywheres and Somewheres can easily exist in their own separate bubbles—listening to different news programs, only friending those on social media who reinforce what they already believe. But in the end, neither Anywheres nor Somewheres can move forward without each another. Healing the divides in our society—tackling the big issues around education and economic health, of justice, peace and equity for all—requires a level of mutual trust among all citizens. Something bigger than us is needed in order to bring all of us together.

That's where the rest of the John the Baptist story in Luke is so helpful. In verse 21 it has this wonderful description: *Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended upon him like a dove.* Don't focus on the dove part; focus on the other part—that non-descript account of a large group of people being baptized including Jesus. Here is the Son of God, the Messiah, about to be baptized by John. No one steps to the side for him. No red carpet is laid out or security detail clears a path for him. It sounds like Jesus was in line with everyone else—patiently moving forward as if he waiting in a grocery store check-out lane or weaving through turnstiles at an airport to get his passport stamped.

There he was—surrounded by Anywheres and Somewheres, people with families, people utterly alone; some oppressed and tired of the unfairness of daily life; some

frustrated by hollow rituals and religiosity that were only words without vitality. Maybe some had hopes and dreams for the future; maybe some had just buried a child or a parent. From what Luke says, they were all together with Jesus in their midst, and at some point they were baptized—loved, beloved, baptized one and all.

That's why baptism is such a funny, amazing thing. It points back to the ancient Jewish *mikveh*s, a washing away of lingering impurities so that we can move forward, clean and new and forgiven. It has been called a type of dying—descending into water, a place of darkness and no oxygen, only to emerge once more to fill our lungs and see the light of day. It has been linked to Jesus' own death and resurrection; linked to amniotic fluids and to the gospel promise of being "born again;" linked to John's promise of moving us seeds of potential into the storehouses of God's favor. But mostly it is something we have to trust. Why? Because it is not something we do, but something that is done to us. We let go of control. We are submerged. We close our eyes. We have water poured over us. We become part of something that already exists—a community beyond Somewhere and Anywhere—as we receive a baptism into newness of life that we can trust.

When Jada Yuan wrote about her travels and talked with people about her dream job of the past year, the question she received over and over again was this: "What was the biggest lesson you learned?" And she always answered, "That people are fundamentally good around the world." Now as someone who visited scores of places and traveled over 75,000 miles around the world, I'm happy to take her word on this.

For me, the truth of her words is captured in the image of Jesus waiting in line with others waiting to be baptized. Because the same heavenly voice who said "My beloved, with you I am well pleased" says it to all who are baptized—says it to all who are waiting in line—says it to all who have been born or are waiting to be born, for all people are part of this larger communion of God's own making.

How does that work? Don't ask me—I'm not in control. I'm just someone else in line, someone else who's drying off after my baptism. But I do trust this. I trust these waters and the One who speaks over the waters about love and acceptance. And as Christ is my guide for whatever comes next—as Christ is our guide for the adventures and dream jobs and chance encounters with others that await us, then let us trust Christ as well. Together.

¹ Jada Yuan, "A Year on the Go, Nonstop", *New York Times*, January 6, 2019.

² David Goodhart, *The Road to Somewhere*, Hurst & Co., London, 2017.