

**January 12, 2020 | Sanctuary worship service**

**TEXT: [Matthew 3:13–17](#)**

**TITLE: Let It Be So Now**

*By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush*

At our staff meeting this past Wednesday, we talked about baptism—memorable baptisms we'd seen or experienced. Now, the Presbyterians and Catholics in our group were largely baptized as infants, so those folks couldn't offer much about their own baptism. But the Baptists and Jehovah Witness could talk about what it was like to come forward in church and be immersed in baptismal tanks as young teenagers. I shared how once in my prior church in Racine, Wisconsin, a four year old girl had vetoed her baptism. Her parents had arranged for her to be baptized one Sunday. It was in the bulletin; we reached that part of the service and I said my opening words inviting the family forward. But the little girl stood there with a death grip on the end of the pew. Head down, eyes averted from her parents—she was not coming forward to the baptism font to have water tossed on her head. So after a pause, I simply announced that this baptism conversation we'd begun with the family would continue at a later date. The family and little girl sat back down, and a couple years later when her baby brother was presented to be baptized, she finally finished the sacrament we'd started when she was four.

I now realize that, of the two of us, the little girl was theologically wiser than I was when it came to baptism. I thought it would be possible to reason with her—that perhaps when she was a bit older, we could talk about the meaning of the sacrament and all would be well. Yet she was the one who saw this ritual for what it was—a strange act, tossing water on someone's head, not to wash their hair, indifferent to whether it got their nice clothes wet, and doing so publicly in a church where normally no one is allowed a cup of coffee or juice box lest you spill it and make a mess. What I believed could be explained rationally she rightly saw as something odd and peculiar.

Sometimes we have too much faith in the power of reason. Back in 1518, Cardinal Wolsey gathered the European heads of state in London. Representatives from France, the Netherlands, Spain, even the Papacy were there to sign a treaty agreeing not to attack one another and to come to the aid of any that were under attack. The idea was that war between Christian nations could be rationally outlawed, since it was clearly against the principles of our common faith. The treaty lasted for less than two years, when war broke out first between Denmark and Sweden, followed by a battle of England and Spain against France. So much for the power of reason!

There is something odd and peculiar about the act of being baptized, and it goes beyond the ritual of having water poured on our heads or being immersed in a tank of water. When John the Baptist was baptizing people in the river Jordan, he was calling them to do something out of the ordinary. He insisted they needed to re-think their relationship with God, step away from sin and false pride, and step forward to be washed clean that they might live in humble obedience to God's laws. It was quite clear to John until that day when Jesus came forward to be baptized. There standing before

John was the very one he'd proclaimed as the Lamb of God, the one who would call people to right relationships with God and transform the world. Jesus was the last person John believed needed to be baptized, and yet here he was before him.

Preachers and theologians usually smooth over this irregularity by commenting that Jesus is without sin, but elects to go through the act of baptism as a way to show his solidarity, his oneness, with all humanity. But I think there is more to the story than just that—and it is captured in Jesus' words to John the Baptist, "Let it be so now." Now, if you've been paying attention to how Jesus' story unfolds in Matthew, you know that these words are the very first words Jesus speaks in this gospel. Matthew's first chapters were about Jesus' birth and chapter 3 has John the Baptist crying out in the wilderness "Prepare the way of the Lord. Bear fruit worthy of changed, repentant hearts." Only at the end of chapter 3 does the adult Jesus appear and speak his first words in this biblical drama: *Let it be so now, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.*

Jesus doesn't fully explain why John should baptize him. But he does gently correct John—basically by saying, "Your expectations of me and of this act are not entirely correct. Baptize me now. Let it be so now. You will learn more in the days to come." And as confirmation of the correctness of Jesus' approach, it is only after he is baptized that the Spirit of God confirmed everything with a voice announcing, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Imagine if the order of things had been reversed. Imagine that when Jesus came to John, just then the heavens opened announcing him as the beloved One of the Lord. Jesus would then have been baptized, not as an act of solidarity but as a way to affirm his uniqueness and holiness unattainable by us. Wisely, the sequence of Jesus' baptism was reversed. While John was doing his baptism work as best he understood it. Jesus came forward and startled him, upsetting his reasonable routine. Jesus reassured him to let it be so, and stepped into the water just like everyone else. After that act, he then is affirmed as beloved by God—a pronouncement given about him, but one that by virtue of God's grace, is also bestowed on each one of us when we follow that same path – when we too go through the odd, peculiar, simple ritual of being baptized with water.

Now, this may seem like a strange tangent, but I want to talk for a moment about another bible story that I believe sheds some light on Jesus' baptism. It's the story of Noah and the flood. Both involve water—one has waters of destruction, the other waters of cleansing. But my attention is particularly focused on the ark Noah built. Genesis 7 describes Noah building the ark and collecting the animals, two by two, into the boat. Vs. 16 ends this way: *The creatures went in as God had commanded, and the Lord shut him in.* God commanded Noah to build the ark. God called the animals to get on board. And then God shut them in.

The image here is of God closing the door on the ark. God took the initiative here as a way to reinforce this wasn't a human plan but a divine one. But when the flood is over

and the earth can once more support life, it is Noah's turn to open the door. Noah led the procession of family and fauna back to the earth. Genesis 8 says: *So Noah went out with his family and all the animals, and built an altar to the Lord. And Noah offered a sacrifice to the Lord, to which God promised "As long as the earth endures, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease."* God set things in motion, but in the end, God stepped back and let Noah finish the work—and as Noah did so, coming out of the ark, offering prayers to God, God promised this type of destruction will never again come from God's hands.

In an analogous way, baptism is fundamentally God's act: God initiating something, calling us to come forward, not trusting in our own reason and merit, but calling us to come forward and do something out of the ordinary. In the days of Noah, it involved entering an ark. In the days of John the Baptist on through today, it involves coming to a baptism font and take part in this unusual act of splashing water and prayer. It is a moment when we humbly admit we are no better, no worse, no different from anyone else. Then we receive this water, and a voice says "You are my beloved. Remember that. Remember these waters." And like Noah, we open the door and step into the world. Like Jesus, we step out of the Jordan and go forth to love and serve and seek justice and incarnate God's realm on earth. Baptism becomes the starting point for everything that follows—which is why it is so important to remember our baptism. Remember that we've been splashed, sprinkled, dunked. Remember that we are beloved and children of God's free, saving grace set loose in the world.

There is a very talented fiction writer named Jeanette Winterson. She is a lesbian, which I mention simply because there is still the need to bring into the light realities that for far too long have been left in the shadows due to bias, prejudice, and racism; just as I am still forced to mention when an author is African American, Latino, non-American, or speaks a primary language besides English, so their full identity is acknowledged in our inhospitable world. Regardless, Winterson was asked about the moral value of reading. She said this: "Reading is an odd act—solitary, introspective, outside of time."<sup>1</sup> Yet to her it has tremendous value because it is made up of language and thus returns language to us. By that she means that so much of our life is shaped by false vocabulary—language that is broken, skewed, biased, self-serving, and shallow. That is not the language God wants us to use in our self-definition. God wants us to use language that is faithful, enlivening, healing, and true. Winterson argues that great literature returns to us great language and in that is its real moral value.

Baptism does the same thing. This odd act is one that you might be tempted to avoid, like the little girl did years ago. Or it might be something you try to rationally define, like John the Baptist did a long time ago. But in the end, it is a ritual that restores us to what we may have forgotten—that we are not judged by our imperfections but loved by God and forgiven by grace. This is a fundamental truth for our lives. It was set in motion by God—the God who called forth life, who shut the doors on an ark, who came to earth in the form of a child, and who is with us always to the end of the age. But when we walk up to the font, when the water is sprinkled, and afterwards when we allow ourselves to remember "I too am beloved, a child of God," then a great truth is given back to us. No

matter what the world may say, this is who we are. This is what is real. This is the good news, in fact, the best news of my life. So remember your baptism and be at peace.

AMEN

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<sup>1</sup> Jeanette Winterson, *By The Book*, New York Times Book Review, September 29, 2019, p. 8.