

Kirby Lawrence Hill

Abington Presbyterian Church

January 12, 2020

Isaiah 42:1-9

Matthew 3:13-17

## NEW THINGS DECLARED

Among many times I feel greatly blessed occupationally is when there is a deeply personal and holy moment that I as a pastor get to share. We pastors generally get to be there in the cemetery with a family as they look with pained love in their eyes at the final resting place for the remains of their beloved. There are often meaningful expressions; sometimes there are tears.

Quite a number of times I have gotten to be right there at that holy and personal moment when two people who want to live their lives together in committed love gaze into each other's eyes, and say their vows to one another before God and their closest family and friends. It is an extraordinary privilege to be right there involved in one of the most personally meaningful moments in many people's lives.

We as pastors have the high honor of seeing up close the expressions of joy and a bit of anxiety as parents look at their infant child who is about to be baptized. Then we get to see the expression on the child's face change as we place water on his or her head. We ministers of the word and sacraments hold dear in our hearts such close proximity to these highly-significant personal moments in people's lives.

If someone was reporting what they saw at a baptism in a Presbyterian church, that person might simply say that people gathering around a bowl of water said some things to one another and then one person scooped up some water and put it on the head of someone else. But there is much more than that which takes place in a baptism. We explore the significance of our baptism on this Sunday when we focus on the story of Jesus' baptism.

I love the sights and sounds of moving water, whether it is from a stream, a waterfall, or from the crashing waves at the shore. I love feeling water of a certain temperature on my skin, whether it is in a warm shower or while I am floating in a pool or the ocean. As human beings, we need water to drink. We need water to sustain plant life and animal life that sustain us. Water cleanses, it renews. Moving water can also exhibit great power. When we are caught in a current, it can be difficult to go in any other direction than that which the water is moving. Our

society has its powerful currents, and there is much that tells us to just go with the flow. It's easier that way, we are told. It is also easier that way by our own experience.

One of the strong currents in our society is one which tells us that our value as a person is generated by what we do or by what we produce. There are societal currents that try to sweep us along with an understanding that the material things we can purchase are the prime things that can help us feel better about ourselves. There were currents in Jesus' day that swept people along. Jesus, in choosing to be baptized, wasn't just going with the flow. Christian baptism these days is an active choice to go against the flow of the direction of our society.

I read about a woman who had been put up for adoption as an infant, who when she was in her thirties, was reunited with her biological parents. As she explored whether she was wanted or not, and other questions regarding her identity, she asked them about the 'why' of their decision to put her up for adoption. The answers were confusing because her parents were also confused about them. But her father told her it might make some difference to her to know that when she was conceived, he was in love with her mother and she with him. They were young and were on a hike along a remote and secluded section of a Texas river. Their act of passionate love took place on a sandbank in the middle of the river. The Spanish had named that river "Los Brazos de Dios" – the arms of God. Wherever and however any one of us may be conceived, it is the same. We come into being in the arms of God. <sup>1</sup>

Baptism helps us come to understand that those arms of God are not there to constrain or compel us, but to embrace us, and free us to live into our full identity as beloved children of God. That identity, which is even more special and lasting than one of royalty, does not come from what we produce or purchase. It comes from the One who made us, the One who claims us in the waters of baptism.

With that identity comes the joyful challenge of joining the ongoing ministry of Jesus Christ. The reading from Isaiah was descriptive of the One who was coming as the Messiah. God's Spirit would come upon this servant of God to enable him to bring justice to the nations. Jesus, in fulfilling that role, would do so as Isaiah described, in a gentle way that would not break a bruised reed or extinguish a dimly

burning wick. He would be a holy messenger, commissioned to bring light and freedom and justice to the blind, the shackled, the forsaken.

When we are touched with the waters of baptism, we too become servants of God, taking on Christ's mission of compassion and justice. We go from those waters of baptism to some point where we will wade into the undertow of life in the world, hoping and praying that by God's grace, as we hold onto each other, we won't get swept away by the currents of meritocracy and consumerism.

Have you ever been in the shallow end of a swimming pool where a group of people joined hands and began going around in a circle? I remember doing it as a little kid. A bunch of us were trying, but in the choppy waters, we were having a hard time staying connected and moving forward. But then we were joined in the circle by a larger, stronger person who urged us to stay linked together and to keep going. With the force and the encouragement of the more powerful one, as we kept going, the water eventually began to flow in the direction of the circle.

What could it mean that Jesus got baptized? There are some new things being declared, starting with his identity being expressed from heaven itself. But his baptism that leads to his ministry also communicates that God intimately knows the trials involved in being a humble servant working for a reign that has yet to be fully realized. Perhaps more importantly, Jesus in the Jordan demonstrates that Christ will never ask us to go somewhere that he is not. Knowing that God in Christ has preceded us in the waters of baptism reminds us that we're not called to take on challenges before us alone. Even closer than we pastors get to be in some of these personal, public, holy moments, God is closer still. What's more, God's presence is not limited to just certain moments, but continues day after day, night after night, strengthening us to live out the identity and the mission we've been given, standing with us in the challenging currents of life in today's world. God is in the circle with us. So when we see the circular baptismal font each Sunday, we know that God has been where we are, and is in the circle with us still. Reminded by the sights, sounds, and experience with the baptismal waters, we can keep journeying hand-in-hand until such a time the flow is no longer against us.

<sup>1</sup> Robert Fulghum, *Maybe (Maybe Not): Second Thoughts From a Secret Life*, New York: Villard Books, 1993, pp. 41-42.