

Matthew 3:13-17  
St. Andrew's, Nogales

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As a swimmer and kayaker I have always thought I appreciated water. But living in the desert has certainly brought me an even greater appreciation of water as well as the vegetation that is so adapted to receiving so little.

Water brings life to this world. It is essential not only for us humans, but to all animals, birds, fish, and every kind of plant. Without it there would be no life. No wonder so many of the ancients worshiped water gods! No wonder our scientists are so fascinated with what looks like evidence of water on Mars!

Our creation story in the Book of Genesis reminds us that in the beginning the Spirit hovered over the waters. And right after creating light in the darkness God separates the waters on earth from those in the sky and gathers the waters on earth together to let the dry land appear. And then the earth brings forth vegetation, and living creatures.

Ah, but too much water can bring destruction and even death. Here in the desert there is always a concern about flash floods, which can come out of nowhere down washes drowning everything in their path. And storms throughout history have sunk boats. And of course, this year we have been living with scenes on our TV's of the incredible floods in Queensland, Australia, which will affect the lives of the people living there for years to come. Too much water can bring death and destruction.

But it can also bring rebirth. Think of the parting of the waters as Moses and the children of Israel escape slavery in Egypt as they embark on a journey toward a new life. Think of the

parting of the waters for Joshua and the people as they finally reach the promised land. Our ancestors in the faith enter the water as slaves and then later as wanderers into becoming something new. A new people.

No wonder that by water we are baptized not only into the death of Jesus Christ but also into his resurrection.

In Hebrew tradition those who had broken the purity laws, would perform a cleansing ritual bath before the priests would admit them into the inner courts of the temple for worship. John, whom we know as the baptizer as well as a prophet and critic of what he saw as hypocrisy in the formal and hollow religion of his day, took this practice out into the wilderness where he preached repentance to great crowds of people. He used water as a symbol of that repentance, baptizing people who confessed their sins, by what was most likely full immersion in the River Jordan.

It was John, we know from today's familiar story, who baptized Jesus in the river Jordan. "And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

The early Christians, following Jesus' experience, baptized new members by full body immersion in water, at first in rivers and lakes, wherever there was water, than in pools in the homes of the wealthy who hosted house churches, and later in formally constructed baptisteries, which were separate rooms with pools of water attached to churches and cathedrals.

Catechumens, those who wished to become Christians, would go through up to three years instruction, allowed into church

services to hear the scriptures, homily and prayers, but excluded from participation in the Eucharist. They would be separated and given moral and spiritual instruction instead. Then there would be 40 days of special preparation during Lent, culminating in baptism during the night at the Easter Vigil.

During the vigil those ready to be received into the body of Christ were taken into the baptistery one by one, men separate from the women, and stripped naked before entering the pool of water. The priest would hold them under long enough to sense that death was possible and then bring them up into the light. On coming out of the pool their bodies were first anointed with the oil of atonement by one assistant and then with the oil of thanksgiving, in abundance, by another before being dressed in their robes of white.

Then, together with sinners who had repented during Lent, they would join in their first communion on Easter Day. The Bishop laid hands on them as they were received into the church, the community of the holy ones. Into a new life in Christ.

We too are baptized into a new life in Christ. One of the things that we need to remember is that Jesus' baptism marked the beginning of his ministry in this world. One of the reasons that we follow infant baptism with confirmation as children are approaching adulthood is to help them and us understand that we are not just cleansed from our sins in baptism, but that we are all called into what the Greeks call metanoia, a transformation and turning around in our lives. We are called to live in Christ, and to live into our own ministry. We are anointed with oil and receive the Holy Spirit. We too are baptized into Jesus' calling, into ministry.

A little later in this service we will renew our baptismal vows together. Let me remind you of the promises we make:

Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?

Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?

Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?

Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?

Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?

(pause)

We have all suffered through the trauma of the shootings in Tucson yesterday. Of the twenty who were shot, six people have died, including US District Court Judge John Roll, and a nine year old girl. Eight were taken to UMC for emergency surgery, including Gabriel Giffords, who represents about half of you, and who is in critical condition with a head wound.

In the face of such an incident, and in this increasingly intolerant and violent world, our challenge as Christians is to live our baptismal covenant every single day. To live it in our homes, to live it in our schools and churches, to live it in our communities, to live it in our outreach at home and abroad, and to live it in our political choices also.

We are called to overcome fear with hope.

We are called to overcome violence with love.

As we come to the altar this morning, let us remember that we are baptized not only into Jesus' death and resurrection, but, through the receiving of the Holy Spirit, into his ministry in life as well.

Let us ponder in our hearts what that means to us as individuals and as a community.

Amen.