

“Immersive Love”
Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler
Presbyterian Church in Leonia
January 10, 2021
Virtual Worship

Genesis 1:1-5
Mark 1:4-11

When I was a child, and it was bathtime, my cleansing often happened after my mom had first soaked in a hot tub. She would pull herself out of the water and towel off, but leaving the plug in the drain she would then call me into the bathroom. With the mirrors still covered in steam, and the tile on the walls dripping with condensation, the pale water in the tub awaited me. I would slide in, and her leftover suds would gather around me. The water which had first been a steaming heat had cooled to a gentle warmth, and as I relaxed into it, I would begin singing songs and telling stories to myself-- much like my daughter does now as she bathes.

Some of you might cringe at the idea of bathing in someone's leftover water. My daughter probably would today find that gross. It didn't matter to me. My mom did it to be practical-- saving money and probably time, too. That didn't occur to me. The water my mother left behind smelled like Calgon bubble bath, and to me it seemed more luxurious than fresh water. I can't remember, but it is possible that my older sister had a turn in the bath before me, too. To whatever water was left behind for me, I would add my own suds, made of soap and baby shampoo. Looking back, I am sure that whereas my mother's leftover bathwater seemed exquisite and clean, the water I drained from the tub probably revealed a grimy ring, since I was always climbing trees and playing in the dirt. No matter-- when all was said and done, I was clean.

From Genesis to the Jordan, we see a continuation of the water God provides to God's people. Our story with God as we know it in scripture begins with a formless void and darkness, and wind from God sweeping over the water. Even when there was nothingness, even when all was dark, the waters were there, and the wind-- which in Hebrew also means Spirit-- was there. And from that moment, creation's rhythm found its way: and there was Light. And there was evening and morning, the first day. The next day, God formed a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters. God called the dome Sky. And there was evening, and there was morning, the second day. And so forth, for 6 days of creation, and a seventh day at rest.

Now, of course we see a primitive cosmology at work in this telling. Unlike those who passed along the stories of creation until a literate culture was able to write them down, we know that there is not actually a dome in the sky. People then actually thought that when you look into the sky, the blue sky you see is actually the waters of the heavens, and that transparent sky-dome keeps it from all falling on our heads-- unless of course, the heavens are torn open and rain falls upon us. Science has told us so much more about the richness of creation, and the more

complex I find it to be, the more I am in wonder to be part of such a magnificent creation. For me that awe, that wonder, is very spiritual and is tied to a sense of a holy Creator's work-- in my understanding, evolution, big bang, and whatever else it took to make the magnificent web of creation we are in today are each miracles.

In Mark, we see Jesus step into the waters that others have already stepped in, as they have been baptised by John the baptist in the River Jordan. He needs these waters, this blessing, as much as any of those who came before him, and those who would come after him. In those days, and in many places, in these days too, baptism was done by full immersion. As Jesus emerged from the water, the heavens tore open, the Spirit descended like a dove, and a voice came from heaven, announcing, "You are my son, the Beloved. With you I am well pleased."

Jesus goes on to command that we baptize others-- people of all nations-- in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. And we believe, in that sacrament, that the waters that Jesus once stepped into, surround us. The gospels reveal to us that this moment is first and foremost about immersive love: God's love for Jesus, as we hear, "The Beloved," also gets extended to us as Jesus steps into the fullness of human experience, its life and joys and pains. Baptism shows us, simply and profoundly, that we are filled and surrounded by love. If we understand anything about baptism, I want us to first understand that it is about love.

But we must not forget the purifying, cleansing nature of baptism. Our Prayer of Thanksgiving Over The Water in the Book of Common Worship remembers, "In the time of Noah, you destroyed the earth by the waters of the flood, giving righteousness a new beginning." I loved the story of Noah's Ark as a child, but as an adult I found it rather disturbing that God would send a flood to punish an evil humanity. I actually don't believe that God causes floods or other natural disasters-- pandemics, for instance-- as a way of punishing us. But I like it that this baptismal prayer includes this story. It reminds us of God's power in creation. And it also reminds us of the persistence of human evil. We may know that on a personal level, through our individual shames and those done to us. On a larger level, we saw that evil last week, as an attempted coup fell upon the US Capitol in the middle of confirming electoral votes in a presidential election. We saw a parade of white privilege mocking the values of democracy, and it stood in stark contrast to the treatment of black and brown protestors over the summer; we can imagine how tragically different it would have looked if the group that broke into the Capitol had been majority black and brown. Still, we saw the loss of life caused by this event. And though many proclaimed, "This isn't America!" if we are honest with ourselves, we know that many of America's foundations were built on the physical and economic violence of slavery; this country has supported coups in other countries, to put "our" preferred leaders in power; and most of us have seen the writing on the wall that led to Wednesday's mob, but have been complacent in the face of it. When we see signs of people in the mob holding signs that proclaim Christ, we Christians must hold accountable others who speak the name of Christ while pursuing an agenda of racist violence.

The humbling truth is that not one of us is clean on our own. The deferential act of submersion reminds us that *we are not our own highest power*. The cleansing of the water purifies us, and

gives us a chance to try again at the goodness God has set within us. The shared experience of the water ties us to one another, to Jesus, and to Christians of every time and place, holding us accountable to one another for confession, correction, and care.

It is an act of radical solidarity that Jesus chooses baptism with us. As Debie Thomas put it, Jesus' baptism is "an act of stepping into intimate, inextricable, 'shameful' relationship with sinful humanity. Instead of holding himself apart, instead of protecting his own purity, Jesus stepped into the same water we stand in, and wedded his reputation and his destiny to ours." (Debie Thomas, *Journey with Jesus* blog, Jan. 10, 2021)

These are chaotic times, and indeed some may find them frightening. Take heart, Christians people, because God can actually do a lot from chaos. Remember, God's acts of creation came first from the primordial nothingness, the formless void, when we knew not what to expect and anything was possible. John the Baptist didn't come from the Temple. He came from the wilderness, eating bugs and honey-- foods that aren't harvested, but found. From this wilderness, he was able to lead people to the place where heaven and earth connected, in the waters, and there they received the Holy Spirit and found their calling. Carol Crittenden will lead us later on in the old spiritual, "Wade in the Water;" the idea that *God's gonna trouble the water* reminds us that sometimes it is from chaos that God brings forth liberation and meaning.

We share the waters of baptism with countless generations, and as flawed as we may be individually in approaching them, these waters remain exquisite and clean for us and whoever comes next, for each time they are blessed by the Spirit's dove and God's generous love, and each one who emerges from them rises as ones beloved, blessed for goodness, and clean.