

“With Questioning Hearts”
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January 12, 2025

Isaiah 43:1-7
Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

I love it that Luke’s gospel begins the story of Jesus’ baptism by telling the readers that all the people gathered there “were filled with expectation, and *all* were questioning in their hearts.”

If you are someone who has more questions than answers, then perhaps you will find yourself at the water’s edge today, wondering what the Spirit might show you next.

When I was a child, my family went camping at Manatee Springs State Park in Florida. The park has a series of springs that are all interconnected through underwater tunnels and caves, and the springs gush out into the Suwanee River. As part of our week camping, we took a canoe onto the river and were accompanied by manatees swimming below us. It was glorious.

My dad, who had been a competitive swimmer in high school, was fascinated by the interconnected nature of the springs. He watched as some divers with their tanks sank into the water in one spring, and then bobbed up into a different spring several yards away. He chatted with them to find out which way the current flowed, and then he became obsessed with the idea of free diving, from one spring, to the next.

My sister and stepmother and I begged him not to do it, and I think he was really wrestling between a youthful desire to prove himself, test his strength, and feel the satisfaction of accomplishing a mental and physical challenge... and his sense of responsibility to his family. Thankfully, he chose to play it safe and he did not do the free dive, but the rest of the trip he kept talking about how much he thought he *could* do it.

“When you pass through the waters, I will be with you, and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be

burned, and the flame shall not consume you.” We know by now, after looking at apocalyptic conditions caused by wildfires in and around Los Angeles, that being one of God’s beloved does not keep you completely out of harm’s way. It certainly did not for Jesus. From his baptism, Jesus’ life was transformed into a public one. He found a current of water that propelled him to encounter people whose lives he would change: disciples, tax collectors, a Samaritan woman; the many he fed, healed, and taught. But this current also led him to the cross. From that death, he rose to new life.

John the Baptist had warned that “His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

I used to find trouble feeling a connection to that verse. To me, it sounded like a fire-and-brimstone kind of God, who will pick between those who are pure in heart, and good enough, and those who are the chaff: the ones whose chances of pleasing God are hopeless. Those are the ones who would get thrown into the unquenchable fire.

But I realize now that I was reading that verse completely wrong. Just like when you take a dive into a lake, you don’t want to be encumbered by a sweatshirt and jeans, which will weigh you down when you swim and can even be quite dangerous, when we dive into the waters of baptism, we do not want to bring with us that which will put drag on our ability to pass through the rivers to which God calls us. So maybe you are holding on to self-judgment that shouldn’t belong to you. It’s not God’s voice, but it is the voice of someone in your past who was critical and has taken up permanent residency in your mind— so much so, that you hear *that* voice calling to you, more than you can hear and respond to the Spirit’s call. How would it feel to be free of that voice, to just peel it away from you and cast it into the fire? What can I cast away in order to become the essence of who God has called me to be? Here lies a question for your heart.

I imagine this time of transition which the church will soon enter will be a chance to examine with some intention what is wheat: what fills and fuels the church in its purpose of following in discipleship of Jesus Christ— and what is chaff: that which keeps the church from thriving. It might be a chance to let some programs in the church die, or stay dormant for a period of time, in order to offer enough rest so that new life can flourish. Here lies a question for the church’s heart.

We can take some comfort in the fact that Jesus gets in line with everyone else to be baptized. With questioning hearts, we can wonder whether Jesus needed the same kind of experience of cleansing, or new life, of rebirth to which that our faith calls us in baptism. Why was Jesus baptized? Did Jesus need to repent—to change his life, shrug off the chaff, and live a life worthy of repentance? This question humanizes a man whom we may sometimes imagine as so pure, so perfect, that he would not need to be baptized. But Jesus submitted to this life-changing rite of passage, and from there moved into a public life that would change the world forever.

Perhaps one of the most powerful parts of this ritual for Jesus was upon his emergence, when the Spirit descended upon him *in bodily form*, and a voice from heaven proclaimed, “You are my son, the Beloved. With you I am well-pleased.”

How can the Spirit show up in bodily form? Here lies a question for your heart. As you consider your own bodies: what feels strong, what feels weak, what you are ashamed of, what your body is capable of— the good and the bad— can you imagine that the Spirit has shown up in *you*, in *bodily form*? Too often we think of that which is Spiritual as being from a completely other dimension than what is of the body or of the flesh. But in Jesus Christ, we find a perfect coming together of the two. This union can remind us that within our bodies, there is room for what is holy, and what is good. I invite you to put your hand on your heart and say to yourself: “I am body *and* spirit, holy and good. In my flesh, the Spirit rests.” Will this knowledge allow you to be kinder and more loving to your own body? What about other bodies? Here lies a question for your heart.

And how about that voice! From the heavens— did only Jesus hear this, or did all those gathered hear it too? “You are my Son, the Beloved. With you I am well-pleased.” Friends, let me tell you something I do *not* question. That voice? It is not just for Jesus. It is for you too, for me, all of us. When God’s water meets with our flesh, we are reminded that we as well are beloved sons, daughters, children of God. We are Beloved by God. God is well-pleased with us. God is well-pleased with you. What questioning heart needs to hear that good news today, and believe it?

No doubt, if you have a robust life of faith, some of the time it will be with a questioning heart. Don't let that be a deal-breaker. Don't let the questions overrule the truth of your belovedness in God's eyes. Don't think you are alone in your questioning heart. You are never alone.

Just as surely as the waters of Manatee Springs are connected through caves, caverns, and tunnels, so that one spring gushes into another, our baptismal font is the same. The waters that mark you and call you beloved are the same waters that spring forth for the ones in faith who came before you, and the ones who will come to the font after you. They connect the body of Christ, Presbyterian and Pentecostal, Roman Catholic and Reformed, Southern Baptist and even the Spiritual but not Religious. There was commentary last week about whether the Panama Canal should be called something else, and as ridiculous as the notion may be, as harmful as it may be to the global balance of power and the efforts for peace and justice in the Western hemisphere, the person who raised this question knows that ***water has power***. But the waters of baptism belong to no one nation— there is no ruler who can name them for his own country, because they belong to all. They beckon to you even if you have not yet received the sacrament. And the current in these waters carries you to someplace new: from who you are, to who God calls you to become.

In your being and your becoming, know without question: you are God's beloved.