

2023.01.15 SERMON 2<sup>nd</sup> of Epiphany ©Gyllian Davies†

There's a poem by Mary Oliver that for me sings of baptism by water and by fire. I may have read it to you before. It's called At Blackwater Pond. It goes like this:

At Blackwater Pond the tossed waters have settled  
after a night of rain.  
I dip my cupped hands. I drink  
a long time. It tastes  
like stone, leaves, fire. It falls cold  
into my body, waking the bones. I hear them  
deep inside me, whispering  
**oh what is that beautiful thing  
that just happened?**

This poem makes me think of my first baptism as a priest. My first real baptism. At seminary we had practice baptisms. Our prof was a young and had buddies with babies, so there were four babies there the day we practised how to do baptisms. It was quite something and got us past our nerves about dropping the baby or the baby screaming non-stop and awful possibilities like that. But it did not prepare me for what would happen when I was doing the real thing...

I've always loved water. Waterplay. Swimming. Showers. Deep gratitude for water in my life and in the world we live in. Abundant water. I could have been born into a family of Bedouins and water would not have been abundant. So baptisms and water? Love it. Love letting the babies splash their hands in the font. Love pouring the water over their heads and seeing the slightly surprised expressions on their faces. Love seeing that moment of wonder in their eyes - *what just happened?* All good, right? BUT... at my first baptism I was not prepared for what actually happened. I'm holding the baby, the water's been poured over the head, I'm patting the baby dry. No screaming. No dropped baby. They're ok. I'm ok. So far, so good. And then I put my thumb into the oil and making a cross of holy oil on their forehead I say, "In baptism you are marked as Christ's own forever." And then... I find myself standing in a pool of light. I can't see it but I can sure feel it. My heart seems to have lifted up inside me. The child I'm holding I clearly more precious than anything I can imagine. We, the child and I, are in the sweet beautiful presence of God. Of God's love. Claimed. Christ's own forever.

It's a flash of a moment. I have no idea whether anyone else experienced it. I am profoundly humbled and filled with awe and joy. I had no idea it would be like this. And then, after that, I discover - it's like that every single time. Every single time I make that cross with holy oil on someone's forehead - baby, teen, adult, and say those words, the world stops for a moment and we - the one

being baptized and I - are suspended in a moment of light and love, of the sweet beautiful presence of God. And our bodies are saying:

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So this week I've been wondering... what if that baptism experience creates a life-long hunger in each of us, a life-long hunger in **you**, for example... to know God. To be back in that moment, to have more of that profound, awesome, heart-filling, life-illuminating , that... you know - God-with-us.

Who here remembers their baptism? I don't remember my own baptism. I know I was only a few weeks old. I wore this:  
(hold up baptismal gown) But I'm pretty sure my body and my soul remember it. I believe yours do too. Feeling sceptical? This week I read a quote that might help here: "When God put a calling on your life He already factored in your stupidity" That was shared by a priest who declared 'that's the most comforting thing I've ever heard.' Think about it!

Back to our body memories. Our muscles have memory. Think of the stories we hear about heart transplants where the recipient suddenly has a new love for something he or she was never interested in before. And guess what. Turns out that was a passion for the donor. The heart is a muscle. Our muscles have memory.

Our bodies remember things our minds have stowed away in some way back cupboard and forgotten all about. So here you go: Our bodies and our souls remember the moment when we were baptized... They remember that moment of

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Cognitive scientists tell us how the mind and body collaborate. Previously we assumed our cognitive processes, our thinking, was exclusively mental. But... research confirms that actually our entire bodies - muscles, brain, imagination, memory and more - all are involved in our cognitive process. So why wouldn't our bodies remember a profound experience of the holy from before we had a grasp of language. Why wouldn't our bodies remember one of our first deep and profound experiences of God-with-us in our human lives. Something that changed us. Something that has a before and an after.

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This morning we have our second interpretation of the baptism of Jesus. How come we get it twice? This one is an interpretation written for people who already know about the event. Last week we heard it from Matthew who was telling people "guess what happened!!!" Now John is talking to people who

already know it happened and he's saying - "Look. Imagine! Believe. God loves us and has sent God's child to be with us. God wants our love back AND wants us to love one another." John wants us to get the meaning. John wants us to see what God wants. And that is to believe. And to love in the context of community. And so Jesus teaches us about baptism. By being baptized. In front of others. Surrounded by community. And then Jesus invites us to come, abide with him. The Greek verb here is '*meno*'.

John's two disciples see Jesus walking by as John exclaims, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" The Lamb of God? Really? So they follow him. Jesus, noticing this asks them "What are you looking for?" And he invites them to come and abide with him. This Greek verb of *meno*, 'abide', shows up more than 40 times in John's gospel. John really wants us to get it that Jesus invites us to abide with him. That's what we experience at baptism, how it is to abide with Jesus, to be in intimate relationship with him. Deep within us is this visceral knowledge of what it means to abide with Jesus, to be claimed as Christ's own forever.

And even now, Jesus is turning and looking at us. And he's asking: What are you looking for? And then...??? I suspect if we have our wits about us, we say you! And we become disciples. We follow the One who is the Messiah. We claim our pilgrimage, our spiritual journey.

Will you do that? Will you listen to your soul telling you that you were illuminated, sanctified, changed at your baptism? Yes? And then will you say 'Yes!' day after day to Jesus? Every day of your life will you say these words:

"Yes, I'll come and abide with you as you abide with me."

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Amen.