

Westminster Sermon – “River of Life”

Scripture Readings – Genesis 1:1-5, Mark 1:4-11

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Our first scripture reading is Genesis 1:1-5. The water in Genesis represents the surging chaos out of which God's spirit brings order in the creation of the world. On this first Sunday after Epiphany we remember the Baptism of the Lord. If baptism is understood as a new beginning, then our first reading is especially appropriate. Fred Craddock makes an interesting point when he says: *Theologically, baptism as new creation can be seen against the original creation. Just as the original act of God inaugurated the first creation so the baptism of Jesus inaugurated his career and the baptism of individuals inaugurates their new creation.* Hear now the Word of God.

*1 In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, 2 the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. 3 Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. 4 And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. 5 God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.*

Our second scripture reading is Mark 1:4-11. For Mark, Jesus' baptism at the age of 30 is the beginning of Christ's public ministry and also the beginning of a new age—an age of inclusiveness. Water continues to be a theme as we gather by the River Jordan with John, the Baptist and Christ, however the symbolism has changed, rather than representing chaos; water is linked to the utterly new beginning that comes with the gift of the spirit. Hear now God's word.

*4 John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5 And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. 6 Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 7 He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. 8 I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." 9 In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 10 And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. 11 And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."*

The title of the sermon: “River of Life”

*The text: And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. Mark 1:10*

Let us pray: Holy and loving God, we thank you for your spirit sweeping over the face of the waters in the beginning, creating the heavens and the earth. And we thank you for Jesus' entering the waters of the Jordan River and asking John to baptize him. As we reflect together on the river of life, may the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

On a beautiful October day the Fall Paul began seventh grade, the Kieffer Family set out on a journey along the Mississippi. We loaded our bicycles with packs on a Metro train near our home in Clayton

bound for the arch. Then we headed north on the bicycle trail along the Mississippi. We stopped at a monument commemorating a station on the Underground Railroad where runaway slaves crossed the Mississippi. A little further down we crossed over the Chain of Rocks Bridge and continued north on the Illinois side, past the Lewis and Clark Museum and the River Museum on our way to a Bed and Breakfast at Elsay's Landing just north of Alton.

We found ourselves removing layers of clothes in the heat of the unusually warm day and we were refreshed along the way by sips from our water bottles and well-placed drinking fountains. We were about 45 minutes from our destination when the sky began to turn dark in the distance. We watched the ominous clouds and what appeared to be a downpour across the Mississippi hoping against hope we would make our destination before the rain caught us. We peddled as hard as we could along the river road on the tandem without losing Paul who was holding his own behind us on his own bicycle.

Then we felt our first drop, and another, and another. The character of the gentle drops began to change. The sky was now dark above us and the rain became more intense. Cars swarmed past us splashing us with water and the rain drenched our clothing and gear. We could hardly hear our own voices as we called back to reassure Paul, hoping our destination would be around the next corner. We began second guessing ourselves and each other. When we finally arrived, we were drenched, muddy, cold and rung out. We found solace and strength in the hot showers that cleansed our bodies and reassured our spirits.

Our bicycle adventure was a sobering reminder of life on the river. Samuel Clemens loved the Mississippi and captured the vicissitudes of the river in his novels. His pen name, Mark Twain refers to the second mark in a rope measuring two yards, which was the depth sufficient to navigate a steamboat down the river. In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* the raft that Joe and Huck share transcends the racism and injustice alive and well along the banks they travel.

The river gave life to many a runaway slave on the Underground Railroad. The Negro Spiritual *Wade in the Water* was a secret code directing the men, women and children risking their lives for dignity and freedom to get into the river where the hound dogs could not track their scent. *Wade in the Waters! God's gonna trouble the waters!!*

Rivers around the world have been a source of life and hope throughout the ages. *I've known rivers;* writes Langston Hughes in one of his poems.

*I've known rivers ancient as the  
world and older than the flow  
of human blood in human veins.*

*My soul has grown deep like the rivers.*

*I bathed in the Euphrates when  
dawns were young,*

*I built my hut near the Congo and  
it lulled me to sleep.*

*I looked upon the Nile and raised  
the pyramids above it.*

*I heard the singing of the Mississippi  
when Abe Lincoln went down  
to New Orleans, and I've seen  
its muddy bosom turn all golden  
in the sunset.*

*I've known rivers;  
Ancient, dusky rivers.*

*My soul has grown deep like the rivers.*

How grateful we are for the rivers which have deepened the soul of humanity and for a God who was willing to enter into the river of our lives, willing to step into the muddy banks of the Jordan in order to bring healing and wholeness.

Today we commemorate Jesus' baptism and we remember our own. In the ancient baptismal imagery the old-self is drowned in the waters and a new-self rises with Christ.

The words of the prophet Isaiah echo the tenderness of the voice of God each time one of God's children is baptized.

*Fear not, I have redeemed you, I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you, and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you...Because you are precious in my sight, and honored and I love you.*

Today, we reaffirm the baptismal covenant made and kept on our behalf within this community of faith. We give thanks for the children we have promised to nurture and for the strong and clear voice of those who came before us at Westminster, calling for *justice to roll down like an ever flowing stream* as abolitionists, members of the underground railroad and the Dorcas Society advocating for the poor and oppressed. Today, we give thanks for the powerful symbol of water in our life together; a symbol that reminds us not only of the chaos and danger of deep, overwhelming water, but also of the still waters that restore our soul and the cleansing and refreshing streams along the desert paths we are sometimes called to journey.

Mark Twain once said about the Mississippi: *It was good for steam boating, and good to drink, but it is worthless for all other purposes, except baptizing.*

As we wade through the river of life, let us remember our baptism and be thankful. Amen.