

## A River Runs Through Us

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Baptism Sunday, January 13, 2019

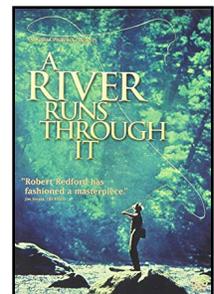
Isaiah 43:1-7/ Luke 3:15-22

Even though it was almost half a century ago, I remember fishing with my grandfather in a cypress pond on his farm. It was an unbearably hot and humid August afternoon. Now, my memory isn't that good, but in Georgia in August it is always unbearably hot and humid. What makes this fishing trip memorable was that my grandfather showed me a new way to fish.



Until then, fishing meant worms on a line on a cane pole, waiting for the red and white cork to bob. The only skill required was patience. That hot, humid day, however, my grandfather and I went fly fishing.

In 1992, Robert Redford directed the film version of Norman Maclean's classic novella "A River Runs Through It." In the story, fly fishing is a metaphor for our spiritual life. Norman describes how his Presbyterian minister father taught them the art of fly fishing, hoping that the lessons would translate to life:



*So my brother and I learned to cast Presbyterian style: on a metronome. He began each session with the same instruction: "Casting is an art that is performed on a four-count rhythm between 10 o'clock and 2 o'clock. If he had had his way, nobody who did not know how to catch a fish... would be allowed to disgrace a fish by catching it."*

In January, gyms are packed with all the people who made New Year's resolutions to exercise and to lose weight. (Personally, I find that the urge to exercise usually can be cured with chocolate.)

Most of us make resolutions to get in better physical shape. Some of us gave up alcohol for January to let our livers recover. Baptism Sunday is the day the church invites us to consider our spiritual fitness, a day



early in the year for us to resolve to invest time and energy in the vitality of our souls. After all, it is the only part of us designed to last forever.

During Lent this year, we are going to challenge you to take your spiritual life more seriously than, perhaps, you ever have before, because, if you do, the impact will last long after the gyms are empty again and our wine glasses full. For today, though, I simply want to remind us that baptism is the sign that we are in a covenantal relationship with the One toward whom our whole life is flowing. Because relationships are living things, they must change and grow, or they wither and perish.

Several years ago, I heard a pastor tell a story about a Rabbi who lived in a rural area with his young son. As the boy grew, he would take walks alone in the woods around their home. The rabbi thought it was a good thing for him to explore and build his self-confidence, but, every day, the boy was gone longer and longer. The rabbi began to worry that he, perhaps, was straying too far and might get lost or be in danger.

The next morning, the rabbi talked to his son about his concern. "Son, I've noticed how much time you are spending in the woods. What do you do there?"

“Oh,” said the lad, “I go into the woods where I listen for the voice of God.”

“Ah,” smiled the rabbi, “that is a good thing, but don’t you know that God is the same everywhere?”

The boy pondered that a moment, then replied, “Yes, father, but I am not the same everywhere.”

That is true for us all. My hope is that, in this place, we are different and open to hear new things from God. Yes, it is an old, old story, but we are learning to sing a new, new song.

Learning new songs is challenging in churches because we love the old ones so much, and let’s be honest: whenever we are learning something new, it is awkward, and our confidence suffers. Still, this is a new year, and we are called to be new in it.

There are many different spiritual journeys one can take in this life. As Christians, we have chosen to follow Jesus. We believe that being people of the Way of Jesus leads us closer to God. Baptism is the sign of that marks us as people of the Way of Jesus. It is the knot in the rope of our days that says we will not go backward from here but will go forward together.

Today, we remember Jesus’ baptism and our own. Like an old married couple renewing their marriage vows, you and I are called to renew our covenant with God. Every now and then I hear a new couple talking about “love at first sight.” I want to say, “Yeah, tell me how you feel when you’ve been looking at them for 35 years!”

That is also the miracle represented by baptism. God fell in love with you at the start. Baptism is the sign of that love. Although God has seen you at your worst, God still has never taken a towel and dried you off.



Water that never dries ...

Baptism is water that never dries! If you doubt this then ask yourself, "Why am I here?" Despite our struggles, doubts, and disappointments, we are still here. Despite how we have failed and disappointed God, we are still here. Something mystical and inexplicably powerful draws our souls home, and we are still here. Something powerfully binding holds onto us, and we are still here.

At his baptism, Jesus was called God's beloved, and so were you. Those are words God still speaks over you. I don't know about you, but I need a regular reminder that I'm beloved, which is why I'm grateful to be here with you each week to remember my baptism and the sacred purpose it gives my life.



Do you remember going to the circus as a kid? It is so sad that our kids and grandkids won't have that experience. One of the acts everyone loved was the lion tamer who would enter the cage of a roaring lion. Do you remember what he took into the cage with him? That's right, a whip and a chair.

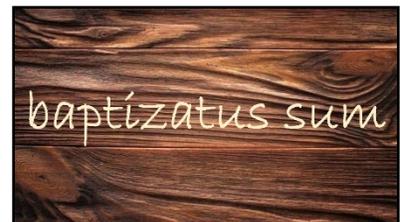
Even as a kid, I thought the chair was silly. Only much later did I learn that the reason for the chair was because the four legs confused the lion. They could never focus on just one leg.

Today, with all the confusion, and chaos, and change, it is hard for any of us to know where to focus our attention or our anxiety. There seems to be too much to worry about, too many issues that need our concern, advocacy, and prayer.

When Jesus came to the end of his life, he may have felt this, yet, on the last night of his life, he took the role of a servant at the last supper, washing his disciples' feet. How did he keep his equilibrium in those hours? Well, John 13:3 tells us his secret. Jesus knew that *he came from God and was going to God*. A centering awareness of those two facts gave him roots and wings. Purpose for our living and meaning for our dying.

I love the hymn we will sing in a few moments. It begins by reminding us that God heard our borning cry and knew us in our baptism. When the night of our life closes in and we shut our weary eyes, God will be there as always with just one more surprise.

Martin Luther, in his life-and-death struggle against the distortions of the Roman church, had times of great doubt and despair. It is said that, to combat these, he took a knife and carved into the wood of his desk the reminder "I am baptized" in Latin.



As a pastor, I **love** baptizing babies because it reminds us all that:

- Even when we didn't know God, God knew us.
- Even when we forgot, God remembered.
- Even when we let go, God held on.

In Norman McClean's wonderful story, he falls in love with a young woman named Jessie and leaves Montana, eventually becoming a writer and professor

at the University of Chicago. Still, he never forgot who he was, and, at the end of his life, he returns to fly fish in the Big Blackfoot River.

In the beautiful scene at the end of the movie, Norman, who is now an old man, offers us a most important and profound truth that all of us need to remember:

*Now, nearly all those I loved and did not understand in my youth are dead. Even Jessie. But I still reach out to them. Of course, now I'm too old to be much of a fisherman. And now I usually fish the big waters alone, although some friends think I shouldn't. But when I am alone in the half-light of the canyon, all existence seems to fade to a being with my soul and memories and the sounds of the Big Blackfoot River and a four-count rhythm and the hope that a fish will rise. Eventually, all things merge into one, and a river runs through it. The river was cut by the world's great flood and runs over rocks from the basement of time. On some of the rocks are timeless raindrops. Under the rocks are the words, and some of the words are theirs. I am haunted by waters.*



### **I am haunted by waters ...**

Baptism reminds us that, at the end of our journey, those whose lives have been haunted by sacred water will be found washed up by the river on the banks of God's eternal love. There, we will find those who made this journey before waiting to welcome us ashore. Baptism connects us to God and to God's saints. It gives our life holy meaning and purpose.

May all our lives be haunted by holy water!