

Year A: Baptism of our Lord  
Isaiah 43:1-7  
Psalm 29  
Acts 8:14-17  
Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

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Grace and Peace to you from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ - Amen.

There is nothing better on a cold winter day than to cozy up with a warm blanket, a hot drink, and your favorite book or movie to forget about the weather outside. During our recent cold snap, I have been doing just that. Dusting off old favorites and enjoying them as if for the first time.

This week I had the chance to re-watch one of my favorite Cohen Brother films *"Oh Brother Where Art Thou."* While the film came out some time ago – its central story follows many themes that remain relevant for us today: redemption, forgiveness, and grace. And best of all the movie treats these themes through a lens of modern satire and folklore that leave its viewers wanting to hear more about this rag tag crew of characters long after the film is over.

The movie is set in 1937 during the great depression, and involves three convicts who have managed to escape from a road crew working in Mississippi. A few days after their daring getaway they find themselves down on their luck in the woods and they contemplate their next move. And as they do, they see a whole host of saints dressed in white gowns walking through the forest. As their eyes track the flowing crowd they discover that the people are headed towards the river, where a minister is baptizing them. And what comes to follow happens to be one of my favorite baptism scenes from on the big screen – and so I'd like to share a bit that that scene with you today.

Play Movie Clip: *"Brother Where Art Thou"*

Description of clip:

*One of the men, who had been serving time for stealing a pig, decides he wants to be baptized and forgiven, so he runs to the bank of the river and takes his turn. When he comes up out of the water after being baptized, he calls out to his friends, "Well that's it, boys. I've been redeemed. The preacher's done washed away all my sins and transgressions. It's the straight and narrow from here on out, and heaven everlasting's my reward. The preacher says all my sins is washed away, including that Piggly Wiggly I knocked over in Yazoo." One of his friend's replies; "I thought you said you was innocent of those charges?" To which he replies "Well, I was lying'. And the preacher says that that sin's been washed away too. Neither God nor man's got nothing' on me now." And then he*

*stretches out his arms and says to his friends on the river bank: "C'mon in boys, the water is fine."*

From our reading from the Gospel of Luke this morning and throughout this past Advent we know John the Baptist had been calling people down to the River Jordan to repent and be washed long before Jesus came on the scene. And while I don't think they lined up in white garments like the movie clip we just watched – I do think that they came to encounter something greater than themselves in the simplest of ways.

It was a straightforward ceremony back in those days - nothing more than a bath in the river by a disheveled man in the wilderness. Yet, something about this washing called people to come out from the comfort of their lives, to make a trip down to the river to meet a wild preacher.

So what was it that compelled all of those people to leave their towns? Maybe some of them were looking for a cure. Hoping beyond hope that coming to the waters and God's word they would be healed from the hurts that had kept them from being a part of the community for so long. I'm sure others longed to find that being washed by the current would provide them with a clean slate, a new beginning for their broken relationships within the world.

Or maybe in the end, the thing that motivated people to seek out John the most, was more simple than this.

John's actions took something that their bodies knew so well - that just bathed, fresh feeling and managed to copy it for people's souls. They found a connection to something deeper and more meaningful than they had before as they emerged from the waters – they had been truly seen by both John and God and had still been marked as clean before a crowd full of witnesses.

Yet, John would not allow folks to take this ritual washing in the Jordan lightly. He did after all turn away the high and mighty religious class of the day – calling them a brood of vipers that only had come to be washed clean for their own political gain. John knew that this water – a sign through the cleansing and God's word, had consequences for people's lives within the world. He preached and he taught that these holy waters have a meaning - as deep and as wide as God's all-encompassing forgiveness can reach – and people were grasping to find it somewhere in the murky waters beneath.

For John in those early days - Baptism was all about repentance. To be pulled beneath the waters was to be cleansed of sin; to be given the gift of healing to be one with God, and to try to walk in a way that showed this change from within. And so John was a little

more than stumped when he saw Jesus coming around the bend – God’s holy and chosen one – walking towards him, asking for this same baptism of repentance.

In fact, John does everything in his power to try to deter Jesus from even entering the river’s water that day. We hear him state that he would not be fit to even untie the sandals of the coming savior. John's confusion likely makes more sense to us than it did to the crowd gathered there that day. We, like John, know Jesus to be more than a simple man. So why would Jesus, the Messiah, want anything to do with John’s baptism at all? The one without stains doesn't need to be washed, right?

So maybe it’s no surprise at all that we hear such push back from John as it dawns on him that Jesus is wading into the water to be baptized by him. Maybe John’s worried that Jesus will be tainted by the washing – that people will come to doubt that he is the Messiah after all.

Yet when a dripping Jesus surfaces from the Jordan, washed within its murky waters, the least likely outcome of all takes place – we hear the very voice of God speak, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." Naming and claiming Jesus through the waters of baptism for the work of the kingdom that lay ahead. Telling John and everyone else gathered by the river that day that this man – Jesus – was more than he seemed, He was God’s son – the one the prophet Isaiah long ago had foretold, who would bring about justice for all of God’s people.

Through Isaiah’s prophecy we heard in our first reading today we are given a picture of who Jesus was named and claimed to be. He is the gentle servant, who will not come to harm even the last or the least. He is also a holy warrior, commissioned to bring light, freedom, and justice to those who have long been forgotten. He is the one who has come to set the scales right, to bring joy and peace for a world in need. He is God’s son here with us, even in the midst of the waters, calling for all of humanity to be redeemed.

That day Jesus emerged from the Jordan as the one true Son of God – chosen to stand against all that would threaten the waters holiness from that moment on. Because on the day Jesus entered the waters, they changed, and they would never be the same again.

For Jesus came to hold and extend the waters holy promise for us all. A promise that declares that when we are washed in the waters of baptism, we are joined to Christ in newness of life. We are set free from the tangles of death and fear, not just in the life to come, but also here and now, as we live our lives each day. We are named and claimed

as God's beloved, washed clean with the grace and love of God to walk forgiven, redeemed as we are set free journey in faith within the world.

And while our baptism is a gift and tangible symbol of that inward working of grace within us all – our baptism is also a confirmation of something we have come to know deep within our soul – that the God of all creation wishes to be in a relationship with us. A relationship that isn't founded in our ability to remain sinless or clean – but a relationship that calls us back to the waters again and again to know we are deeply loved.

Through these waters we are called to join in Christ in the mission of love and welcome he came to share. And as members of the body of Christ we are called in his image to contest the oppression, pain, and hate we come to see our world bear. To bring light to the darkness, and hope to those in need.

This month in particular, this congregation marks an important part of our journey to become a more welcoming, caring, and inclusive community of faith. In 2008 Holy Spirit became a Reconciling in Christ Congregation – intentionally working to welcoming LGBTQ2SIA+ peoples of faith. A decision that has grown the inclusive welcome of God's kingdom right here in this place.

So this month we do take time to celebrate this decision – but we also take time to continue to learn and grow – because God continues to call us back to the waters of our baptism – to remember that we are beloved children of God with gifts of grace, love and welcome to share with those who do not know the gift of having such an inclusive church to call home.

While this may seem like a need greater than we can achieve - we know we do not enter these changing waters alone. God intimately knows the trials involved in being a humble servant working for a kingdom that has yet to be fully realized. But, more importantly, Jesus in the Jordan demonstrates that Christ will never ask us to go somewhere that he has not already gone. Knowing that God has been washed by the waters of baptism reminds us that we're not called to walk in our faith alone.

Through our baptism, we are called to share this good news we have received. To fling wide the gates of God's kingdom and welcome all to join in the beauty of God's love and grace we have experienced.

So go and walk wet in the rich promises of God.

Trusting and knowing that God names and claims those promises in us too.

That we can be a people of Christ's love, welcome, and grace no matter where our lives come to take us.

And may this be so among us - Amen.