

Through the Waters

Isaiah 43:1-7; Luke 3:

The Reverend Rita Wilbur

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Sometimes I like to believe I'm rather clever. And enough people say nice things about my sermons that it tends to further inflate if not my ego, then my self-satisfaction. Yet I can also be astonishingly dim. At least as a preacher I'm honest about that. I don't pretend to be more clever than I am; if I don't understand something, I tell you all. And I know for a fact that every time I preach on the baptism of Jesus, I share that I have never really understood this story. If baptism is about the forgiveness of sins, then I don't get why Jesus needed to be baptized. I can find meaning in the story, and I don't think that's dishonest. It's not that I find the story meaningless. I just don't get why it happened at all.

But as we are fond of saying in the UCC, "Never place a period where God has placed a comma," and what that means for me is that this time, after years of preaching on this story, and a dilemma that has confounded me since childhood – finally this year, I got it. Imagine! You really can teach an old dog new tricks! Or more accurately, even a dimwit like me, given enough time, can finally get a clue.

You see, when I perform weddings, I tell the couple that a wedding doesn't give them anything they don't already have. They already have the love, the relationship, the commitment to one another. A wedding doesn't give them anything new. But it is a public declaration, a public enactment of what they already have. They could live together without getting married, but that public act of a wedding makes a difference. It changes the relationship in a real but hard to define way. And that's why weddings are important. It's what the church means when we talk about a sacrament. It is an outward and visible sign of an inward, invisible grace. It doesn't give us anything we don't already have. But in enacting it publicly, it somehow cements it, seals it, sanctifies it.

And so it is that as I was reading the story of Jesus' baptism, I finally – finally! – made the connection. It's not that Jesus needed forgiveness, as if that wasn't something he already had. It wasn't as if he wasn't already God's beloved son with whom God was well pleased. It didn't give Jesus something he didn't already have. Rather, it was a public declaration, a public enactment of what was already true, an outward and visible sign of an inward, invisible grace. God already loved Jesus. God just wanted the chance to say it out loud for everyone to hear. "This is my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased."

I get it now! I totally get it! And now it's amazing how all kinds of other things suddenly slot into place for me. Last week I shared how this story is one of three traditionally associated with Epiphany, the celebration of God's manifestation in the world. Does this mean that before this God was not manifest in the world? Before this God did not love us all and want to save us? Of course not! But this, the baptism of Jesus, our own baptism, this is God publicly acting it out, God taking the opportunity to say publicly and formally, "you are my beloved child, with whom I am well pleased." It didn't start with our baptism. It was true all along. From the beginning. But God needed to say it, and we need to hear it.

Three simple words: I love you. We make such a big deal about them, particularly in romantic relationships, but sometimes we don't make enough of a deal of them. In movies it's a pivotal moment when a couple says, "I love you." But it seems like we leave it at that, a single declaration that lasts for all time, and not something we should say over and over, as often as possible. It's as if we think it's a phrase that should only be trotted out on special occasions, as if we'll

wear it out if we say it too much. Now it's true that words can be trite and meaningless, but if we save them only for special occasions, then we risk losing something very important.

My family said "I love you" a lot. We still say it constantly to one another, parent to child, sister to sister. We may sound corny, but I love it. I say it a lot to Sam, and I remember vividly when he first said it back to me. Now he's more linguistically advanced, and he says, "Mommy, I love you very much." I melt! I guarantee that I will never get tired of hearing that.

It's true that those words would be empty if we didn't back them up with deeds. But frequent repetition of those words does not cheapen them or dilute their meaning. Rather, like some kind of medical tonic, frequent application just make the treatment all the stronger.

And we definitely do not hear those words often enough in a religious context. It's not that God isn't saying it, but somehow that's not what we hear. We tend to weigh our religion down so much with moral codes and judgment and sins and repentance. It's not that those things are bad. But sometimes we think those things come before the love. Many people believe that God does not really, truly love them, that God will only love them if they're good, if they've proven their worth. So we place conditions on God's love. Now we know intellectually at least that God's love is supposed to be unconditional. Yet somehow we manage to make even *agape*, God's unconditional love, into something kind of impersonal and distant. As if God loves us on principle, because God is love and kind of has to love us even though we are not really very lovable. We might be able to acknowledge that God loves us in that impartial, even dare I say inhuman way. So it is that we acknowledge that technically we are God's beloved children. But we have a hard time believing that God could be truly pleased with us.

Yet that is exactly what baptism is all about. That is exactly what it means. Yes! God is saying you really are my beloved child. And it's not just an impersonal, obligatory love. I really am well pleased with you! Imagine that! A God who likes us, who even delights in us, warts and all! Sure, God gets exasperated with us sometimes. God wants us to learn to clean up our room and share our toys and play nice together. But the fact that we misbehave does not in any way change the fact that God adores us. We are God's beloved children in whom God is well pleased.

That's the feeling I get from Isaiah 43. I remember distinctly the first time I truly heard that passage. I had read it before, heard it many times, but somehow I had never really gotten it. Yet finally when I was in seminary I truly heard those words, and they struck me with force as if hearing them for the first time. "You are precious in my sight, and I love you. I have called you by name, you are mine." This isn't a standoffish *agape*. This is passion!

The book of Isaiah spans a tumultuous and terrible period in Israel's history. Parts of it date from when the kingdom still existed but was going down the tubes. Much of it deals with the dark times of exile, when the people had lost everything and felt abandoned by God. Isaiah, being a prophet, felt that Israel deserved what had happened to them. Yet throughout the book there is always this vision of a day when all would be set right, the nation restores, the Temple rebuilt, and the people would dwell in God's favor once more. Throughout the book there is the knowledge that even though we may turn away from God, God will never let us go. Even if we fail God, God will never fail us. Not because God has to, but because God wants to.

In the 43rd chapter, God is saying, "Times will be rough. Horrible things will happen." God does not say that there will be no flood or fire. Rather, God says that when we go through the flood and fire, God will be with us. God says, "Don't think

for one minute that when bad things happen it means I have abandoned you or I don't love you. You are precious in my sight! I have called you by name, you are mine! Do you think I'm ever, ever going to let go?" Elsewhere God says, "A mother will sooner forget her child, but I will never forget you."

That is what baptism means. It doesn't give us anything we don't already have. But somehow we still doubt. We think that God can't really, truly love us, miserable and wretched as we are. So we need this ritual, this sacrament, as an outward and visible sign of an inward, invisible grace. And it's something we need to hear not only at our baptism. Rather baptism is meant to wash out our ears so we can hear what God is in fact saying to us every single day. "You are my beloved child, and I am well pleased with you."