

The Water Is Fine!

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Matthew 3:13-17

[13] Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him.

[14] John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"

[15] But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented.

[16] And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him.

[17] And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

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Grace to you, and peace, from God Our Father and Our Lord and Savior Jesus The Christ!

One day a church was having a baptism down at the river. Everyone bowed their heads to pray for the man being baptized who was waiting on the bank of the river. One man who was praying heard a noise from the hill behind the preacher; this man looked up and saw a fellow who appeared to be inebriated – drunk if you will – tumbling down the hill. The drunken guy splashed into the river where the preacher, with head bowed and eyes closed, was praying and stood beside him. No one else seemed to notice this, as all heads were bowed in prayer. The preacher finished praying, reached over for the man he planned to baptize and instead dunked the drunken man's head into the water for a few seconds and brought it back up. The preacher said to the drunk, "Did you find Jesus?" the drunk said, "NO!" The preacher dunked him under again and said, "Did you find Jesus?" and the drunk said "NO!" Once more the preacher dunked the drunk's head in the water and kept him there for about 45 seconds, and brought him back up, again the preacher asked "Did you find Jesus?" and the drunk said, are you sure this is where he fell in?!"

Jesus, of course, did not fall in. He made the choice to go into the Jordan River. He could have decided not to be baptized. His choice to go into the river and be baptized has profound implications for the Christian faith and offers unparalleled, perhaps untapped, hope for the living of our lives each day.

Over the years we've heard plenty of sermons declare that Jesus did not have to be baptized. He was without sin, these sermons would announce. John's baptism was for the forgiveness of sin. So, the

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reason Jesus was baptized, was ... and here different preachers have told us different things. But all have emphasized that Jesus did not have to be baptized and that he was without sin.

Well, then, why did Jesus choose to go into the river with the thousands of others who went and be baptized by his cousin John? And what faith significance, if any, does this have for you and me? My God, we are only two weeks away from the Manger and now Jesus is 30 years old and getting baptized? What gives?

God gives. And with water, mind you!

You see, it is no accident that Jesus chooses to get in line with sinners as they make their way down into the River Jordan to be baptized for the forgiveness of sins. "... this is where Jesus [will] spend his earthly life - in the midst of sinners - eating with them, talking with them, healing them, calling them. Why should his baptism be any different? Jesus [goes] under the waters of the Jordan as the others [are doing] - under the waters his ancestors crossed after 40 years of wilderness wandering."¹ And this time, at this river crossing, for the first time, are the waters flowing by the throne of God. Can you see Jesus making his way into this river?

I have never seen the deeply captivating and spiritual nature of baptism portrayed better than in the movie, **O Brother, Where Art Thou**. In a moment, I want us to view the baptism scene in the movie, but first, I must tell you a bit about the movie.

O Brother, Where Art Thou? is based loosely on Homer's epic poem *The Odyssey*. It is set in 1937 Mississippi and tells the tale of how Ulysses Everett McGill escapes from a chain gang and makes a difficult journey to a town named Ithaca to reunite with his ex-wife Penny. The movie is filled with 1920s and 1930s American music, including folk, bluegrass, gospel, and blues.

At the beginning of the film, the three main characters, Everett, Pete, and Delmar escape from a chain gang and try to jump into a boxcar on a moving train. The boxcar is already occupied by a number of bums, and we realize that the Great Depression is on.

Soon Everett, Pete, and Delmar meet a blind soothsayer, who tells them, "You seek a great fortune, you three who are now in chains. You will find a fortune, though it will not be the fortune you seek. But first ... first you must travel a long and difficult road, a road fraught with peril."

The three escaped convicts manage to reach the farm of a man named Wash Hogwallop, a cousin of Pete's. As they sit around a table eating Wash's food, Delmar compliments his host, "This stew's awful good." Wash responds, "You think so? I slaughtered this horse last Tuesday. I'm afraid she's startin' to turn."

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But Wash turns the escapees in for the bounty, and they have to hit the road again. While pausing to roast gopher in a wooded area, they are suddenly surrounded by church members slowly walking along and singing "Down to the River to Pray." This sequence in the movie parallels the Lotus Eaters episode in *The Odyssey*. This is the scene I want you to see. It includes one verbal profanity. Everyone is reminded: God's name is holy and should not be profaned.

Video clip is played.

Later, as the escapees drive along a country road ... Everett sums up his reaction to the recent developments by saying, "Pete and Delmar just been baptized and saved. I guess I'm the only one that remains unaffiliated."²

Jesus chose to become affiliated with the human condition – to identify with us completely. For Mark, the earliest Gospel writer, who has nothing to say about a manger and shepherds and wise men, this is the way Jesus is born into the human condition – at his baptism in the waters of the Jordan River – as he identifies, affiliates himself totally with the sinful and broken human condition. He rushes into the water with us as if to exclaim, "Come on in, boys and girls, the water is fine!

Canadian Pastor Richard Fairchild illustrates this poignantly for us. He says, "Just before Christmas Day a few years ago I was reading the London Free Press [when] a picture suddenly caught my attention. It was a picture of a young man sitting on some steps outside a school. The young man was bald, and all around him were his classmates, about 25 of them, some wearing school jackets, others in T-Shirts and regular jackets, their heads bowed towards the camera - and they too were bald. The Headline next to the picture read: TRUE BLUE PALS and the caption said:

'Mark Busse, 16, of Reardon, Washington, poses with classmates from his high school in this eastern Washington state town. His friends shaved their heads to show support for Busse after his hair fell out following chemotherapy for inoperable lung cancer. His buddies said that they didn't want him to stand out in the 180 student high school.'

"... this islike what God has done in Christ Jesus - he has come among us - and identified with us - he has taken on our flesh and our blood - our experience - our joys and our concerns, our trials and tribulations so that he might help us, so that we may know that we are not alone, so that we may know God so loves us.

"Indeed, the very first hymn of the church that we have a record of, the hymn which is quoted in the second chapter of Paul's Letter to the Philippians, speaks of this identification, this solidarity, this total commitment, this love."³

"Have this mind among yourselves, which you have in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a

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servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross."⁴

So, this is the main reason Jesus chose to be baptized. To identify with us and to let us know he is with us in the often churning, muddy waters of our sinful, human condition. He knows completely what it is like to be you, to be me, to know joy, to be anxious, to suffer, to doubt, to be tempted, to wonder where God is, to be angry at injustice, to feel betrayed, to laugh, to admire beauty, to feel overwhelmed by a sick and perverse world, to enjoy the smell of flowers, to sorrow over the death of a loved one, to have to eventually die ourselves – every human emotion and condition – he knows! He knows! He is with us in the water! This gives us the faith to go on living and loving and giving and forgiving and hoping and trusting and believing!

But that does not make the water fine! Bearable, endurable, but not fine!

What makes the water fine? See if you can figure it out. As Jesus comes up out of the water, God tears open the heavens, Mark says, and bestows The Holy Spirit on Jesus, and declares ""You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

As Jesus comes up out of the water. Coming up out of the water is a preview of coming out of The Tomb. How did Delmar put it as he came up out of the water? I have been redeemed! Only The Redeemer, Jesus Our Lord, who comes up out of the water, who conquers death, who is God's beloved Son, makes the water we still find ourselves in fine. Because I live, you too shall live! She who believes in me, even though she die, yet shall she live!

Do not be afraid. Take courage. It is I. In this world you have tribulation. Be of good cheer! I have overcome the world. You are my beloved. I named you in the waters of your baptism. You belong to me. I am with you always.

In 1976 when our country was celebrating its 200th anniversary, I had been a Pastor for 3 years. That year " ... a very creative writer came up with an intriguing idea. 'Our nation is 200 years old,' he thought. 'I'll bet I can find someone who is alive today who is old enough that when they were a child, they remember someone who was then old enough to have been alive at the founding of the nation, a living link to the beginning of the country.' And, sure enough, he found such a person. He was a Kentucky farmer named Burnham Ledford, who was over 100 years old in 1976; and he remembered when he was a little boy being taken by a wagon to see his great-great grandmother who was then over 100 herself and who was a little girl when George Washington was inaugurated as the first American president. When the writer asked Burnham what he remembered, he said he remembered being taken into his great-great grandmother's house. She was feeble. She was blind. She was sitting in an old chair in the corner of a dark bedroom. 'We brought Burnham to see you,' his father said. The old woman turned toward the sound and reached out with long, bony fingers and said in an ancient, cracking voice, 'Bring him here.' 'They had to push me toward her,' Burnham remembered. 'I was afraid of her. But

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when I got close to her, she reached out her hands and began to stroke my face. She felt my eyes and my nose, my mouth and my chin. And all at once, she seemed to be satisfied, and she pulled me close to her and held me tight. 'This boy's a Ledford,' she said, 'I can feel it. I know this boy. He's one of us.'

In an even deeper way when we are baptized, God holds us close [as he did Our Lord at his baptism] and says, 'I know this one. I called this one by name. This one belongs to me. Fear not. I know you by name.'"⁵ With you I am well pleased!

That also makes the water fine.

Amen!

¹ Barbara K. Lundblad <http://www.day1.net/index.php5?view=transcripts&tid=88>

² Ivana Redwine <http://homevideo.about.com/library/weekly/aa062001a.htm>

³ Richard J. Fairchild <http://www.spirit-net.ca/sermons/b-or01su.html>

⁴ Philipians 2:5-9 Revised Standard Version

⁵ Thomas G. Long <http://www.protestanthour.com/01.11.2004.html>

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