

Baptism of our Lord A
Church of the Good Shepherd
The Rev. W. Terry Miller
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Have you ever heard of the writer Flannery O'Connor? She's a Catholic writer from the South, from Georgia and she's one of my favorite authors. She once wrote a haunting short story entitled "The River." The story is about a little boy, four or five years old, named Harry. Harry lives in a city apartment with parents who drink heavily, smoke heavily, go to too many parties, and generally neglect their son. They routinely leave him to find breakfast on his own every morning while they slept late; one morning all he finds to eat are two crackers spread with anchovy paste, some flat ginger ale, and raisin bread heels spread with peanut butter.

One day a woman who cleans and babysits for the family takes Harry with her to a preaching revival down at the river. The preacher, who is reputed to be a faith healer as well, stands in the water talking in a twangy voice about Jesus. At one point he shouts, "Listen to what I got to say, you people! There ain't but one river and that's the River of Life, made out of Jesus' Blood. That's the river you have to lay your pain in, in the River of Faith, in the River of Life, in the River of Love, in the rich red river of Jesus' Blood, you people!"

The babysitter suspects that Harry has never been baptized. So, at her behest the preacher takes the boy in his arms. The child suddenly realizes that this is not a joke, although with his parents everything is a joke. The preacher tells him that if he is baptized he won't be the same anymore—he'll count for something. Suddenly the preacher dunks the boy under the water and repeats the words of baptism. When he comes up, the preacher says again to the surprised child, "You count now; you didn't even count before. You count now." That is what Harry remembers that night when his mother quizzes him about how he has spent the day. He tells his mother, "He said I'm not the same now. I count."

Now, the preacher had also told his crowd of listeners that the river flowed on to the Kingdom of Christ, and that after the little boy was baptized, he would be able to go to the Kingdom of Christ "by the deep river of life." Harry thinks about that. And then early the next morning before his parents wake up, Harry helps himself to a bus token from his mother's purse, rides to the end of the bus line, and trudges back to the river. "He intended not to fool with preachers anymore," O'Connor writes, "but to baptize himself and to keep going on this time until he found the Kingdom of Christ in the river."

At first the boy keeps sputtering and choking in the water, coming up for air. He fights against the river. But when he plunges under a fourth time the current catches him and pulls him swiftly forward and down deeper. The child knows he is getting somewhere; all his fury and fear leave him. A fisherman tries in vain to rescue Harry, but in the end the man stands empty-handed on the bank staring down the river as far as he can see.

A producer once asked O'Connor if he might make a documentary film about the story. In a letter dated August 24, 1956, O'Connor reported with amusement, "Sunday I am to entertain a man who wants to make a movie out of 'The River'...It is sort of disconcerting to think somebody getting hold of your story and doing something else to it." Besides, she added, how can you document the sacrament of baptism?

O'Connor may be right, that the sacrament of baptism cannot be documented, but she paints a remarkably powerful illustration of the mystery of Christian baptism in this story. For, in the image of the river that carries young Harry, we are reminded of the awesome power of the sacrament. In the image of the river we are reminded how at our baptisms we are caught up in something much larger than ourselves, caught up and carried away sometimes against our will.

This point is often lost when we envision baptism in the church, what with pretty baptismal gowns and sprinklings of water of babies' heads. But being carried away was likely exactly what Jesus experienced at his baptism in the Jordan. As you just heard, Matthew's account begins with Jesus all of a sudden taking off from Galilee to the Jordan River, some 25 miles away, not a short distance over the mountains by foot. What drew him there, what compelled him to come, we don't know. All we know is that he was determined to be baptized by John, even over John's objections. John baptizes him, but what we don't get, because our lesson cuts the story off a bit abruptly, is that right after his baptism Jesus didn't just stand there in the river, basking in God's love. He was immediately carried off into the wilderness where he was tempted for forty days. And of course the story doesn't end there. Jesus comes back from the wilderness—with a mission. He comes back, renewed, with energy and power, carried along as if by a force beyond himself.

Even without Matthew clueing us in on the cosmic event that occurred at the Jordan—the heavens opening and all that—we can tell just by what Jesus did afterwards that something happened in that river, something very powerful. Of course, knowing the story as we do, we know what happened: Jesus was baptized, not just by water but by the Holy Spirit. He was immersed not just in the flow of the river, but in the “flood tide” of the Spirit. The experience was like something welling up inside him at the same time as descending on him from above, bathing him with divine energy. This is what it was like when the Holy Spirit came upon Jesus, when the Spirit anointed him, when the Spirit consecrated him and set him apart for mission, for holy service. For the Holy Spirit's anointing wasn't just to show God's pleasure, but to confirm his calling. Jesus had work to do. He had a mission. As Isaiah prophesied centuries before, Jesus was anointed to “bring forth justice to the nations,” to be “as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations,” “to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.” Jesus accepts this calling, submits to it. He surrenders to His Father's will as he surrenders to the waters of baptism. Like Harry in Flannery O'Connor's story, Jesus is caught up in a river, caught up in the river of the Holy Spirit and carried forward and down, deeper into the suffering of the world.

In our baptisms, you and I are promised that same Spirit that descended upon Jesus in the Jordan, the same Spirit that swept him away. Often we try to minimize the significance of baptism. We talk about baptism as being only for the forgiveness of sins, or for membership in the church, for adoption as God's a son or daughter, or even as “fire insurance,” as our own personal “get-out-of-hell-free” card and ticket to heaven. That's all true. (Well, not the “fire insurance” part.) But we short-change ourselves and our children if we think that getting saved is all that baptism is about, if we see baptism as being about having our children “done.” Just because we are baptized does not mean we are “done.” We are never “done” with our baptism. Baptism is not limited to a short, ten-minute ceremony on Sunday morning. When we are baptized, that's just the beginning, the beginning of a new life, a new life in the Spirit. No matter whether we are dunked or dashed, submerged or splashed, we emerge out of the waters of baptism with a whole new world opened to us. Like Jesus the heavens are opened to us in our baptism, the barrier

between us and God is torn, ripped apart, and we are invited into a new life as God's beloved child. We are invited into a life of righteousness, a life lived in the flow of God's Holy Spirit, a life lived in the growing awareness that our lives are not our own, to use as we please, but are rather God's gifts, to be used as God pleases. For we have been claimed, our lives are claimed by the waters of baptism, claimed by God.

Here's the point. In baptism, God has claimed us, but he has also called us, called us to serve God in the world. For like Jesus, our baptism is not just a declaration of God's love. It's that, but it's also an anointing, a commissioning. And as God gave Jesus the Holy Spirit to empower him for his work, you and I too are given God's power to take up the work we have been called to do. This is to say, the baptismal font is where you and I were ordained, ordained for ministry. You may be surprised to hear that, but you don't have to have a collar to be a minister. In baptism you and I have been ordained, set aside to be ministers of Jesus Christ. In fact, that's what being a "Christian" means quite literally. The name given to Jesus—Christ, "Christos" in Greek, "Messiah" in Hebrew, means "anointed." We call ourselves Christians because we are anointed in imitation of Christ, the Anointed One. In our baptisms we are each anointed, "christed," "christened," not just to be Jesus' followers, not just to speak his word, not just to do his work, but to bear Jesus to others in the world. You and I are bearers of Jesus Christ. We take him with us into our worlds, where we live, where we work, where we play. That is our ministry. To "know Christ and then to make him known" wherever we are. And, we shouldn't be surprised when the Holy Spirit carries us further and deeper into the suffering of the world, just as he did with Jesus.

You might be thinking this is a pretty heavy charge. Well beyond what you probably came expecting to be faced with this morning. We're used to thinking of religion, church, as pretty staid, conventional, sedate, if not sedimentary. Not something that gives you orders and a commission and then thrusts you out into the world. But the truth is, that's what baptism is about, what it entails, not just induction into the church, but a sending out with a charge. Maybe for some of you surrendering to the waters of baptism might mean surrendering to the call to go and serve Christ among others in unfamiliar places—as a missionary, like Adam Starr feels called to do. For others, most of you, I imagine, that calling involves something closer to home, serving those in your family, in the city, in your work and whatever else you do—speaking truth and showing love and grace and inviting others to be apart of this mission God is carrying out. Now, I'm not talking about anything too fancy or grandiose. I'm thinking of the grandmother who bakes bags of oatmeal cookies each week for inmates in the juvenile detention center, and how that would affect the youths. I know of some other people, a group of bikers, Bikers Against Child Abuse, who go to the houses of child abuse victims and stand guard outside, using their formidable and intimidating looks to make the survivors feel safe. I've known families who adopted the widow down the street and grandparents who looked forward to retirement but accepted the challenge of being parents again when their child was not able to be there.

None of the folks involved in these ministries, I imagine, would have ever seen and even imagined that when they were baptized, that was where the waters would take them. But it did. Further and deeper into the suffering of the world, just like Jesus. Carried away by the River of Life. We are each called and gifted in different ways to serve the Lord in different places, though we are baptized by the same Spirit. As we receive the Eucharist today and in our prayers this week, I invite you to remember your baptism, to remember that we are invited to a new life, invited to share with Jesus in his ministry and to share Jesus with others. Baptism is only just the beginning, the beginning of a life-long adventure. It is

an invitation to joy as well as to service. It is an invitation to be carried away by the waters of life. Why don't y'all come on in? The water's fine! Amen.