



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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BAPTISM OF CHRIST SUNDAY

Taking the Plunge Isaiah 43:1-7; Luke 3:15-22

A little over a week ago, on New Year's Day, I sat in the warmth of my den and watched a news item about the hundreds (maybe thousands) of people who had gathered at the beach in Coney Island for the annual Polar Bear Plunge. Although, like here, temperatures in the Big Apple had been warmer in December, on the first day of the new year the thermometer registered a high of 42°. Many of the bathers wore nothing but a traditional bathing suit while others were dressed as Santa Claus, polar bears, or other characters. Most people, however, simply wore layers of warm clothes. They waited for the Head Polar Bear to blow the traditional conch shell and then made a mad dash into the water and back out again.

There are polar bear plunges all over the country—perhaps all over the world. Most events support some sort of charity to make the day meaningful or perhaps to make sense of an otherwise sensible person jumping into icy water in the winter time. I have never taken a polar bear plunge, although when I was a Boy Scout attending camp in Saluda, North Carolina, the water in that lake was frigid even in mid-July. At least we had a hot afternoon to warm us up after we finished our swim!

I could not help but think about the polar bear plunge when I began thinking about our text for today and baptism in general. Whenever we have a baptism, we work hard to be sure that the water in our baptistery is at a “Goldilocks level” – not too cold, not too hot—just right! I have had a few instances in my ministry when the hot water heater did not work and the baptistery felt like the Atlantic Ocean on New Year's Day. Then again, I remember at least one instance when the water was so hot that the baptistery felt like a hot tub.

I thought about the Polar Bear Plunge as I reflected on baptism because, like stepping into the baptistery, jumping into icy water in January takes some commitment. You have to want to do it. You have to believe that there is some good purpose to it. For an ice bather it may be nothing more than a rite of passage, something to check off of your bucket list. It may be a novel way to begin the new year with friends or a rather crazy way to raise

funds to send children with incurable diseases to a camp for a week. Whatever the reason, to plunge into that frigid water takes commitment.

Plunging into the waters of baptism obviously requires commitment. While the water is most often at a comfortable temperature and we wear simple, modest robes, it is our declaration to the world that we are believers in Jesus Christ. Granted, we do not understand everything about our faith at that point because discipleship is a process of growing in faith. Nevertheless, when we affirm our faith by declaring “Jesus Christ is Lord!” we tell the world that we are committed followers of Jesus Christ. Not everyone is willing to step into baptismal waters. Thousands of people stand on the beach at Coney Island each year and watch others run into the water. Commitment separates those who get into the water and those who never get wet.

While getting into the icy Atlantic ocean or into the warm waters of baptism may share similarities, getting out of those waters is vastly different. At a Polar Bear Plunge, uppermost on everyone’s mind is getting out and getting warm. Once the water has caused most parts of your body to go numb, sucked all of the air out of your lungs, and turned your skin blue, you rush back to the shore, find a dressing room and get into dry, warm clothes, and go on about your day. Many people stay on the island, enjoy a hot beverage with friends, and celebrate the New Year, but jumping into the cold water does not change most people’s lives.

Not so with Christian baptism. We get into the waters of baptism because we genuinely believe that God loves us and we love God. We pledge our lives to follow Jesus, even though few of us fully realize what that means at the time. We get in because we feel in our hearts it is right. We get in because it is time to declare our faith. We get in because our friends are getting in and we don’t want to be left out. We get in because our parents or our pastor think it is a good thing for us to do. None of those reasons diminishes our faith, but they are sometimes the things that get us into the water. Getting out of those waters is altogether different.

Baptism marks us. It tells the world whose we are. John the Baptist emerged from the wilderness preaching repentance and calling people to be baptized. The Bible tells us that people from all over the region of Judea and all of Jerusalem came out to be baptized. Part of their motivation was a belief that if all of Israel repented, God would send the Messiah. The people wanted to acknowledge their dependence upon God. They wanted to be marked as the people of God. Who would have thought that one of them

standing waist deep in the river, water streaming from his hair, was actually the Messiah? Jesus, too, wanted to be marked as God's own and as one of his people.

After baptism, what? Do you head to the nearest changing room for dry clothes so that no one will even know that you have been plunged beneath the waters? Ancient believers were sometimes baptized naked and then presented with a white robe to wear so that they actually stood out in the crowd, marked as God's child, a follower of Jesus.

A little earlier in our worship we sang that wonderful gospel hymn "Shall We Gather at the River." We all love to sing it as evidenced this morning. It is a wonderful hymn that uses the biblical symbol of life-giving water in a powerful way, but it is not a baptismal hymn. It is a hymn that expresses our peace, our satisfaction, our hope, and our excitement long after we have come out of the waters of baptism. It is a song about eternity and the river of life that runs through heaven. How do we get from the baptismal pool to the river of eternal life?

We follow Jesus out of the Jordan. We are told that after he was baptized Jesus went immediately into the wilderness. Sopping wet, sandals squishing as he climbed up the sandy bank on the other side, robe clinging to his body like all those expectations of who he was going to be, Jesus walked out of the water and into his ministry. The first thing he did after baptism was to spend time alone in reflection and prayer. He thought, he questioned, he planned, he kicked around a lot of ideas, he meditated on the scriptures which he had tucked away in his heart for just such a time. He summoned the inner strength God promises to us all and, when the Tempter arrived, Jesus was ready. He was prepared to meet the challenges of everyday life and be faithful. Getting out of the waters of baptism required even more commitment than getting in.

We are not able to use our baptistery right now because it needs repair. I am told that a gallon of water weighs a little over eight pounds. When you add five or six hundred gallons of water to the baptistery, it gets rather heavy. Of course, it is designed to hold that kind of weight. Unfortunately, in our situation, that kind of pressure caused stress fractures in the fiberglass because the tub did not have the right foundation. When we fill it up, it leaks. Fortunately there are no holes or gushing tears. There is no flooding, just steady drips that can still be damaging and could get worse. We are repairing

those hairline fractures. More important, we are providing the proper foundation so that we will never have this problem again.

I remember thinking after my baptism at the age of about nine years old that I was going to be perfect. I would be sinless and do everything just right. I got baptized in an evening service and that attitude lasted until about bedtime! We are all sinners, after all. There are times when the pressures of life combined with, perhaps, an inadequate foundation at the time, cause leaks in our faith, ruptures that need to be repaired.

That is why Jesus went into the wilderness—to prepare for the pressures that were sure to come. They did not wait very long for the Tempter turned up the heat and applied the pressure on Jesus at every point the young Savior might be vulnerable. Jesus was steadfast, prepared, secure on his foundation of trust in God. You might argue that he was, after all, the Son of God and not really vulnerable to temptation, but that is not what scripture tells us. He was vulnerable. He felt the pressure. He also relied on the power of God to stand against temptation and do what he knew to be right.

Earlier we heard from the prophesy of Isaiah. God's people constantly struggled with their relationship with God, much as we do today. They were hot and cold, steadfast and wishy-washy, committed and undecided. Isaiah mentioned water and fire which evoked many memories for the Hebrews. They thought of the waters of creation from which God cooked up the world. They thought of the waters their ancestors crossed in order to flee Pharaoh and gain their freedom. They thought of the fire of defeat that had come whenever they were unfaithful and did not depend upon God. They thought of repentance and cleansing and purity just as the people standing in the Jordan with Jesus did.

Isaiah did not threaten the people with visions of what God would do if they were not faithful, but he did remind them of one very important thing:

But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.

Isaiah 43:1-3a

Isaiah reminded the people of Israel that they belonged to God. God claimed them and promised to watch over them. They were marked as the children of God. Standing in the River Jordan, Jesus was marked as God's child when the Spirit descended on him like a dove and a voice declared, "'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

When we stand in the waters of baptism, we, too, are marked as belonging to God. And after we emerge from those waters, we are surrounded by God's Spirit so that we do not have to buckle under the pressures of life. Our foundation is firm and secure.

We also emerge from baptismal waters with purpose. Unlike someone who takes a happy-go-lucky plunge into frigid water on the first day of the year, we are baptized by the Spirit of God every day of our lives. We do not walk away from the water of baptism and forget what happened. We follow Jesus. We follow him through the wilderness and into the villages and towns where he shared God's love with every person he met. We follow him into a life of service. To be sure, getting into the water involves commitment, but getting out requires absolute involvement in the life of faith.

Obviously we are not celebrating any new baptisms today. We will in a few weeks. Perhaps today is a good day to affirm our baptism and what it means to us and our life of faith. If not physically, at least symbolically, we can rise from the waters of baptism once more and follow Christ into discipleship.

"Come to the water," our choir sang. Come as you are: weary, poor, heavy laden, weak, children all. Come to the water which is free and pure and invigorating for life. Come to the water where we are marked by God for life and service. The commitment is wholehearted. The reward is eternal. Thanks be to God! Amen.

January 10, 2016

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

Gracious Spirit of God, even before the whispers of our prayers melt into the air, you have already begun to respond to them. Our thoughts barely form meaningful patterns before you give your full attention to our concerns. Our hearts never skip a beat but that you sense the rhythm of our souls. You dwell with us and care for us and we are grateful.

Gracious Spirit, listen now to those deep callings that no one else can hear. Our greatest fears, our most troubling needs, our most longed-for joys are on our tongues but cannot be spoken aloud. Listen and help us, we pray. Listen and whisper back your words of encouragement. Listen and lead us.

Gracious Spirit, feel our greatest joys and know that we credit you for our happiness. Thank you for the small delights that collectively brighten our days. Thank you for the momentous triumphs that assure us we are on the right path. Thank you for the abiding goodness that makes each day worthwhile and brings peaceful rest at night. Thank you for your abundant kindness which never ceases to amaze us.

Gracious Spirit, understand our weakness and our need for the power of your grace to act in our lives. We plead for help in our world, our nation, our community, and our homes. Give us courage to choose what is right. Provide us with wisdom to know what will work best. Grant us humility to recognize that we will do better together than we ever can alone.

Gracious Spirit, illumine our gifts and the power of personality you have given to us all. Remind us that we are your children, created to live abundantly in this world. Open opportunities that will call on our unique skills and show us needs that we are chosen to meet. Reveal to us the calling that is ours, we pray.

Gracious Spirit, dwell with us in these restless days when we seek to make your ways known day by day. And remain with us until that day when we shall all stand in the river of life eternal; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.