



COMMUNITY  
PRESBYTERIAN  
CHURCH

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January 9, 2005  
*Baptism of Our Lord*

*Matthew 3:13-20*  
*Psalm 29*

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## Up From the Water

Each of the Gospel writers tells of Jesus being baptized. Our New Testament lesson is from Matthew and he describes the day that Jesus joined with others being baptized by John in the river Jordan. Let us listen for God's word as it comes to us through Matthew's words.

Two weeks ago, the Sunday after Christmas, we read in Matthew about Herod's rage and the slaughter of children. I mentioned that we don't know if that loss of life was historically true - but still the story about young children lost because of the stormy moods of an insecure ruler carries great power as it makes us consider how precious and fragile life is.

It was on that day two weeks ago that the tragic loss of life in southeast Asia began. A tsunami hit land and the death toll has swelled over 150,000 - many being children. Already, we've seen too many photos of parents holding small lifeless bodies; or

people holding pictures in front of cameras in hope of finding a loved one. We know this tragedy is all too real. These days the devastation seems so vast and the pain so deep, that as a world, our soul is weeping. Somehow 9/11 pales in comparison. Somehow the petty frustrations of my own blessed life seem downright embarrassing. From every corner of the globe people of all faiths are asking the old questions Why, God? Where are you God? Why them and not us? Why there and not here? And how, dear God, how, can life ever taste sweet again?

Last week, I heard a story on NPR about Pearl Buck's award winning

children's book called **The Big Wave**. It was written in 1947, the setting is an island off of Japan, and it is the story of two boys - Kina, the son of a poor farmer, and Jiya, the son of a poor fisherman. I'd like to share with you some of this story. These boys have heard stories of the "big wave" all their lives. But when it comes, with all its devastation, their lives are changed forever. Jiya, sent running up the mountain by his fisherman father, watches as the tsunami sweeps his home and his family out to sea. And though Kina's family, safe above the destruction, welcomes him into their home, Jiya sinks into the deep, thick darkness of depression. At one point Kina worries that his friend will never be happy again. His wise father answers:

*Yes, he will be happy someday, for life is stronger than death...[Now] he will cry and cry and we must let him cry. But he cannot always cry. After a few days he will stop crying all the time...He will sit sad and quiet. We must allow him to be sad and we must not make him speak. But we will do our work and live as always we do...all the time his body will be renewing itself. His blood flowing in his veins, his growing bones, his mind beginning to think again, will make him live.. Someday he will accept [the death of his parents] as part of his life. He will weep no more. He will carry them in his memory and his thoughts...So long as he is alive, they, too, will live in him. The big wave came, but it went away. The sun shines again, birds sing, and earth flowers. Look out over the sea*

*now?"*

*Kina looked out the open door and he saw the ocean sparkling and smooth. [And] the sky was blue again.... Tears started rolling down his cheeks and he cried out how cruel it all was. But again his father spoke, reminding him that the ocean and sky did not cause the evil storm - [that God did not cause the storm] - that storms simply come - and that "we must live through them as bravely as we can." There will come a time, his father concludes, when we will "feel again how wonderful is life." The reporter suggested that one of the things that has changed in the last several decades is that while children still know that the world a vulnerable place and that children are risk, we don't give them the stories that acknowledge that. Maybe it is parents and big people who are most afraid of what cannot be controlled.*

Lent begins in a few short weeks. We have just made a cradle for the Christ Child and We start the journey to the cross and the tomb. We will remember how Jesus dies that we might live. And he will live so that we might die to the old and rise to the new.

How that makes any sense is a mystery. Our faith story is a mystery. But it is also the promise that the light shines in the darkness and the darkness - even the darkness of

tsunamis - will never overcome it.

Today is baptism of the Lord Sunday. A day we remember that Jesus went under the water, that he was baptized into the Jordan. In all of the gospel accounts describing the baptism of Jesus, one question remains unanswered. Why was Jesus baptized? Why did he need to be baptized? For some reason Jesus submits to baptism himself, kneeling in the mud and the muck. It is for the same reason he is born in a manger, that he eats with prostitutes and tax collectors, that he cries and prays and sleeps in a garden, and that he dies a painful, very human death. It is quite simply because Jesus comes to be like us, so we can grow to be like him. Jesus is baptized into our humanity, so that we can be baptized into his divinity.

In the Eastern Orthodox tradition, those who are baptized in the same font become siblings— they are considered the same flesh and blood—they are kin with one another. In this sense, Jesus became siblings with the crowd, all those with whom he was baptized in the River Jordan. When we are baptized into Christ in the waters of the font, we too become siblings, with Christ and with one another. The personal name we receive is important. But much more important is the spiritual name we

receive—Christian—bearer of Christ—brother and sister of Christ.

What is most important about our text for today is how it ends. Up until this time God would have been viewed in an ancient way, as being distant and vengeful. But now things are different God has drawn near and everything has changed with Jesus being the Christ. After this remarkable transformation—from thunder theology into tender theology, after the change of this abstract, awesome God into a fragile, flesh and blood God—after the Heavenly One decides to become earthly—it is then that the Creator God responds in a very particular way. If you have ever wondered if God is a mean God or a merciful God—if you have ever worried that God may blast us instead of bless us—if you ever have thought that God is a God of law more than a God of Love—well, the 17th verse of the third chapter of Matthew alleviates our confusion. The Voice of God speaks once again.

This Voice is warm and welcoming. "You are my Son, the Beloved One; with you I am well pleased." To the man in the mud, this Son who has become a servant, God speaks. Even before Jesus has done anything noteworthy or worthwhile God praises him. God affirms that Jesus is

precious, that he is unique, and that he is loved— not for what he does but for who he is. After the baptism of Jesus, after this total immersion into the human condition, God says “this is the Beloved, So it is with each one of us when we are baptized. We too are blessed as the Beloved. We too bring pleasure to God. When we know that, life is wonderful again.

Today and over the next weeks we will celebrate the ordination of new elders and deacons, ordination is a setting apart for particular ministry through the laying on of hands. Ordination is seen as a continuation of baptism, our calling to give away our lives in love. Each time we celebrate baptism or ordination or anytime we reflect on and remember our baptism may we remember that we are always surrounded with grace, each one of us has our original blessing. Each one of us can be reminded of God's Voice in our lives. The voice that says “You are my child, the Beloved with whom I am well pleased.” AMEN.