

“Are We Frightened by the Water?”

Acts 19:1–7; Mark 1:4–11

Christopher C. F. Chapman

First Baptist Church, Raleigh

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All ministers have a collection of baptism stories, some of which are suitable for public consumption. The story I tell here is about a young woman who worked with me in another setting while she was in seminary. She was a gifted minister and, when she graduated, she went on to become one of only three female pastors in Baptist churches in that state. She did well, she offered good leadership and was well received. Then, it happened, she had her first baptism, and she wanted everything to go smoothly. She didn't need much coaching. We talked through the usual details, she prepared for the service, and finally, the day arrived.

Because the church did not have a baptistery, baptisms were done in a swimming pool. Everyone gathered there. The candidate was a teenager and the minister had talked through all of the details. She had even asked if the teenager was comfortable in water and the answer was yes. But when it came time to baptize, standing there in pool water that was pretty deep, the teenager grabbed hold of the minister and dragged both of them under the water — baptism in reverse! The teenager had not been honest about the water thing, was absolutely terrified, and very nearly drowned that day along with the minister — all in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, amen!

I tell this story not to criticize this minister nor to ridicule the teenager, but to ask in a lighthearted way whether we are frightened by the water. I don't mean literally. I'm not talking about whether we can swim or not, nor even simply about whether some who have not been baptized are afraid of taking the step, though the latter is part of my concern. I am talking about whether we are frightened by what is at stake in being baptized into Christ, into a whole new way of being.

For the early church, baptism was a frightening experience, wonderful and joyous, but frightening as well. According to Mark, John the baptizer says Jesus comes to baptize not with water but with the

Holy Spirit, and then Jesus is baptized, the heavens open and a voice speaks! When the disciples in Ephesus are baptized and hands are laid on them, as described in Acts 19, they speak in tongues and prophesy! When people are baptized into Christ in the churches in Galatia, there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female. All social boundaries collapse, all are sisters and brothers! And throughout the early period of the church, because of the stance of the Roman Empire toward Christian faith, anyone who is baptized expects to die for his/her faith! Baptism for these early believers is frightening, wonderful and transforming, but unsettling and life-threatening as well!

Contrast the experience of the early church with our own wherein baptism is often a timid ritual, a mundane rite of passage the value and necessity of which many question, at best a thing you do at a certain age to belong. I have to wonder whether we are frightened by the water at all. Fear should not be the primary factor in our relationship with God. Perhaps awe is a better term. And, as I have said, I am not talking about literal water. But are we awed by the prospect of a whole new way of life defined by service and sacrificial love? We should be, perhaps not for all the same reasons as the early believers, but we should be.

A part of what should bring us a sense of awe is the offer of forgiveness and transformation. Forgiveness is not the only thing at stake in baptism, or else Jesus would not submit to it. Furthermore, sin is not the only thing separating us from God, one another, and our own best selves. In his book *How Good Do We Have to Be?* Harold Kushner details the damaging consequences of the Judeo-Christian obsession with sin, reading the Genesis narrative of the fall as the defining moment of humanity, and thus seeing God's love as conditional. Kushner acknowledges that human beings do wrong things and are capable of more cruelty and deceit than any other creature, but he rejects the idea that we are destined to lose God's love or go to Hell because of our sins.

But forgiveness is one of our deepest needs, and both forgiveness and the transformation that comes with it are part of what we are offered when we are baptized into Christ. There is nothing magical in the water that cleanses. In fact, I don't believe that God waits until baptism to

forgive us. To think of God doing so is to believe in a God whose forgiveness is conditional. God already loves us and forgives us, but when we open ourselves to that experience through a baptism of water, fire or spirit, we fully receive the gift and we are changed by it.

In the movie *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* there is a fascinating scene in which the three escapees from a chain gang happen upon an outdoor baptismal service. Delmar rushes to be baptized and comes up out of the water claiming that he is forgiven of all his sins — the preacher said so! Why, he is forgiven even of knocking off that Piggly Wiggly in Yazoo! His comrades, unconvinced by this sudden transformation, point out that the state of Mississippi may not be quite as forgiving as the preacher and God, and they point out that he said he didn't knock off that Piggly Wiggly. Well, says Delmar, I am forgiven of lying about it too! It all seems superficial, but later, when the escapees steal some apple pie from a windowsill, Delmar leaves money behind to pay for it.

That's what baptism is about, that's what forgiveness involves, not just a simple acknowledgment of wrong and pretense that the past is passed, but a deep-down change of heart that ends in a change of life. If I am broken and know it, and then I am healed and forgiven, I am different, my words and actions are different. I don't steal anymore; I pay for my pie. I don't spend my time tearing down others; I use my words to build up. I stop acting in disloyal ways and begin building trust in my relationships. All of this is wonderful, but it is also unsettling and awe-filled because it involves the pain of self-exposure and open acknowledgment before God, and it ultimately leads to change.

Yet, as I have said, baptism is not just about forgiveness. Another part of what happens in baptism that evokes a sense of awe is that we find a way to claim our true identity. As with the gift of forgiveness, it is not that baptism gives us this identity; it simply confirms it. When Jesus arises from the waters of baptism, the heavens open, the Spirit descends like a dove, and a voice says, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." He is confirmed as Beloved Son of God. A previously established reality is recognized. Yet this recognition or

confirmation is critical on Jesus' journey. In times of testing, when people question everything he is doing, even who he is, when he is put to death in the most brutal fashion imaginable, he can recall this moment of confirmation! It is awesome and unsettling, not simply a nice little ritual with a touch of meaning. It is empowering!

Such is our experience in baptism. We are not the Beloved, but we are loved, and baptism provides an intense and memorable confirmation of this reality. This is one answer to the question, "Is baptism necessary?" Not as a requirement to get into the next life — God's love and what is in our hearts are the keys. But as a gift to sustain us when we question who we are — yes, absolutely, baptism in some form is necessary! The water doesn't magically do it. In fact, some of us receive confirmation in some other way — a word that a parent or mentor speaks, an experience of recognition or accomplishment. But no matter how the baptism comes, it sustains us in many places of life.

It is said that when Martin Luther was troubled — and if we know anything about his life, it doesn't take much imagination to realize just how often he must have been troubled — he would touch his forehead, make the sign of the cross and say, "Martin, calm your nerves, you are baptized." In other words, Martin, remember who you are, you are a beloved child of God with a purpose. No matter what happens, no matter what anyone else thinks, you are a beloved child of God.

What a gift it is to have had such an experience of confirmation, and the good news is that each of us has had or can have such an experience! It is a central part of what baptism involves. We are beloved children of God, but do we know it, do we believe it? Do we remember our baptism? When others would cheapen us with their words, when some experience discourages us deeply, we can think back to that moment in the water or wherever in life we knew God's love, and hear again an affirming Voice blessing us. This may not be frightening, but it is awesome and wonderfully so!

Awe comes in baptism because forgiveness and transformation are involved and because we claim our true identity as children of God; then, awe comes, perhaps also fear, because our relationships with others

change. This is seen in the baptismal language of Galatians. When individuals are baptized into Christ, they join a new community where there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female. Each of these divisions is huge in the first century, but each is transcended by baptism, by one's relationship to the God who is in Christ. Those who are baptized in water and Spirit have a new pattern of relationships — they accept former enemies as friends, they accept former superiors and inferiors as equals. This is awesome, unsettling, frightening!

Two early church practices illustrate what this means. The first involved the naming of the baptismal candidate. Sometimes the candidate was given a new name as a sign of a new identity. Other times the candidate was baptized in his/her first name only to emphasize the shift of relational allegiance. To reference the entire family name, as we do, is to honor the critical significance of the family structure, to say that you may be a child of God, but I am still your father in this world! The early church did not want to minimize the role of the family, but it did assert that because I am now a child of God, this identity transcends all others. I now relate even to parents as brother in Christ.

The second early church practice that illustrates the change in relationships involves the work of exorcists. I am not going to recommend that we recover this role today. It doesn't fit our worldview. But the early church knew that baptism and Christian life were about more than what we believe in our heads. They knew that what we are about is the transformation of the whole person. And in their worldview, part of what they had to do was cleanse the body of evil, clear the hotel of the old occupants to make room for the new Occupant.

This is where exorcists came in, and the fascinating thing is that social standing was irrelevant. The exorcist might have been a poor woman of a minority race standing next to a well-to-do baptismal candidate. But in the water, all social distinctions were out the window. It was a sign of how we appear before God — none of the other stuff matters, and it is a sign of how things are to be in the church and of how we relate to the world. Baptism into Christ means we are forgiven and transformed, and it means we claim our identity as children of God, but it also means we claim a new way of relating to other people such that

things like race and gender, education and socio-economic standing, age and orientation, are out the window. We are all equals now, brothers and sisters in Christ, members of one family. If that does not stir a little holy fear, we haven't understood what is involved!

For this means we have a calling not only to treat black and brown people with dignity and respect in our personal interactions, but to address the social and systemic racism in our culture that denies them dignity and respect. This means we have a calling not just to love the immigrants and refugees who make their way to our church and community, but to address the barriers these brothers and sisters face in getting here. And this means there has to be another layer of response for us as Christians to the reemergence of White Supremacy, anti-Semitism, and downright meanness that we have seen over the past few years and that was a part of the violent riot in Washington, D.C. this week that took lives and desecrated the very heart of democracy.

Out of respect for our political differences in this church and the historic Baptist desire to remain non-partisan, I will try to refrain from making any broader comments here. But when you look at the crowd, clearly incited by the President, it included large numbers of people who bear great hostility toward persons of color, Jews and many others. There were shirts celebrating Auschwitz and saying 6 million Jews killed was not enough... It may not have been everyone, it is not everyone in one party, but it was and is a lot of people, they have been empowered by national leaders, and many of them or at least many who have strengthened this movement are evangelical Christians. How in the name of all that is holy can this be? And how can faithful followers of Jesus stand by and remain quiet?

In the waters of baptism, we are all equal. In the eyes of God, every life is sacred. We have a calling to do everything we can to make sure every life is valued and respected. That's what forgiven people do. That's what people who claim their true identity do.

Maybe we should be frightened by the water, but we should also be inspired. I can almost hear Delmar now, saying, "Come on in boys,

the water's fine!" And it is fine, in fact, better than fine. It is awesome and fearful, wonderful and transforming... thanks be to God!