



Sacred Ordinary Days: Waking and Washing Up

Matthew 3:17-17

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If you have ever felt like not-enough, this story is for you. But we'll come back to that.

We're beginning a new sermon series this week: Sacred Ordinary Days. After all of the hectic, holiness of the holidays, after the frantic activity of Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Years after all that has settled back into the regular routine, the regular routine can seem awfully ... ordinary. And when aren't in the midst of a "special" liturgical season, like Advent or Lent, we call it just that: ordinary time.

That term actually refers back to how we count Sundays. We number them. Ordinary time comes from "ordinal." It's a way of arranging a collection of things, a way of identifying one distinctly, but in relation to the others. It's not meant to imply any sort of evaluative measure of how special one Sunday is over another. Our human nature fights against that, though. "Ordinary Time" is the middle child of the liturgical year, at least if we let ourselves laugh at a few stereotypes for a moment.

Advent is the first-born. Advent always gets mentioned. It's a bit of an over-achiever, with packed pews, candles and wreaths, leading us into Christmas. There are rules to follow, and Advent dares not break them: when the bows are put on the wreaths, when to light the purple candles versus the pink candle, and when the hymns can turn into carols.

Lent is the youngest, the baby of the family. Always stirring up some sort of attention, with far fewer rules, slipping under the radar for a number of traditions, and ultimately writing its own rules, as Lent makes way for Easter, when

resurrection is afoot, and everything we thought we knew, like death and sorrow and sighing, is turned on its head and vanquished forever. You thought you knew what to expect? Lent and Easter will lull you into thinking that's true, but when you least expect it, everything changes.

Ordinary Time is the name given to all the Sundays in between. And anyone who's a middle child knows that sometimes, that's how you get described — you're not the oldest and you're not the youngest. Ordinary Time is when it's not Advent or Christmas or Lent or Easter. It's all the Sundays that carry us from one to the other. But middle children, do not despair, do not be afraid — for ordinary time carries with it a holiness, a sacredness, all its own.

Ordinary time might also be the language we use to describe the make up of our average, everyday lives. Waking up. Washing our faces. Walking to work, or school, or the store. Greeting one another. Working, 9-5, or longer. Chasing kids. Making dinner. Doing the laundry. Picking out clothes for the next day. Here is what I hope we will discover together over the next several weeks — just as our liturgical ordinary time is infused with more goodness and grace than we might realize, so too are the ordinary moments of our daily routine.

In other words, there is nowhere, not one part of our lives, where God is not.

"The word became flesh," John's gospel tells us, "and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth." That is what incarnation means. It sounds untheological. Unsophisticated. Undignified. But according to our faith, it is the way things are.

Presbyterian pastor and poet Frederick Buechner puts it this way: "All religions and philosophies that deny the reality or the significance of the material, the fleshy, the earthbound, [the ordinary,] are themselves denied. Moses at the burning bush was told to take off his shoes because the ground on which he stood was holy ground, and incarnation means that all ground is holy ground because God not only made it but walked on it, ate and slept and worked and died on it. One of the blunders religious people are particularly fond of making," Buechner says, "is the attempt to be more spiritual than God."

In other words, trying to separate out the spiritual from the secular, the extraordinary from the ordinary, is not only to labor in vain, it is to labor in tremendous misunderstanding.

And perhaps there is no better place to be reminded of this than the story of Jesus' baptism. Up until now in Matthew's gospel, others have been the stars of the show. Mary and Joseph. The Magi. Herod. John the Baptist. The way Matthew tells it, Jesus himself has done absolutely nothing special, nothing even worth recording, other than being born, before his baptism. And yet, when he comes up from that water, "suddenly the heavens were opened" and "a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.'"

Except ... He hasn't healed anyone yet. He hasn't resisted Satan in the wilderness. He hasn't walked on water. He hasn't even restocked the bar at a wedding celebration. All of that will come later. All he's done, as best as we can tell, is go about the daily business of everyday life. And for this, he is beloved? By this, God is well pleased?

In a word: yes. And the same is true for us.

In our tradition, baptism is grace. It is all grace. We are counted as God's children before we have anything to show for ourselves. Baptism is available to us before we know it, before we doubt it, before we confess it, before we can

sing it, certainly before we can understand it. Before any of that, we are beloved by God.

Grace always comes first. If you have ever like you weren't enough, grace tells you differently. Grace means that you are always enough.

I suspect, as you came into this space today, that you saw our baptismal font. I say that in part because of its size (it is rather enormous, as Presbyterian fonts go) and in part because of its location. The truth is, no matter what happens up here, you can't see any of it without also seeing the font.

We see everything through the font. We can see nothing without the font. And that is how God sees us. When God sees us, before he sees anything specific, he sees "my beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

My friend Sarah grew up in a preacher's home, going to church twice every Sunday and a few more times during the week, as well. But, she is quick to say, it was not all that time in the sanctuary where she learned what her baptism meant. Her mother, who, for the record, was not the one who earned a living by preaching, when she would wake Sarah up every day, would say, "Get up. Go wash your face. And remember your baptism." And when she would send her family to get ready for dinner each evening, she would say, "Go. Go wash your hands. And remember your baptism." Any time the activity included water, no matter how mundane, the instruction still came: "Remember your baptism."

Sarah says, "It probably sounds silly, but in middle school, when I felt invisible or, worse, utterly inept, I would find a water fountain in the hallway, and I would watch the water burst up in the air and arc back down again, and I would hear those words, "Remember your baptism." And just in case that doesn't sound silly enough, I'll tell you right now — I do it still today."

Sarah may think it sounds silly. I think it sounds sacred.

I know that a number of you feel overwhelmed by the world these days. It is literally and figuratively on fire. "I don't know what to do. I don't even know what to think, or how to pray," is a common refrain as of late.

"Remember your baptism" is not bad guidance in these days. Because remember what Jesus said when he was baptized? "It is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness."

Traditional scholarship has long asserted that Jesus' baptism signals his humility in submitting both to God's call over his life and to John's authority in the community. Scholarship has also long asserted that John's activities at the Jordan imply a vote of no-confidence in the Jerusalem authorities. You see, before John spoke of and offered repentance in the river, such things were only available in the Temple. Under the eye of the authorities, under the right circumstances. John talking of repentance outside of the Temple, and Jesus meeting him there and taking part in all that was going on, Jesus walking into the water and saying, "Let it be so," they were declaring, both of them, together, "God's redemptive activity is found anywhere and everywhere."

Which means wherever God's redemptive activity is needed most, it will be found there.

Martin Luther, whenever he would feel overwhelmed by the powers of evil in the world, he would say to himself, "Martin! Remember that you are baptized!" And he would remember that to trust his baptism meant to trust that Jesus is Lord. And to trust that Jesus is Lord is to trust that nothing, and no one else, is.

Which is to trust that the waters of baptism will wash down not only over us, but over everything that is in flames around us.

And make no mistake: to trust in that promise, that the rushing waters of baptism will carry us all toward righteousness and toward God's promised day, is no passive activity.

It's like our font here — you can't see anything else that happens here without looking

through the font. Everything here is seen through the promise of our baptism.

What if we lived that way every day? What if we looked at one another that way? What if we remembered our baptism every time we encountered another person?

A friend of mine attends a church where every Sunday in the announcements, the pastor says, "By being here today, we do not presume that you are Christian. It simply is our hope and our commitment that we will be Christian to you." What if every time we remembered our baptism, we remembered that to be Christian is to show the love of Christ to everyone we meet, regardless of who they are, where they come from, what they struggle with, what tradition they claim, what color their skin.... What if it were always simply our hope and our commitment that we would be Christian to everyone we meet?

The font up here — it is full of water today. Not because we're baptizing anyone. But because Jesus invites us, always, to remember our baptism. So when you come forward for communion, or after the service ends, you are welcome to dip your hands in. Splash around a little, if you like. Touch the water for yourself, and be reminded that the promise of God is tangible.

And don't be shy. You don't have to be holy to touch it. It's just water. It's ordinary water, for ordinary people. The promise it holds is what is extraordinary. Which means that this water is both nothing special, and everything we need.