**Sermon Matthew 3:1-17 (Narrative Lectionary, NL121)**

I’ve been fortunate to witness many different kinds of baptism, maybe you have too. One of the first outdoor baptisms I ever saw was when I was serving at a Vineyard Church in St Andrews, Scotland. That church community practiced full immersion baptism, where people were plunged all the way under the water, and pulled up again, completely drenched. Many of those baptisms I witnessed during that time were in the chilly North Sea. On Castle Sands, this small sandy beach close to the ruins of St Andrews Cathedral. You have to descend 150 or so steps to reach the sand, that at high tide becomes invisible. Sometimes the pastor and person being baptized wore wetsuits, sometimes just shorts and T-shirts. And when the congregation gathers on the beach, passers-by would also stop and congregate around the top of the cliff. Leaning on the railing to watch this odd thing happen 10 or 15 feet out into the choppy water.

This is not the baptizing tradition that I grew up with, however. I was baptized as a baby, well before I can remember. And it was carried out in the Church of Ireland, which is in the Anglican tradition. One of a marble baptismal font, with godparents and parents making promises on my behalf. I wore a white gown (not a wetsuit). A gown that was passed down through the generations of my family on my mother’s side, my younger brothers also had to pleasure of wearing it. And the liturgy, the words used in the service, interchanged the word ‘baptism’ with ‘christening’ or a naming ceremony.

One of the most meaningful baptisms I’ve attended was in Nashville. Some of you may remember the torrential rains that swept across the region back in 2010. I had only been in the States 2 years by this time. And in 2 days at the beginning of May that year, Nashville received more than 13 inches of rainfall. This forced the Cumberland River, and several others, over their banks. Flooding and devastating areas throughout the city of Nashville and surrounding countries. Waters took lives, destroyed homes, businesses, and roadways. Churches and communities of volunteers were mobilized in the clean-up efforts afterward. The church I was serving at the time, spent weeks and weeks digging river silt out of people’s homes. As you drove around, everything under a 6-, 8- or 10- foot water line looked like it was in gray-brown sepia. Trees, houses, vehicles…everything.

My dear friend, Lesleigh, who is a Disciples of Christ pastor and her family were flooded out of their home that sat on the banks of the Harpeth River. During the storm, their young family of 4 had to be rescued by boat as the waters rushed into their downstairs. It was over a year before they were able to move back home again to that same point. Although their house had been lifted up a couple more feet, Lesleigh and her family’s relationship with the river had been shattered. What was once the stream that she had let her toddlers paddle and play in, shattered their entire lives. Forcing them to move into the basement of a Good Samaritan neighbor whose house on higher ground was spared. What was once a picturesque backyard that dipped down to the water, now seemed threatening and dangerous. But in May 2012, after they were settled back home again, Lesleigh’s oldest daughter, Anna Lauryn, wanted to get baptized by her mom in that very same river running behind their house. This was a bold choice, and Lesleigh felt it heavy with meaning. But her daughter was adamant. She wanted to step into the unpredictable waters of the Harpeth to take her baptismal vows.

Baptism is a reenactment of an ancient practice within Judeo-Christian communities. And it has remained significant throughout the millennia, not because there’s something special or magical in the water, but because there is a symbolic meaning the undergirds this action, this ritual that connects us to the forebearers of our faith, and yet still holds beauty and promise for today. Baptism is an ancient ritual that can ground us in the present and hold us accountable for our future.

It is rooted in the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. It has become a sign of not just new life, but of change, and of transformation. The images for what baptism means are many, but perhaps we can lean on two in particular this morning. One’s that I hope and pray help you to not only reflect on the year that has just passed, but to ground you in the present and provide hope for the future. They are love and liberation. Love and liberation, or more precisely loving community, and liberating action.

At its core, I believe, baptism makes visible our Creator’s hope that we might be connected with one another in loving community. Baptism is not just about the individual, it is about standing amongst those who know us, support us, correct and challenge us, guide us and love us. I knew this to be true to the core of my being, as I stood amongst those who had helped rebuild Lesleigh’s home, as she pulled her daughter back up through the flowing waters of the river. None of us are meant to walk through life alone. We are all worthy of love. We are all healthier in relationship with others. You are a beloved child of God. Those words from the heavens as the Spirit of God descended on Jesus like a dove echo again and again through the practice and sacrament of baptism. You are loved.

This ritual made ‘loving community’ visible again to Anna Lauryn, as a young 12 year old. She could see the support that she had all around her, especially through scary and frustrating times, but also through the joys and celebrations of life.

Baptism is - by necessity - a public and communal action. We see this in the ministry of John the Baptizer, and in Jesus’ decision to be publicly baptized in the Jordan River. This is way most pastors really hesitate to conduct baptisms in private settings. Baptism and the vows made there, only really make sense as we make them with other people in mind.

The promises made, either by us or by beloved community on our behalf, have virtually remained unchanged since the earliest days of the church, and are commitments that are practically impossible to keep by ourselves. They pre-suppose loving community.

Baptism is about loving community, and it is also about liberation, or liberating action. It is about declaring something true in the present, but also about looking ahead to the future, with hope and with purpose. For my friend, the baptism of her daughter was so clearly a liberating experience. A way of returning to a site and source of great pain and upheaval and to declare that “through it all, there is beauty and healing and life again.” The destruction and disruption didn’t have the final say. The good could come from bad. That fear was not permanent, that hope was possible.

Making visible the gifts of loving community and of liberating action, for me encompass what Jesus was doing being baptized by John. Baptism was a shared and open practice of putting to death old prejudices, old perspectives, old limiting thoughts and actions and rising through the waters again to a new a way of being. John was preaching about the power of baptism to bring different humans into community with one another under the radical and provocative notion that they could all be loved, equally, by the same God. Baptism was about freeing people from the idea that some are worthy of God’s love, and some are not. And then committing oneself each day to hold the institutions and powers of our day to ALSO uphold the worth and dignity of others. This the liberating action that baptism ignites. This is the liberating action that we see Jesus committing himself to in his ministry where he demonstrates the values, the behaviors, and attitudes of liberation. A life that embodied the liberative promise of God, a liberation that threatens all established religious and political authorities because of its radical notion that all are worthy to be love and liberated.

Dear friends, you are loved, and you are liberated. Jesus’ baptism declares you so. And you can participate in the liberation of others as well. Jesus’ life and ministry demonstrate how. As you come forward to touch the waters of baptism, whether you’ve been baptized or not, remember or not, THERE IS MEANING FOR YOU HERE TODAY.

All are welcome to come forward and touch the waters of baptism. And as you do: Say to yourself, “I am LOVED by God.” Then as you return to your seat, ask yourself “How can I be a force for LIBERATION this year?”

So, after the singing bowl rings, I invite you to come forward and touch these waters. May they be for you signs of LOVE and LIBERATION.