

Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

Mystic, Connecticut

Sermon from January 13, 2007

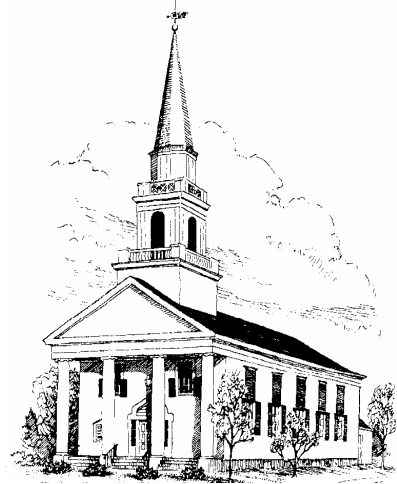
Rev. Barbara J. Libby

“Baptized in the Spirit”

Scriptures:

Isaiah 42:1-9

Matthew 3:13-17



Once again, this week, we hear prophetic words and poetic phrases about the Messiah to come. Isaiah speaks beautifully of what an unusual servant the Messiah will be for us.

“The prophet reminds that God is faithful to God's promises, and that how we live and order our world matters to God. It matters so much to God that God will send one who will ‘fix’ the mess we've made, transforming it into a time of beauty and grace, healing and justice. This transforming servant, the chosen one whom God upholds and in whom God's soul delights, has the very spirit of God within him. The same themes consistently appear in Isaiah and Matthew: righteousness experienced as compassionate justice and care for the poor and marginalized, humility and faithfulness that always point to God as the one who is at work in this transformation, and the hope – better, the promise – of new things that will dazzle us and rattle the foundations of our safe little worlds.” (Writer for UCC Samuel website)

And then, as we leave behind these prophetic words of Isaiah, we make a rapid move ahead in time. We move rapidly through the centuries and then even more years out from all the recent weeks of focus on, and hearing again, the details of Jesus' birth. Today we move well beyond the story of shepherds coming to a manger to see a new born baby. We move well beyond the story of astrologers bringing gifts to a child following a star. We move well beyond any stories of Jesus as a young child or even as a teenager and today we hear about the very beginning of Jesus' ministry.

Jesus emerges in today's readings as an adult, an adult of faith. Jesus appears from Galilee at the Jordan River to meet his cousin, John the Baptizer. Note that this event takes place at the Jordan River – the place where Moses interpreted the Torah, the place where the wandering Israelites entered the promised land, and the same river where Elisha received Elijah's spirit.

Today we have a mature man emerge from Galilee after what we assume are years of work as a carpenter and also years as a faithful Jew with all that tradition and faith in God. Today we hear and see what happens at Jesus' baptism—an occasion when God reveals something

Godself in his son and in his own words. Except for a few words in a story of the 12-year old Jesus at Jerusalem as a teenager, today we hear Jesus' very first words, as God's son, asking his cousin John to baptize him and to begin a new story, a story that will start what we call the Christian faith.

This was not Jesus and John's first encounter. After all, their mothers were friends and had spent considerable time together before either of them was born. John and Jesus had known each other from childhood. John's ministry had begun long before Jesus' ministry, however, and John was now both a renowned preacher and a radical teacher of his day. John's ministry had gotten a lot of attention. This strangely dressed and desert man (living on the earth of the desert) had drawn many. John was known for his baptism of repentance in the Jordan River. John had declared himself a forerunner for the Messiah!

So Jesus comes to the Jordan River, a river rich with history for people of faith. Jesus steps forward and asks John to baptize him. Oddly enough, this baptismal scene turns out to be a scene full of uncertainty and struggle. John objects to Jesus' request. The story doesn't give us much detail about the conversation that ensued between Jesus and John. We don't know exactly why John hesitates to baptize Jesus and tells Jesus that Jesus is the one who ought to be baptizing him! Yet Jesus insists.

Then John does baptize Jesus. We don't know the words John used. We surmise from the text that John immerses Jesus completely in the water of the Jordan River and that, as soon as Jesus "came up out of the baptismal water", God made God's presence known to all. The skies opened; God's spirit, like a descending dove, comes down and lands on Jesus. Then God speaks and says, "This is my Son, chosen and marked by my love, delight of my life."

Here is one of those luminous moments we talk about. Here is a mysterious moment! God is present in the midst of this moment. God participates in the baptism of Jesus. And we are reminded that, at each and every baptism, it is God and God's spirit that us present in the sacrament. God always participates. God comes into each life at the moment of baptism. We who are baptized, regardless of which church or which denomination, are each baptized with the power and presence of God with us.

This day is a day to remember our baptism. Baptism is "rooted in the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, in his death and in his resurrection," the technical theological words tell us. Baptism "is incorporation into Christ, who is the crucified and risen Lord; it is entry into the new covenant between God and God's people." To remember our baptism is an opportunity for us to each recapture our lost enthusiasm for our faith. To remember our baptism means to remember who and whose we are.

Early in my ordained ministry, I served an American Baptist church in Wallingford, CT. That church, like this one, had gone through a terrible experience of finding out that their much beloved senior pastor had miscondacted himself and that pastor, like Thomas, had been removed from the pulpit and from ministry for his misconduct. The congregation was still reeling from the blow of having lost a favorite pastor. We were struggling together with how to reconcile the consequence of the pastor's actions and the power of God's forgiveness.

I was asked to conduct a baptism class—much like a confirmation class in our tradition—except that each of the participants, both youth and adult, decided for themselves that they wanted to be baptized. After months of preparation we came to the weekend of the baptism, a bitter cold time deep in a January winter. The deacons filled the baptismal pool that lies at the front of the sanctuary. They filled it with hot steamy water on Saturday night and we prayed that, by cranking up the furnace and keeping the sanctuary warm through the night, perhaps the water would be at least tepid by Sunday morning worship time.

I went down the set of stairs into the pool and took up my position to receive each person as they descended the stairs into the tepid pool waters. We were all dressed in white robes. I asked each candidate a set of questions and, after each candidate had testified that they were a believer and that they wanted new life in Jesus Christ, I tilted each person back into the pool until they were completely submerged in the water briefly. I then brought each person back up to standing and offered a prayer.

I had never personally participated in any baptisms by immersion before. The whole thing was filled with awe and mystery in a way that moves me still today. One of the things that I remember most vividly was that, as each candidate moved out of the pool, they left by another set of stairs. All of the language of traditional baptisms across all of the Christian church suddenly became clear for me. The imagery in the language we use is that, once baptized, our lives are changed! After baptism we are no longer the same person. We are each changed by the baptism. I liked the visceral experience that each of these newly baptized persons had that day of coming out of the water by a different route.

In baptism God and God's spirit comes directly into our lives, in the same way that it did for Jesus that day in the Jordan River. The language we use at baptism says we die to our previous lives and that the waters of baptism cleanse us and help us start a new life, a life in service to Jesus Christ.

Baptism serves as entry way into the church of Christ and as a moment of rebirth by the Holy Spirit. By baptism we are each welcomed into service to God in Christ's name. In baptism each of us is named a beloved child of God. Let me say that again: we are each of us a beloved child of God. Through baptism we invite God's spirit to be at work in each of us. God's spirit does move through each of us. God does speak to each of us. God does call to each of us. If we listen we can hear God calling us to new life and newness of life.

As we remember our baptism, let's consider what former things have passed away in our lives and what other things in our life may need to go as well. As we remember our baptism, let's consider what new words of hope need to be spoken here at Mystic Congregational Church. As we remember our baptism, let's consider what is the transformation that needs to happen here.

This day let us remember our baptism. Amen.

