

“Homecoming”

OT: Jeremiah 31:7-14

NT: John 1:10-18

Water. There is something in the water.

Looking at this text from a slightly different vantage point, although still within the larger umbrella of homecoming, we could conceptualize it in sequence with other passages incorporating water imagery.

In the New Testament, water appears in several stories. Jesus is baptized in the River Jordan. Jesus turns water into wine. Jesus meets the disciples on the shore. The great catch is revealed as Jesus tells the fisherman to cast their nets on the other side of their boat. Jesus preaches from a boat in the water. Jesus calms the storm in the sea. Jesus walks on water.

In the Old Testament, and in direct correlation with the Jeremiah text, water also appears.

Psalm 23: He leads me beside still waters

Psalm 137: By the rivers of Babylon- there we sat down and there we wept

Jeremiah 31:9: by brooks of water, in a straight path in which they shall not stumble.

Walter Brueggemann has suggested that the Psalms can be thought of as leading the reader through three psychological stages: orientation (to the worship of God), disorientation (a loss of direction, or a sense of the failure of the promises), and reorientation.

The flow of these three texts above have a similar outpouring. God does not punish forever, nor has Israel abandoned its faith in its God because of its awful historical experiences. The proclamation here in Jeremiah 31 delivers the good news of God’s healing: “I will deliver them ... by brooks of water, in a straight path in which they shall not stumble.”

In addition to the reference of the brook in verse 9, verse 12 recalls the language of a watered garden. With this language comes possibility. No gardener wants to work in a dry garden. A watered garden is ideal. Now, the mere mention of a watered garden in this season poses a challenge to those of us who only feel the cold clutch of winter. For Israel however, and maybe we do as well, we look forward to a time and a place, a garden of Eden or the Promised Land, where softer soils burst with flowers and fruits. With water we remember the power of creation and possibility and place our faith and hope on the experience of being home as new and improved creations. The imagery of the watered garden reveals something of God’s

nature and of Israel's new life with God. The watered garden suggests God's intention to tend Israel; the Creator's rains will fall gently upon their fields. The watered garden of Israel's future foretells both God's nurture and fortification of the people.

When we encounter texts or images of water, we are to be reminded of a particular practice and celebration: baptism. Baptism is one of our sacraments in the church: a sign and seal of God's claim and grace and love poured over us to wash us clean of our sins and shortcomings and make us a new creation in Christ. The old life has gone, and a new life has begun. By God, through Jesus Christ, we are forgiven and can be at peace. Glory be to God.

The term "Baptism" comes from the Greek word "Baptismo" which means to immerse or dunk. Now, I know we "sprinkle" but I at least do three handfuls and get the head wet to the point water drips down the face. More important than the amount of water though is the symbolism of the act. "Baptismo" is a word which was used to describe sinking ships- as they sank water would fill the inside of the ship- and to describe a garment being immersed into dye- the dye penetrates every fiber of the fabric.

Maybe you recall Jesus' own baptism. As John the Baptist lowered Jesus into the River Jordan, the scriptures tell us that the sky opened and the Spirit of God in the form of a dove descended out of the heavens. One author once referred to this revelation as God on the loose. That is an awesome thought to apply to baptism. When we celebrate baptism, whether it is our own or we are reaffirming our baptismal covenant while someone else is being baptized, we are celebrating God on the loose in our life and in the world around us.

Something to think about: When you were baptized, what did you experience? Do you remember? Maybe you were baptized as an infant. If so, did you feel anything at confirmation when you made your public profession of faith? When you have witnessed a baptism, have you ever looked up to see whether the sky opened, and a dove descended?

There is a story of a mom telling of her son's baptism. Recently my 7-year-old son was baptized at nearby Lake Tahoe. With tears streaming down my face, I watched as he came out of the water, then excitedly asked if he felt any different. "Yeah, Mom, I do," he replied. "Now I have water up my nose!"

What happens then when we are baptized? Is it magic? Is it power? What is it?

To start, the water is just a sign and seal, a symbol of what is really taking place. The power is not in the water. The power is in the Holy Spirit transforming us, filling us up, penetrating every fiber of our being. As the water pours over us, it is not some magic trick that takes place. The water is not some magical potion. We do believe that

something major happens, but it is only because of our faith in the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. Don't get me wrong, to be baptized is to be changed, but it is not always a change immediately witnessed or felt. Baptism is the start of our journey home with God. It is like the waterfall that then fills the stream and flows for miles and miles, years and years.

Those miles and miles and years and years are our life in relationship with God and our brothers and sisters in Christ. The living water is flowing. At times, it might feel like we are experiencing rapids. At times, it might feel like we are experiencing deep pools. At times, it might feel like we are experiencing being stagnant and stuck behind a rock or pile of leaves. At times, it might feel like we are floating along smoothly with the warm sun and no bugs.

How many of you just put yourself on the river somewhere? Maybe you put yourself at the beach or lake or poolside?

Just about every early civilization built itself on land with close access or proximity to what? Water. Rivers, Oceans, Seas, Lakes, etc. Just like civilizations needed water to grow and nourish the crops to feed and provide for the people, so too do we, as Christians, need the living water in our lives.

Why? Why do we need water? Beyond the essential scientific fact that our bodies and world are made up mostly of water, we need the symbolism of water in our lives through our faith because it reminds us of God's claim and grace and love for us. We need the symbolism of water in our lives through our faith because deep within the sacrament of baptism is another spiritual practice known as repentance.

Repentance is not a word we often use in our daily lives, even though it is a practice worth engaging daily (at least). Another word for repentance we can consider is reorientation.

Ken Davis shares: My golf ball had become a water-seeking missile, so I engaged the services of a golf pro to help me keep the ball in the fairway. The first ball I hit arched into a lake to the right of the fairway. "You are too stiff," the pro said. "Wiggle before you swing. It will relax you." So I wiggled and hit a beautifully soaring shot right into the lake. I got another ball, did the wiggle thing and again the ball went into the lake. I reasoned, surely if I aim at the nice homes on the side of the fairway opposite the lake, the ball will land in the fairway. I teed up, did the little wiggle, and hit the ball as hard as I could. It hit the inside of my club, then the inside of my heel, and scooted across the grass into the lake. He reflects: someone defined insanity as continuing to do that same thing over and over expecting a different result. I live out that definition every time I

step on the golf course. He then states: the bible suggests a cure for this kind of insanity; it's called repentance. It means to change direction. God's people sometimes need a dose of sanity. "If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear them in heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land." (2 Chronicles 7:14)

In a recent article by Tony Dungy and Benjamin Watson, who are both associated with the National Football League in a big way, they acknowledge the act of repentance to be a practice of great benefit for us if we are our finding our faith strained by the pandemic. At the core, I believe they are reminding us that worshiping God is at the top of the priority list by suggesting practices like reading the entire bible, praying, repenting, going to church as you are able, and giving. Specific to repenting here is what they said: "Repentance is a word American culture have lost sight of. It means to turn away from the direction one has been headed. Repentance applies not only to salvation but to everyday life. If 2020 has exposed worry, jealousy, racism, pride, greed or anger in our hearts, we must repent." The title of the article is *A Call for Christian Revival in 2021* but I could suggest the title *A Call for Christian Homecoming* could also work. Thank you, Dave Tate, for passing that article along to me.

It is true. We all must repent. Even if we believe God already knows what we have done, it is important for us to turn back to God and recognize it ourselves. We all need to repent. As significant as we need water to live, so to do we need to repent to live faithfully and fully. Here is the thing. We know when we fall short, right? And we believe in God's unconditional love for us, right? That God's love is there no matter what as a gift and not just something we earn when we have been morally successful?

God is powerful enough and strong enough and courageous enough and forgiving enough and gracious enough for all our shortcomings and we are not, so we must repent. We must repent so that we can return home to God; so that God can deliver us by brooks of water in a straight path.

John 1:16-17 states, "From his fullness (that is Christ's) we have all received grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." And in Acts 2:38 Peter said to the early church, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." We have faith that the gift of God's grace is what is poured over us and celebrated through water in our baptism. As the living water flows over us, so does God's grace flow over us. And as God's grace flows over us, the Holy Spirit fills, washes us clean, makes us new, and guides us home.

Live out our Baptismal Covenants- Reaffirmation of Baptism

## **Reaffirmation of the Baptismal Covenant-**

### **Opening words of Scripture: Kathleen**

Paul reminds us in Ephesians to “Lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

### **Profession of Faith and Renunciations: Peter**

Brothers and Sisters in Christ, our baptism is the sign and seal of our cleansing from sin, and of our being grafted into Christ. Through the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Christ, the power of sin was broken, and God’s kingdom entered our world. Through our baptism we were made citizens of God’s kingdom and freed from the bondage of sin. Let us celebrate that freedom and redemption through the renewal of the promises made at our baptism. I ask you, therefore, once again to reject sin, to profess your faith in Christ Jesus, and to confess the faith of the church, the faith in which we were baptized.

Trusting in the gracious mercy of God, do you turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world? I do.

Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Lord and Savior, trusting in his grace and love? I do.

Will you be Christ’s faithful disciple, obeying his Word and showing his love? I will, with God’s help.

### **Thanksgiving for Baptism:**

**(Peter: Water is poured visibly and audibly into the font.)**

**Kathleen-** Let us pray: Eternal and gracious God, we give you thanks. In countless ways you have revealed yourself in ages past and have blessed us with signs of your grace. We praise you that through the waters of the sea you led your people Israel out of bondage, into freedom in the land of your promise.

**Peter:** We praise you for sending Jesus your Son, who for us was baptized in the waters of the Jordan, and was anointed as the Christ by your Holy Spirit. Through the baptism of his death and resurrection you set us free from the bondage of sin and death and give us cleansing and rebirth.

**Kathleen:** We praise you for your Holy Spirit, who teaches us and leads us into all truth, filling us with a variety of gifts, that we might proclaim the gospel to all nations and serve you as a royal priesthood. We rejoice that you claimed us in our baptism, and that by your grace we are born anew. By your Holy Spirit renew us, that we may be empowered to do your will and continue forever in the risen life of Christ, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be all glory and honor, now and forever. Amen.

### **Remembering your Baptismal Covenant: Peter**

Brothers and Sisters in Christ, remember your baptism and be thankful. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, let all God’s children say... Amen.