

January 12, 2020

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Reading: Matthew 3:13-17, The Baptism of Jesus

The Message: Water Water Everywhere

Baptisms are joyful events for families. And I imagine that there might have been a little joy in Jesus' baptism. Going down into the water and coming up, refreshed. There was joy in the Spirit of God in the Jesus. And it may be there was joy in the heart of John the Baptist who saw in Jesus the fulfilment of his prophecies.

There is joy in the water.

We have a cousin in Braidwood, Australia, which has been surrounded by fire for weeks. They had rain this week and his children literally danced in the rain. Sadly, it wasn't enough to extinguish all the fires on the east coast, and I imagine all of us wish we could send ours to them.

No matter what Gospel you read, Jesus begins his ministry with water.

Baptism and then a wedding -- a wedding gone wrong. And out of a bad situation -- running out of wine, Jesus creates wonderful wine from water.

It's an odd story as Jesus stories go.

Many years ago I studied this passage in Oxford in a course on early Christian art; it was taught by an Anglican nun.

In one lecture, she told us how she discovered a Christian wall painting that showed a vine without any grapes on it. "Why." she asked herself, "didn't it have grapes on it?"

First she thought that some early Christian painter must have borrowed an idea from Roman art, but when she researched it, she discovered that there wasn't one other representation of a vine without grapes in all of Greek and Roman art. She knew that it couldn't be a mistake, because Mediterranean people know what vines look like.

So then she hit on the idea of following up clues in early Christian literature, and after a long while she came across a passage of an early Christian writer called Clement of Alexandria, who said that to know Jesus Christ was like inebriation without alcohol – being drunk without alcohol.

So the light went on. She realized that this mysterious vine in the wall painting was a representation of Jesus, who said, "I am the vine." This painter was saying that when we attach ourselves to this vine, it's like being inebriated without the hangover afterwards.

In our reading today, we hear how Jesus went to a wedding and turned water into wine, and the gospel-writer says that this sign was so powerful that his disciples believed in him. They discovered the spiritual inebriation of being in God's presence.

This action of turning water to wine causes the disciples to believe in him -- to want to continue to follow him, to get to know him better.

They discover this Jesus, who is inebriation without alcohol. To follow this man of water turned to wine is to be really happy in our relationships, really happy in the world, without any of the bad side effects. -- no anger, regret, recriminations.

That's rare.

Going backwards in the story, let's think about where the wine came from: water.

The gospel says that the water came from six huge stone jars, each holding about twenty gallons. The water was used for the Jewish rites of purification. The idea is that when you went to worship you dabbed some water on yourself as a sign that you wanted to be spiritually clean before you approached God. The rabbis said that a cup of water could purify a hundred people. How much could 120 gallons purify? Probably all of Israel!

The purification water turned into wine points to Jesus as the purifier of the world.

The story of the wedding at Cana reminds us that being a Christian is really supposed to be good, pure fun, as at wedding feasts with friends and good wine, and that all of this is a sign of our relationship with Christ, a sign of our inebriation without alcohol in Christ, which makes life really clean and pure and full of meaning.

Jesus is among us to provide glorious, brimming life. Waters of baptism, purifying us.