

During the January term of 1994, my seminary class was sent to different areas of the country to do a few weeks of field work in unusual places. I was sent to the Diocese of Northern Michigan, which is comprised of Michigan's upper peninsula. That's a pretty cold place to be in January. The snow on the ground was up to my waist in some places.

The Bishop at that time was Tom Ray. He said being Bishop of Northern Michigan gave him the extraordinary ability to walk on water. That is, he said, he could walk on water during the winter.

And that was true. I had the opportunity not only to walk on water, but I also got to take a snowmobile out onto the frozen surface of Lake Michigan. Growing up most of my life around Odessa, and Amarillo, and Lubbock, I had never even been on a snowmobile before, let alone on the frozen surface of one of the Great Lakes. It was quite the experience. I followed fairly closely behind a Michigan native who seemed to know what he was doing. But every time we hit a slushy spot, it was a reminder that there were only a few inches of ice between me and a really cold and dangerous bath.

We 21st century high-tech people forget what our ancestors knew. Our ancestors knew about the power of water. They feared and respected water. They didn't take it for granted.

They also knew about the power of fire. They knew fire demanded respect as well.

Before modern chemistry was developed, water and fire, along with earth and air, were thought to be the four primal elements that made up the entire universe. Our ancestors knew about the power of water and fire.

Our Psalm this morning was Psalm 29. Psalm 29 uses images of water and fire to describe God's power and majesty:

"The voice of the Lord is upon the waters;
the God of glory thunders;
the Lord is upon the mighty waters.
The voice of the Lord is a powerful voice; *
the voice of the Lord is a voice of splendor...

The voice of the Lord splits the flames of fire;
the voice of the Lord shakes the wilderness...
The voice of the Lord makes the oak trees writhe
and strips the forests bare."

When the psalmist wrote these words, these images of God's power, the most poetic way he could find to express God's power, was to compare it to water and fire and earthquake. Our ancestors knew the raw power of nature.

With our twenty-first century technology, we forget the primal power of things like fire and water; power to help, and power to harm. While we may have water neatly contained in

pipes and in tanks, waiting for us to turn the tap to control it, it only takes a frozen pipe or a flood or a drowning to remind us of water's power.

And while the fire in our fireplaces or barbecue grills or candle flames may seem quite tame, it only takes a grass fire or having someone's house burn down to remind us of fire's power. Dealing with water and fire is risky. Our mastery over the powers of nature is not as strong as we'd like to think it is.

Like water and fire, baptism is risky. It's easy to forget this. We have the water of baptism safely and neatly contained in cruets and fonts. We have the fire of God, the light of Christ safely confined to the tops of our candles. Nevertheless, baptism is risky business.

It's easy to miss the raw power of baptism. We often baptize babies in the Episcopal Church. And we forget that baptism is risky business.

So today, as we remember Jesus' baptism, I wanted us to reflect on our own baptisms. We won't be distracted today by actually doing baptisms. We have a couple rounds of baptisms scheduled in the next six weeks. But we don't have any today. So today won't have our attention diverted by looking at a sweet child or proud parents. Instead, we can reflect for a moment on what our own baptisms mean.

Consider the promises we make in baptism:

We promise to turn from the powers of sin and evil and the world...
We promise to accept Jesus Christ as Savior...
We promise to follow and obey Jesus Christ as Lord...
We promise with God's help, to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves...

We promise to strive for justice and peace among all people, promising to respect the dignity of every human being

Promising all these things is risky. These promises are not easy to keep. These promises often seem silly when viewed in terms of the world's wisdom. In a culture which praises rugged individualism, the promise to serve others is counter cultural. Promising to love our neighbors as ourselves is strange by the world's standards. By making these promises, we commit ourselves to a life of being different from the rest of the world. We commit ourselves to a pilgrimage that often requires forsaking what is comfortable and stepping out in faith along life's stormy pathways.

In our Gospel lesson this morning, John the Baptist is baptizing the Jewish people for the forgiveness of their sins. John's baptism is a baptism of repentance. Christian baptism is also a baptism of repentance.

But Christian baptism is also much more than just a baptism of repentance. Christian baptism is a sign of unity. Christian baptism is a sign of adoption. Christian baptism is the way that we are made part of Christ's body, the Church.

There is not one baptism for the Episcopal Church, and one for the Church of Christ, and one for the Baptists, and one for the Catholics. There is one baptism into the one body of our one Lord Jesus Christ.

The ancient African bishop, St. Augustine, has a wonderful image of what it means to be a part of the body of Christ. Augustine speaks of individual grains of wheat which are put together to make bread. Augustine says that you take grains of wheat. You mix them with water. You heat them by fire. And through these actions individual grains of wheat are transformed into one loaf of bread.

In the same way, Augustine says, we as individuals are joined together. We are wetted by the water of baptism. We are heated with the fire of the Holy Spirit. And we become one body. As Ephesians says, "There is one Body and one Spirit, there is one hope in God's call to us; one Lord, one Faith, one Baptism; one God and Father of all."¹

On this Sunday every year we celebrate the Baptism of Our Lord by John the Baptist in the Jordan River.

But we also celebrate our sharing of Jesus Christ's saving work through the sacrament of baptism.

He calls us to be part of his body, to be his hands and feet, doing his work in the world around us.

It's not an easy task. Baptism is risky business.

The poet and essayist Annie Dillard wrote about the risks of following God. She says,

"On the whole, I do not find Christians... sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke...? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return."²

God may draw us out to where we can never return...

Jesus came out of the baptismal waters of the Jordan, and there was no going back. His life and his ministry would never be the same from that point on.

¹ Eph 4:4-6

² Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters*

We also have come through the waters of baptism. And if we take that seriously, our lives will never be the same either. We can't go back. We must follow God where he leads.

Yes, he is the God whose voice splits the flames of fire, who makes the oak trees writhe. But he is also the God who says, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom he is well pleased."

And through the waters of baptism, he promises that we can share that same status. Through baptism, we have become his beloved daughters and sons.

But God calls his children to a high standard. He calls us to live life without a worldly safety net. He calls us to risk loving our neighbors as ourselves. He calls us to risk loving him with all of our heart and mind and strength.

The waters of baptism are dangerous waters.

But they are also waters which give us the greatest gift God gives us, the right to call him our Father.

The voice of the Lord is upon the waters. It is a voice of power. It is a voice of love. "You are my beloved. With you I am well pleased."

It is a risky thing to follow his voice. But it is also an awesome thing to follow his voice.

If you're looking for a New Year's resolution, maybe that's the best one possible. Listen for God's powerful, yet loving voice. And take the risk of following him.