

“Out of What Water?” (Luke 3: 15-17, 21-22)
January 9, 2022: Acton Congregational Church
Rev. Emma Brewer-Wallin

When I was a kid, our church had a tradition around the waters of Baptism. Every summer, as families prepared to go on vacation or spend time by a favorite stream, lake, or beach, our pastor invited us to bring a little of that water back with us. The church office had a shelf dedicated to this medley of plastic bottles, with places and dates written in sharpie or taped over caps. When someone came forward to be baptized, our pastor reminded us that these waters of baptism were the waters of God’s creation – that the waters of baptism were the same waters that cooled us off on a hot day and provided astounding beauty and quenched our thirst. And as the person or family stood beside the font, about to be baptized, the congregation would say, *This is the water of baptism. Out of this water we rise with new life, forgiven of sin, and one in Christ, members of Christ’s body.*

I love this tradition of collecting a little bit of water from the places we go, and having those many sources of water added into the mix at the font. But I was baptized as an infant, before my family started attending the church with that tradition – which means that the waters of my baptism probably came straight from the Southern California tap. When we ask *out of what waters do we rise?* there are two answers, and both are correct. One speaks of the literal and physical: where did the water come from? How did it come to be in the place where you were baptized? The water sprinkled on my head when I was a baby did not, of course, originate in the church’s plumbing – it was transported there by an aqueduct that moves water across the southern part of California. The Colorado River’s flow begins in the Rocky Mountains, 1000 miles from where I was baptized. Asking *out of what waters* we emerge in baptism is asking for a story about where we are from – it’s asking for a story about how the people there live.

The story of Southern California, where I was born and both my parents were raised, is a story in part, about a desire to shape the landscape according to human will. The huge influx of white settlers in

the 19th and early 20th century brought a demand for water greater than what the territory known as California could provide. This is not to say that the region is unable to support human life: indigenous nations have lived there, and in other arid climates, for millennia. But the migrating white people and the communities they built wanted a land that would conform to their wildest dreams, rather than a community that adapted to the realities of the land around them. Centuries later, it is hard for me to imagine what alternatives could have looked like. Imagining alternatives requires that I understand the decision-points that shaped our current reality, such as the federal government's incentives for white people to move west and policies that enabled white families like mine to buy homes and pass that wealth along to their children. Imagining something different requires that I be honest about our current reality, including that California is in a perpetual state of drought, punctuated with climate-change induced seasons of both flooding and fire.

Asking *out of what waters* we emerge can help us uncover a literal, physical story about the places we come from. I wonder where your minds have traveled these past few moments, and I hope you'll take this as conversation starter with the various generations of your families. Understanding the decisions that led us to where we are now – both as individual families and as a society - are an important component of imagining a future without the devastating havoc of climate change. But when we ask *out of what waters* we rise with new life, there is also a spiritual answer: we rise – all of us who have been baptized – out of the waters of Christ's baptism.

The Sunday following Epiphany is traditionally celebrated as Baptism of Jesus Sunday, where we remember Jesus's baptism as told in this scripture passage. I have often wondered why Jesus was baptized – I have wondered about this both historically, as in, what did it mean to a Palestinian Jew 2000 years ago, and I have wondered about this theologically, as in, what does it mean for Jesus – God incarnate – to be baptized? And what does it mean for baptism in the name of Jesus to continue to be the ritual that sets Christians apart? I wonder all of these things, but as I return to this passage this year,

three things emerge for me as I ask one more question about what this story means: what does baptism mean in a climate-changed world?

The first thing that stands out from this passage is the one that makes me most uncomfortable – the verse in the middle of today’s reading, “His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear the threshing floor and to gather the wheat in the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” Depending on the kind of Christianity you grew up with and what you think about God’s judgement and Christ’s salvation, this passage may be familiar, perhaps even comforting – or it may be familiar and deeply disturbing, or perhaps both unfamiliar and uncomfortable. Although I did not grow up hearing this verse, I associate it with the division between eternal salvation and eternal suffering. But if we are wondering what baptism means in a climate-changed world, then we are not only concerned with the eternal: we are also concerned with the earthly, with the here-and-now, with what will happen to people alive today, and to their children and grandchildren.

Jesus’s baptism is one of the moments we point to as the beginning of his ministry. And here, at the beginning of Jesus’s ministry, we hear that he comes with a winnowing fork in his hand – we hear that his tool as he sets out is one that makes it easier to separate that which gives life from that which is excess. The metaphor used here – imagery that would have been familiar to an agrarian culture, but likely few of us here today – is a process that separates the grain that we eat from the chaff, the dry protective exterior of the plant. Our modern associations of the biblical expression to separate wheat from the chaff has connotations of righteousness: that the grain has somehow done something right, while the chaff has done wrong. There is no moral judgement to this agricultural process. Chaff is simply not something humans can eat, so setting it aside is part of the life-sustaining process of feeding a human community.

In this climate-changed world, what does our baptism mean? In this climate-changed world, what does it mean to be baptized in the name of the one who carries a farmer’s tool, separating the

grain we can eat from the straw that we can't? It means that Jesus calls us to seek out life and all that sustains life. It means that Jesus calls us to set aside that which does not sustain us – even, and especially – when this separation is hard work.

The second part of this passage that stands out to me today is this: “when all the people had been baptized, and when Jesus *also* had been baptized and was praying” – it's that *also* that caught my attention. Because we tend to read this story as being about Jesus's baptism, I forgot that others were baptized that day too. That little *also* is a reminder that Jesus was part of a community – that he was just one of many who dedicated himself to God that day.

Asking out of what waters we arise is asking for a story about where we come from – and as with the stories of each of our baptisms, the story of Jesus's baptism tells us a little something about where he is from. Jesus comes from a community where he has others to encourage him on his journey: his cousin John proclaims the coming realm of God using scripture from the prophet Isaiah that both young men grew up hearing. Just before today's reading we learn that Jesus comes from a community where people want to do what's right, but have questions about what kind of impact they could have and what steps God is calling them to take. Jesus comes from a community where all who were baptized that day – and many more who would come later – discern and struggle together about what it means to faithfully love God and love our neighbors.

Our own promises of baptism are both individual and communal. While our baptisms are a testament to our individual journeys of faith, the promises each of us has made are the same, or nearly the same. When people, whether babies, children, or adults are baptized in our church, we not only witness their baptism, we also covenant to journey alongside them throughout their life of faith – and they promise the same to us. So when I ask what it means to be baptized in a climate-changed world, I am asking each of you as individuals – how is your individual journey of faith leading you to love God and love your neighbor in the time of climate change? And I am asking you as a community: how have

the promises you've made to each other prepared you for the next faithful step of Christian life in this climate-changed world?

One final piece of today's scripture reading: after Jesus and all the others have been baptized, the voice of the Holy Spirit descends like a dove, and says, "You are my beloved, with whom I am well pleased." Before Jesus or any of the others have done a thing to separate the wheat from the chaff – before they can choose that which gives life from rather than that which does not sustain us, the Holy Spirit proclaims that we cannot do the hard work of following God and loving our neighbor if we do not know that we are God's beloved. How might things change – how might *we* change – if we knew, *truly knew* that we are God's beloved? What might change if we could set aside all the things we do in hopes that we will be liked? Knowing that we are already God's beloved, what empty efforts might we let go of? What wanting could we set aside, knowing that we are already beloved in God's sight? Full of the truth of God's love for us, how might we share that love with others?

Asking *out of what waters* we emerge in baptism is asking for a story about where we are from – it's asking for a story about how the people there live. That story is one that is constantly being shaped. When a baby or young child is baptized in our churches, we make a lifetime of promises to that young person. Although we ourselves may not be present to carry out all of those promises, we make them with the faith that the Body of Christ will remain – that over generations there will continue to be people to walk alongside that person on their journey of faith. A generation or two from now, what is the story your young people will tell about the waters from which they emerge? What is the story they will tell about what it meant for them to be baptized into this community of faith in a climate-changed world?

This is the water of baptism. Out of this water we rise with new life, forgiven of sin, and one in Christ, members of Christ's body. Although baptism is a once-in-a-lifetime event, whenever we touch the sacred gift of water, we are reminded that we belong to God and that God calls us to care for one

another. Climate change already does and will continue to bring death – not only for the places we hold dear, but for people we love. But to be baptized is to rise and rise again into new life. As we remember our baptisms and our commitment to following Christ, we commit ourselves anew to a faithful Christian life in the time of climate change. We affirm that, even amidst this deadly turmoil, to follow Christ is to follow the way of life. May it be so, and amen.