

Matthew 3:13-17
“Step into the Water”

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I want to ask you to go somewhere with me this morning. Good preaching take us somewhere. It transports us—picks us up where we are and drops us back off. Maybe it drops us back off where we started, or maybe it takes us someplace all together new and different.

Really good preaching does this to us when we aren't paying any attention. We think we're here just to sit and listen through another Sunday morning when suddenly we hear something that jolts us, disarms us, causes us to realize we're not in Oz anymore, and we can't go home the same way we came.

If you're looking for that kind of preaching, I'd be glad to give you a referral. For us here this morning, I'm actually going to tell you where we're going, and then ask you to go there with me.

The place I want to go to is a place we all know. Some of us know this place because we've personally been there. Others of us know it only second-hand, through watching the news, reading the paper, scrolling Facebook. For some of us, this is a place we've been to recently, though we are no longer there, while others of us are there now. This is a place no one necessarily ever wants to be in, but to which we all would probably agree, is near impossible to avoid. The place I want to go to is terribly sad. In this place, the waters of grief and loss and loneliness overwhelm, and the pain of hardship comes often and stays long. In this place, it is difficult to know what you can do to help yourself, or to help others, because the need in this place is too big to take in all at once, and things that big leave us feeling confused, and paralyzed by fear.

A feeling of overwhelming loss, enduring pain, huge need, paralyzed by fear. Do you know where this place is? Have you been to this place before, even now?

Back in early December at our Service of Comfort and Joy we did something some would consider strange. We went to this place on purpose. Some of you were at that service. You'll remember, I told the story of Noah and his ark. Noah, we are told in the book of Genesis, was a righteous man. Not a self-righteous man, like so many we see today. He believed the world was getting better—let's call this bucket here Noah's world—he believed the world was getting better, not worse, and he lived accordingly. If he made any enemies, he didn't count them as such. He worked not at being powerful, but at being humble. His daily exercise was compassion. And he believed in rainbows. (*Place dozens of rainbow colored strands of fabric into the bucket*). Mind you, Noah had never seen a rainbow before, but that didn't stop him from believing in them. When it came to keeping faith, to believing in things he'd never seen before, Noah was said to be a fool.

Which is how it came to be that on the day God told Noah to build himself a big boat—even though Noah probably lived in the desert and would never sail the thing, and even though there wasn't a raincloud in the sky—Noah did. "I'm deeply sad about the way things have turned out in the world, Noah," God told him. "When I made everything, I declared it all good, but since that time brother has murdered brother, and the earth continues to be cut down in the name of human progress. I'm going to start over."

It's worth noting that when the thought to start over first comes to God, God thinks nothing of Noah. "I'm going to blot out from the earth all the human beings, and every animal, too." There is no mention of Noah, no effort to see if there's anything—anything at all—worth saving. Just a decisive moment on the part of God to do as God pleases. Is it anger, disappointment, vengeance? What is it that makes God want to clean the slate of us? The writer of Genesis records that it is responsibility. Chapter 6, verse 6, "And the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to the heart." God looked upon what God had created and said, "This did not come turn out that way I intended. I've got to clean it up, take responsibility and make good on what I started."

There's a reason, I think, for why, when we suffer the loss of a loved one, or the loss of a job we loved, or a piece of our childhood grows up and moves away on us, that we ourselves decide to move away. If we don't have to walk down the hall every day and see the room where our loved one once sat, maybe we won't have to remember them so often, and that means we won't be so sad anymore. In a way, moving on can be a way of taking responsibility for our grief.

The only problem is, the memory does not forget as easily as we do, just ask any person with advanced Alzheimer's who can still recall the name of their grandparents, though they cannot recall their own name. "That could be me," God must have thought. "I'll wake up tomorrow in an empty world and think about whether there might have been something there still worth keeping."

So, two verses after deciding to clean the slate, God decides not to. "Noah, Noah, the world needs to be cleaned up. It's become such a mess. I'm going to send the rains to wash the slate clean. Noah, will you step into the water with me?" And Noah, being righteous, being hopeful, says yes.

A few days later the sky begins to grow dark, until the daytime is like nighttime. (*Drape large black sheet over bucket.*) At first, the rain comes slowly—washing over the hatred, over the prejudice, over the greed, over the pollution, and in the middle of it all is righteous Noah. Then it seems to come all at once (*pour jugs and jugs of water out to fill bucket, causing the black cloth to cave in on the colors inside*). For 40 days and nights the waters rise. Inside the boat is all that's left of Noah's world, while outside the boat is all that's left of Noah's world. Inside the boat is a life that feels more like death, while outside is a dead world that God says will live again.

On day 41, the rains stop. Noah opens a window and sends out a bird to test for dry land. Noah—being righteous, being hopeful—will do this three times, until at last the bird doesn't return, and Noah knows it's safe to drop the ramp and let everyone off. Outside, the world is muddy and wet, and it smells like death.

In the biblical story, Noah is shown stepping off the ark and reentering the world without any visible hesitation, but in Jewish folklore, Noah looks out on a world still flooded with water, he sees the carcasses floating by, and naturally hesitates to get off board, when the voice of God calls to him again, “Noah, will you step into the water with me?”

I need to rush on to my conclusion and say something about the story of this day, which isn't actually Noah's Ark. It's Jesus and his baptism at the hands of John in the Jordan River. This is one of the few stories that is told by all 4 gospel writers. That must mean there's something about this story that we're supposed to get, something that, if we're going to say we're a Jesus people, we have to do.

In Matthew's version of the story, Jesus comes to John to be baptized, only John tells him, “You've got this all backwards. It's you who should be baptizing me.” In John's view, John baptizing Jesus would be like the beggar at the gate offering food to the king. Standing in line along the shore that day were sinners, people who had come to confess their lives, to tell John the ways they had messed up their lives, and the lives of the people who love them. We can imagine that standing in line that day were people whose ancestors had come through the flood with Noah. They knew what it was to have been given a second chance, and now they needed a third chance.

“What are you doing here?” John asks Jesus. “You should be baptizing me.”

To which Jesus tells John, “No, you baptize me, for this is what the righteous do.”

What do the righteous do? They step into the water.

In his poem, "Stepping in the Mud," Joseph Donders writes,

*The mud of human evil
is very deep,
it stinks forcefully,
it is full of dangerous gases.
And there was Jesus,
in front of John,
asking to be allowed to bend down in that mud.
And when he came up,
The mud still streaming...
HEAVEN OPENED,
And a voice was heard....
And a new Spirit
a new life
and a new heart
were announced.
Glory, Glory, Alleluia!
But what about the mud,
Was he going to forget it?
...[No]
because once he got the spirit
that Spirit drove him...
to do his work
in this world,
to struggle against evil with us...
in order to overcome it.*

When I was growing up, I was taught to believe that God knows everything and is behind everything—behind the earthquake, behind the wildfire, behind the cancer. I was taught that for God, there are no surprises. So if there is a wildfire, God must have a reason. We must have done something to deserve such punishment. And if someone has cancer and dies, God must need another angel. As I grew older, I found less comfort in this way of thinking, and now I don't believe that anymore.

Then, when I was in seminary a professor introduced me to process theology, the belief that neither God alone nor we alone create the mess of the world, and more importantly, neither God alone nor we alone are left to clean up the mess on our own. If the incarnation of God in Christ in Bethlehem tells us anything, if the decision to spare Noah means

anything, it's that God comes to step into the water with us, to redeem the world not in spite of us, but alongside of us.

There are so many ways to step into the water, to reach down into the darkness and pull out what is still living there (*with each example, one piece of colored rainbow fabric is revealed again*). I know a girl who decided it was time to tell someone about the terrible things her parents had done to her, and she got the name and number of a group.

I know a child who last fall, when we were collecting coats for our refugee friends here in RI, showed up here not only with a coat but also with a shirt and pants she pulled from her closet. They still had the tags on them. When her mom asked her what she was doing with the clothes they'd just bought her, she said, "I hear other people need them more."

So many ways to step into the water. You can stand up in the world and tell the truth about the things that do and do not make for peace. You can accompany a friend to an AA or NA meeting, be the safe space someone needs to tell their story.

My daughter Lillian, along with the other kids in her sewing class, is making pouches that will be sent to Australia to wrap up baby kangaroos and joey koala bears whose mothers have been killed recently by wildfires, so these animals can still have the safety and protection they need.

So many ways to step into the water. Because let us not forget what happened after the flood—the dark sky pulled back, and where there was no color, there was now color again, and where there was no life, there was life again. Amen.