

Once again, this is one of those Sundays when I am so grateful for the church calendar. Christmas Day has come and gone in less than 3 weeks. The 12 days of Christmas with their drummers drumming have all been silenced. The tree has probably been taken down, the returns all made, any leftovers have now been thrown away. School vacation and work vacation is all over. The kids and grandkids have all gone home. Biblically speaking, the shepherds and wise men have also gone home. The angel choir is no longer in the sky overhead. Step outside in Bethlehem, or anywhere else in the world for that matter, and the stars all look the same again.

January returns us to routine. And along with the routine there is what might be described as the mundane, the same old-same old, the everyday, the boring. I mean, even the word itself sounds boring. I'm reminded of the clip from Pooh Corner where Tigger, bouncing along in search of another adventure, bowls over Eeyore. Excited to have run into his friend, Tigger says to him, "What are you doing here? I didn't think you'd be here." And Eeyore responds, in his very unexcited, boring voice, "I'm always here."

That's routine. Always here. Of course, if you were to ask Tigger he'd tell you there is nothing routine about the place Eeyore is in, for Tigger it is the place of adventure.

It's a fitting image for us on this third Sunday after Christmas, the day we call "Baptism of the Lord Sunday." For what could be more routine than baptism? At least that's what I hear in speaking with many families about the sacrament. "Tell me why you wish to have your baby or child baptized?"

"Well, it's the next thing. It's what my parents did with me and what their parents did with them." Not every family I meet with puts it this way, but many do. What they're saying is, it's routine. Maybe a truer word would be to call it tradition. But the point is, beyond it being tradition--routine—what is it? There is no magic in the water. It's straight out of the tap! There is no magic in me. I'm not a magician, trying to make you believe we're doing something more than what you can see with your own two eyes. There is no magic in the words we say. In fact, as I tell every set of parents who come with their baby

in hand, getting your child baptized will not spare them from tragedy in this life or save them to heaven in the next, not anymore than anyone who will never be baptized.

This is the reality of the matter as it comes to us in the book of Acts. Philip is in the country of Samaria, where not a single person goes to church or calls themselves Christian. Now Samaria is the country the disciples once told Jesus he should just cut around. “Samaria is a waste of time. No one who lives there is going to believe our message.” The disciples had a bad habit of calling the game too early, and then being wrong about it in the end. All except for one: Philip. Philip was always willing to try things out. “Let’s just see what happens.” (Philip, you may remember is the same disciple who when faced with a crowd of 4,000 hungry people, brings to Jesus a young boy who has nothing more than a couple fish and a few loaves of bread and says, “Will this work?”) So Philip is in Samaria preaching the gospel to the enemy tribe, to the rival gang. Let’s just see what happens. And would you believe it, they accept Philip’s message and many get baptized.

When the other disciples down in Jerusalem hear about it they say, “We’ve got to see this for ourselves,” so they send Peter and John up to Samaria. And this is where the book of Acts gives us one of the most startling sentences in all of scripture: “And Peter and John prayed for the Samaritans that they might receive the Holy Spirit, (for as yet the Spirit had not come upon any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus).”

You mean it’s possible that one can get baptized but still not get the Holy Spirit? It’s possible that the act of being baptized may not bring us any closer to God, or God any closer to us? Yes. In the same way that walking through the doors of a gym doesn’t necessarily make us any more fit, or that reading up on being a good teacher doesn’t necessarily make us a good teacher, or that having children doesn’t necessarily makes us a good parent, or that coming to church doesn’t necessarily make us more or less kind. I could go on but I think you get the point. There is no magic in baptism, at least not apart from what happens next in our story—after praying for the newly baptized in Samaria, Peter and John lay their hands on them, and this is when the Holy Spirit shows up.

If we want to know what baptism looks like, we can peel back the cover on any baptismal font in any church and fill it with water straight out of the tap. Or for that matter we can go down to local watering hole and dunk one another 3 times, or just go out in the parking lot and hose one another down while we call upon the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

In his book, "Wishful Thinking," the late Frederick Buechner writes, "Baptism consists of getting dunked or sprinkled. Which technique is used matters about as much as whether you pray kneeling or standing on your head." Likewise, whether you're a six-week old infant or the Archbishop of Canterbury matters even less. When it comes to the forgiving and transforming love of God, it's all a marvelous grace.

If we want to know what baptism looks like, just look. On the other hand, if we want to know what baptism is all about, we're going to have to lay our hands upon one another. We're going to have to cross over into Samaria, or into whatever place we consider enemy territory, and to touch one another in faith, not in fear. To say with Philip, let's see what happens when we reach out and take hold of one another in love. Let's see if the Holy Spirit of God doesn't show up and heal us of our prejudices, and burn away our hatred to reveal us as something far more profound: as brothers and sisters who belong to each other.

If we simply want to know what baptism looks like, all we need do is show up once and get wet. But if we want to know what it means to be baptized, we must get in the water with everyone who has ever been baptized or would be baptized.

We didn't read the synoptic gospel accounts of Jesus's baptism today but they all start out and end the same way: "In those days Jesus went from Galilee in Nazareth to be baptized by John in the Jordan."

I've been to the Jordan River. Nowadays it looks like the location for a jungle cruise safari, but back in Jesus' day, the Jordan was in the middle of nowhere. It was the wilderness, the wasteland, the mundane place where all the strays and outcasts went to hang out together. All the people who didn't hold any power in society and were never going to hold any power in society; all the disenfranchised souls who were tired of always coming out on the losing end; they all went out to the Jordan. And Jesus went with them. Stood in line with the outcast so they wouldn't be so outcast anymore. Rubbed shoulders with them. And when it was his turn, he got baptized, and coming up out of the water the Spirit (there's that Spirit!), took him away to places where he could grow into the meaning of his baptism.

The Spirit takes him across the Sea of Tiberias where he meets a man possessed of 10,000 demons. The man says to him, "Wait a minute, I know you. You're Jesus from Nazareth. What are you doing on this side of the shore? No one from Nazareth ever comes

this way.” But there Jesus is. And the Spirit takes him to the center of his own hometown where he touches a leper, and all his old neighbors come out to scold him. “Jesus, didn’t your mother teach you never to touch a leper.” But there’s Jesus, touching a leper. And the Spirit takes him to Zebulun and Naphtali and Syria and—wait for it!--Samaria.

Growing up I was taught what you might call, “The Gospel of Similarity.” I learned such verses as Romans 5:8: “God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.” And John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that he sent his only begotten son that whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life.” What I took from these verses was an understanding that the gospel is about a God who wanted to be like me. That God became human in Jesus because God wanted me to know that me being me is good and beautiful.

I don’t believe in that gospel anymore. It’s not that I still don’t believe in a God who would become me, to know me, to come close enough to reach out and touch me and call me good. It’s that I don’t believe the gospel is about God becoming like me. It’s about God becoming like the one who is not like me. It’s a gospel of dissimilarity. God coming to those who are nothing like God, and not much like me either—the lepers, the demonized, the outcast, the unbelieving—and God makes a home with them.

I’ll end with this story. At my last church, we had a young girl in the congregation who we’ll call Suzy. Suzy came to church most weeks with her mom and they’d always sit closest to the exit, because often times, during the service, her mom would have to take her out. You see, when Suzy was born she suffered multiple seizures on her way into this world. She lost oxygen and this meant that parts of her brain never fully developed. She has a hard time focusing and will often, without warning, start yelling things that are inappropriate. And this is when her mom feels like she needs to take her out. In addition, Suzy looks funny. Her skin is splotchy, her hair is always frizzy, and her glasses are rather big for her face.

One Sunday after being hauled out of the sanctuary again, she came up to me after service and said she had a question for me. “Can I get baptized?” I smiled and told her I thought that would be wonderful.

A couple days later her mom brought her by the church. I took Suzy into the sanctuary and up to the baptismal font. I poured some water in and let her splash around

in it a bit, and we talked about what would happen on the day she got baptized. “I’ll ask you some questions. But don’t worry, they’ll be easy ones.”

“Okay,” she said.

On the day of her baptism, Suzy came to the front of the sanctuary for her baptism. I pulled the top off the font, poured in the water, and then turned to ask Suzy a couple questions. “Today, you have come to be baptized in the waters of God, do you promise to love...”

“Yes,” she said, interrupting me before I could finish my sentence.

“Hold on, that’s not the whole question. Suzy, do you promise to love...”

“Yes,” she interrupted again, and everybody laughed.

“Wait a second, I need to tell you who it is that you need to love.”

And Suzy, all of 10, with her splotchy skin, big glasses, and frizzy hair said, “I don’t need to know who it is. I promise to love them.”

With Christmas now over, a new year begun, and life sort of back to routine, I need to ask you a question: Will you promise to love?