

# **“The Water’s Fine!”**

**Acts 19:1-7**

**Mark 1:4-11**

## *What does baptism do?*

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How do you start your new year? People have different ways of marking the occasion. In the South, most of us try to eat black-eyed peas on New Year’s Day for good luck. If you really want good luck, you add some type of greens (turnip or collard or cabbage) and hog jowls to the menu. I’ll take my chances and leave off the hog jowls.

Many people make resolutions, commitments to do something good in the New Year. Lose weight, work out, read books, go to church—all worthwhile endeavors. Resolutions are also notoriously short-lived. Studies differ on statistics, but they all show that it’s a rare resolution that lasts even three months. I’ve been going to the gym for over 20 years (except during the pandemic), and every year, it’s always packed in January, but by February, the crowd is back to normal.

An increasingly popular New Year’s ritual is the polar bear plunge. From Seattle to Milwaukee to Maine, otherwise sane people jump into a lake or ocean on New Year’s Day. Various claims are made for the health benefits of such behavior, but one article called it “baptism for weird-o’s.” The largest of the polar bear plunges is at Coney Island in New York City. This year, thousands of people turned out for the 121st annual plunge, and they raised over \$121,000 for NYC charities.<sup>1</sup>

Why do people mark the New Year? Is the first week of January really all that different from the last week of December? I think psychologically it does us good to have a reset occasionally. Every once in a while, maybe even frequently, we need to re-orient our lives. Life gets chaotic; the turbulence shakes us loose from our moorings. Suddenly we feel like we are floating loose in a wild, raging current, and we’ve lost all control. Sometimes we need to stop, take a deep breath, throw out the anchor, and tie down the cargo more securely before we move forward. We need to remember who we are and whose we are and what we’re all about.

That’s what we do with New Year’s; we re-orient and reset and get our bearings for the year ahead. When we look behind us, we are all too aware of the ways we have failed, of the things that didn’t turn out the way we had hoped, of the incompleteness and emptiness

and regrets that we carry with us most of the time. A good reset can remind us of the certainties that we tend to forget, the immovable and unchangeable realities on which our life is based, and we can move forward with confidence and strength and courage. Maybe we can even set a new course that will make life better.

That's why the church marks the New Year in some definite ways. By this time, the whirlwind of Advent and Christmas is over. The Wise Men are fading into the distance as they return to wherever in the East they came from. The first big event in the New Year is the baptism of the Lord. It is a time to celebrate the beginning of his adult ministry. It is a moment to remember our own baptism and the promises we made (or that were made for us) when we entered into this sacred covenant with God. It's an occasion for re-orientation.

The first big event in the life of Jesus, according to the Gospel of Mark, is his baptism. The beginning of the good news, as he says, is the appearance of John the Baptist in the wilderness of the Jordan. John is cut from the cloth of the Old Testament prophets—rough clothes and a subsistence diet—calling people to repentance and baptizing them in the Jordan River. At the same time, he was looking forward to another, greater leader: "*The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the strap of his sandals. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.*"<sup>2</sup>

Finally, the One showed up. It was Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee. John knew him because his mother and Jesus' mother were related. He came to John for baptism, not because he needed to repent of his sins, but so he could identify with those who did. When Jesus came up out of the waters of the Jordan, he saw the heavens open up. The Holy Spirit descended like a dove on him, and a voice from heaven spoke directly to him: "*You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.*"<sup>3</sup>

God doesn't waste words. In this sentence are references to a royal psalm of David and a servant song of Isaiah. Even at his baptism, Jesus receives his identity. He is the King, the Son of God, and he is the Suffering Servant who will give his life for the people of God.

At the beginning of the year, we celebrate the beginning of the ministry of Jesus, and we remember our baptism, because that, too, is a beginning. It's the beginning of our walk with God. It's the initial covenant of our faith. Baptism is the anchor of our soul. But why? What does baptism do?

Baptism signifies our repentance and faith. People came to John to be baptized (except for Jesus) as a sign of their repentance and an acceptance of their faith in God, as the Jews understood it. If we are baptized as a youth or adult, we also repent and believe. If we baptize a baby, the parents renew their repentance and acceptance on behalf of the child. You hear that in the questions we ask: "Do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and repent of your sin? ...Do you confess Jesus Christ as your Savior, put your whole trust in his grace, and promise to serve him as your Lord?"<sup>4</sup> Repent and believe.

Baptism includes us in the community of faith. Baptism is the ritual of initiation, a rite of passage, as the sociologists say. After baptism, we are part of the community of faith. We are accepted into the family. We have joined the club. And nobody can kick us out, because the membership chair is God.

Baptism inaugurates a lifelong pilgrimage of faith. It's not an end point. It doesn't mean you have arrived at your destination. Baptism means the journey of grace and faith

and discovery and delight in God is just beginning. It is an acknowledgement of the prevenient grace of God. This is especially what we celebrate with the baptism of an infant. Unable to speak or affirm in any way the vows of baptism, God nevertheless accepts the child and engages him or her in a lifelong journey of learning and growth until that person is welcomed into their heavenly home at the end of the journey. All of life is a pilgrimage of faith, and it begins with baptism.

Finally, baptism is the mark of our identity. As God spoke the identity of Jesus in his baptism, so God also speaks our identity through the sacrament. You are the beloved child of God. You are chosen. You are accepted. You belong to God and to the church.

Such an event is singular in its profound depth and importance. That's why we normally don't repeat it. Once you're in, you're in. Once you're on the way, you're on the way. Once baptized, always baptized. Even if we stray from the path, God keeps God's promises, and you are never disowned from the family.

Yet sometimes it's good to remember and renew the covenant that God made with us in baptism. Because we do stray. We sin and have to repent again. We lose the spark of that first love that set our spirit on fire. We forget who we are. So we need to renew our baptism.

There is actually an instance of baptismal renewal in Scripture. In Acts 19, Paul was on his third missionary journey, and he came to Ephesus, a city in what is now Turkey. He had been there before, but since he had been there, another Christian teacher named Apollos had been there and had made converts of some of the Jews. However, these Jews had only received the baptism of repentance, like John the Baptist had done. Apollos hadn't taught them about the baptism of the Holy Spirit in Jesus' name. So when Paul came and met these new Christians, he discovered that they had never been baptized in the name of Jesus. Paul said, "We can fix that," and he laid his hands on them. And like Jesus at the Jordan River, the Holy Spirit descended on these new believers, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied. They were renewed; they were revived; they experienced and understood the fullness of the Holy Spirit in their lives.

As United Methodists we believe the Bible teaches that the sacrament of baptism cannot (should not) be repeated. But the covenant of baptism should be renewed as often as we need it. We periodically need renewal. We need to re-orient our faith. We need to start fresh. We need to go deeper into spiritual places we have not yet experienced.

The New Year is a great time to do this. John and Charles Wesley, leading the great Methodist revival in England, made a big deal out of New Year's and covenant renewal. Starting in 1755, John Wesley adapted a service from the Puritan pastor Richard Alleine, and every year from then on, Methodists would have a service on New Year's Eve or Day to renew their covenant with God and to re-orient themselves for the new year. Wesley himself adapted the covenant prayer that we will pray in a few minutes. Charles Wesley wrote a hymn for the service, because he wrote a hymn for everything. We will sing it to close our worship today. These are deep, meaningful, historic traditions.

One of my favorite contemporary baptism scenes comes from the movie "O Brother, Where Art Thou?" The movie is a modern retelling (loosely) of the *Odyssey* by the Greek poet Homer. It follows the adventures of three convicts in Depression-era Mississippi—Ulysses (of course), Delmar, and Pete. They escape from a chain gang and try to travel to the home of Ulysses to dig up a buried treasure before it's submerged by the construction of a WPA lake. One of the encounters that they have on this odyssey is a baptism in a

muddy river. Men, women, and children are being baptized while they sing “Down to the River to Pray.” Delmar gets caught up in the experience and goes down to the river and gets baptized.

He runs back to Ulysses and Pete and proclaims, “I been redeemed! The preacher done washed away all my sins and transgressions. It’s the straight and narrow from here on out, and heaven everlasting is my reward!”

Ulysses is skeptical, but Delmar insists, “The preacher said all my sins are washed away, including that Piggly Wiggly I knocked over in Yazoo.”

Ulysses said, “I thought you said you were innocent of those charges.”

Delmar said, “I was lyin’! And the preacher said that sin’s been washed away, too. Neither God nor man’s got nothin’ on me now.” Then Delmar spread his arms wide in welcome and said, “Come on in, boys, the water’s fine!”<sup>5</sup>

That is our invitation today. I invite you to remember and renew the covenant with God expressed in your baptism. Come on in, and experience the relief of repentance and the grace of forgiveness. Come on in, and be part of the family of faith. Come on in, and take the next step on the spiritual journey of your life. Come on in, and claim your identity. Know with certainty that God claims you; you are God’s beloved child. Come on in, the water is fine!

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.bkmag.com/2024/01/01/scenes-from-coney-islands-121st-annual-new-years-day-polar-bear-plunge/>.

<sup>2</sup> Mark 1:7-8.

<sup>3</sup> Mark 1:11.

<sup>4</sup> “Baptismal Covenant II,” *United Methodist Hymnal*, p. 40.

<sup>5</sup> Joel and Ethan Coen, “O Brother, Where Art Thou?” Touchstone Pictures, 2001.