

MUDDY WATER AND FLOWING NEW LIFE

Matthew 3:13-17

Like many streams in our modern age the Jordan River is a shadow of its former self. Water is taken from it for settlements, irrigation and industry. What is left where John the Baptist used to baptize not far from where it empties into the Dead Sea is a stinking, bacteria-infested, polluted little creek. Israel bans pilgrims from even entering the gross and muddy water at that point and have set up an alternative site for pilgrims much further upstream where the river has more water and is relatively clean.

John the Baptist had similar reservations about Jesus entering the muddy waters of the Jordan River to be baptized. There were all those sinners lined up day after day to have John dunk them in the water and their sins washed away. The mud in that river oozed with the sins of tax collectors who betrayed their own nation to feed the coffers of the Roman government and no doubt skimmed some off the top for themselves. There were liars and cheats. There were adulterers and philanderers. Why that mud must have been full of betrayals and infidelities. There were hypocrites, the fearful, the self-indulgent and sinners of every size and shape. Even religious people who appeared virtuous brought their private sins to be washed clean by the Baptist. Were these muddy waters tainted by people's wickedness, and many failings, an appropriate place for the sinless one, the Lamb of God who would take away the sin of the world, to dip his toes? Most certainly not! John was horrified. John had his own sins and shortcomings. Who was he to baptize God's Messiah? But Jesus insisted. And so Jesus was baptized in that muddy Jordan River.

I believe something very different happened from what John the Baptist feared. Instead of the Lamb of God being somehow tainted by contact with all those sinners, instead all those sinners – ourselves included – were touched by the living God who became human for us. Through his Baptism Jesus showed his humanity. He didn't need to be washed clean, but he came for the very purpose of touching and healing us in all our brokenness and sinfulness. As Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:21, "*For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*" Far from being tainted through contact with sinners the blood that Jesus shed for us upon the cross washes us clean of our sins.

I like to think of the blood flowing from Jesus' wounded side as forming a very different stream than the muddy Jordan River. The prophet Ezekiel in an apocalyptic vision of the new Jerusalem saw a stream flowing from the altar at the center of the holy Temple:

Then he brought me back to the entrance of the temple; there, water was flowing from below the threshold of the temple towards the east Going on eastwards with a cord in his hand, the man measured one thousand cubits, and then led me through the water; and it was ankle-deep. Again he measured one thousand, and led me through the water; and it was knee-deep. Again he measured one thousand, and led me through the water; and it

was up to the waist. Again he measured one thousand, and it was a river that I could not cross, for the water had risen; it was deep enough to swim in, a river that could not be crossed. He said to me, 'Mortal, have you seen this?'

Then he led me back along the bank of the river. As I came back, I saw on the bank of the river a great many trees on one side and on the other. He said to me, 'This water flows towards the eastern region and goes down into the (Dead Sea); and when it enters the sea... the water will become fresh. Wherever the river goes, every living creature that swarms will live, and there will be very many fish, once these waters reach there. It will become fresh; and everything will live where the river goes... On the banks, on both sides of the river, there will grow all kinds of trees for food. Their leaves will not wither nor their fruit fail, but they will bear fresh fruit every month, because the water for them flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for healing.' (Ezekiel 46:1-12, NRSV, abridged)

The life flowing from Jesus' wounded side forms that river of life flowing ever outwards. And the leaves on the trees that line the bank are for the healing of the nations.

I like to think of both those streams – the muddy Jordan River and that visionary stream flowing from the Holy Temple – as present for us today as we renew our Baptismal Covenant. As we renew the Covenant God made with us in our baptisms, like those sinners lining the bank of the Jordan waiting to be dunked by John, we bring our sins and brokenness into the muddy waters.

Country Music artist Trace Atkins has a song called *Muddy Water* that describes an important part of what we come to do when we renew our Baptismal Covenant. In his gravelly deep baritone Atkins sings:

*Eighteen wheeler dropped me off at that city limits sign
Sunday morning sunlight hurt my eyes
It's a long way from where I been back to my home town
But there's a man in me I need to drown*

*Baptize me in that muddy water
Wash me clean in amazing grace
I ain't been living like I 'aughta
Baptize me in that muddy water*

*Made my way to the church at the end of the dirt road
Dragging what was left of my soul
I could see the saints out back on the river bank
And I could hear forgiveness calling out my name*

*Baptize me in that muddy water
Wash me clean in amazing grace*

*I ain't been living like I 'aughta, no
So baptize me in that muddy water
(<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dfwmrgkdymI&feature=related>)*

There's a man in me I need to drown. The person in each of us that we need to drown is one very important reason we come again and again to the muddy waters of our baptisms to renew our Baptismal Covenant. We need to be washed clean and healed in God's amazing grace.

Another important reason we come to renew our Baptismal Covenant is to be part of that other stream. The stream of living water that flows from Jesus' wounded side, that flows from this altar, that flows from Christ's love. Like the stream in Ezekiel's vision that stream doesn't diminish but grows. That love knows no limits. It is abundant beyond measure. It makes the dead and lifeless fresh. That living stream renews us, quenches our deepest thirst, brings life and healing.

As we renew our Baptismal Covenant we are not only renewed we are swept up in that living stream. We are invited to be part of it. Like Jesus at his baptism the heavens are open for us, God is present and alive. We too receive the gift of the Holy Spirit to empower and strengthen us for ministry. We too hear the words God speaks to us: "*you are my beloved child and with you I am well pleased.*"

Renewed in Christ we are invited to share Christ's love, to serve with Christ those who are in need. We are invited to take our place in Christian community, to pray, to sing, to lead, to teach, to heal, to witness and serve. We are called to be part of God's living ongoing mission. We are called as we proclaim in St. John's statement of mission to be a new humanity in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit.

As the Gospel hymn so beautifully puts it,

*Peace is flowing like a river,
Flowing out through you and me,
Spreading out into the desert,
Setting all the captives free.*

*Let it flow through me,
Let it flow through me,
Let the mighty peace of God
Flow out through me.*

*Love is flowing like a river
Joy
Faith
Hope*

As we renew our Baptismal Covenant let us bring the person inside us that we need to drown in the muddy waters so that we might be washed clean in amazing grace, so that we might hear forgiveness calling out our name. Let us also come to be part of the living stream of life flowing from Jesus, flowing from his Church and flowing through you and me out into a thirsty world. Amen.