

## Tender Care: Living Under Water

A sermon preached on Mark 1:4-11 on January 14, 2024,  
by Emily Hull McGee with First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC  
I.

As the scene opens, Pete, Delmar, and Everett are seated around a campfire: hungry, scared, and on the run. They're outlaws you see, having barely escaped a Mississippi prison chain gang and resorted to roasting the only thing they could find to eat: gophers. Yet some movement captures their vigilant attention. Just over the way, they see lines of people approaching the river in front of them. They were all dressed in white, quiet, their procession underscored by a haunting chorus that carries all the way over the Pete, Delmar, and Everett and washes over them, transfixed.

*As I went down in the river to pray, studying about that good ole way and who shall wear the robe and crown, good lord, show me the way. O brother let's go down, let's go down, come on down. O brother let's go down, down in the river to pray.*

Everett wasn't fooled. "I guess hard times flush the chumps," he says snidely about the Depression-era South around him. "Everyone is looking for answers."

But Delmar... oh Delmar was *captivated*. Up he pops, running into the procession. He couldn't wait a moment longer, cuts in line, and is baptized right there in the river.

"Well I'll be a son of a gun," Pete exclaims. "Delmar's been saved."

When Delmar makes his way back to his buddies, baptismal waters still clinging to him, he announces with joy, "well, that's it, boys. I've been redeemed. The preacher done washed away all my sins and transgressions. It's the straight and narrow from here on out, and heaven every-lasting's my

reward. The preacher said all my sins is washed away. Including that Piggly Wiggly I knocked over in Yazoo.”

Everett protested, “I thought you said you was innocent of those charges!”

“Well, I was lying,” Delmar shrugged. “And the preacher said that sin’s been warshed away too. Neither God nor man’s got nothin’ on me now. So come on in boys, the water is fine!”<sup>1</sup>

I doubt the first viewers of the Coen Brother’s film *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* expected to see a meaningful baptism scene of fugitives who interrupt their running for a bit of soul-washing! Perhaps those viewers felt a bit like Everett, who later in the movie says to Pete and Delmar, “Baptism! You two are dumber than a bag of hammers... baptism may have made you right with the Lord but the state of Mississippi is less forgiving.”<sup>2</sup> Or perhaps viewers then and now have found their story to be one of grace, of a new life given and chosen, of the struggle of choice and behavior against the call of the waters. Perhaps they – we – wonder: once we go down to the river, *who are we after all?*

## II.

From one story to another, we listen carefully today to the story of baptism. Because within the story of baptism is the story of God – the story of us – revealed in scripture. It’s there from the very beginning, when God’s spirit “moves upon the waters” in Genesis, to the very end, when Revelation’s river of life flows through the city of God, and all the stories in between – think of Noah and the ark, Moses and the Red Sea, Joshua and the Jordan River, Jonah and the fish, Jesus promising living water to the Samaritan

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<sup>1</sup> *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, 2000, directed by Joel and Ethan Coen.

<sup>2</sup> Kevin J. Adams, *Living Under Water*, p66-67.

woman, Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts whose question echoes through time: “look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?”

But no story is more formative to the long-held practice of baptism than that of Jesus’s. John the Baptizer comes first, Mark tells us, that wild-eyed prophet calling for baptism for the repentance of sins because God’s kingdom has come near. No one was omitted from the call to the waters – religious insiders and outsiders alike. Not even Jesus. For in the Gospel of Mark, before Jesus does anything at all, his very first act of ministry was to enter in: to wade in the water with the very people he came to liberate, as a friend of mine says, “to risk guilt by association with all the sinners waiting in line.”<sup>3</sup> That very point has confounded scholars and confused the faithful and rankled the orthodox for generations. If baptism was a practice held for those confessing their desire to turn away from sin, then why did a sinless Jesus need to be baptized? What does it say about him?

Yet Jesus, son of Joseph and Mary, begotten of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, the Messiah himself, “gets in line,” as one writer says, “as if he’s in a Costco checkout.”<sup>4</sup> And there, first, foundationally, before anything else, before the sick and the hurting came to him, before the disciples followed him, before the religious leaders conspired against them, before the crowds turned on him, before his friends left him alone, before the cross held him, before the tomb released him, Jesus was baptized. The skies opened, the dove descended, and God’s blessing of belovedness washed over him like a cool shower on a warm day – the first word he’s told was a word of God’s delight: “you are my Son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased.”

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<sup>3</sup> Thanks to dear friend, Rev. Greg Dover, for this one!

<sup>4</sup> Adams, p81.

### III.

Henri Nouwen calls this God's original blessing. It's a blessing of goodness, of story, of identity. This is the story of living under water, of living within baptismal blessing, of living as God's beloved one. Would that it be that simple, right?

But when you're underwater, everything looks different. Distended, a bit. Shiny and blurry all at once. Scientists tell us "not only do underwater objects appear larger and closer to us, they can also appear further away and smaller than they actually are."<sup>5</sup> Visual reversal, it's called: a phenomenon of the experience of refraction and light. No matter the body of water you're looking under – a river or a creek, a puddle or an ocean, a bath or a pool – the experience can feel like entering another world, can't it? For what you often see is life teeming with beautiful diversity – river rocks and tadpoles and sand and salt, algae and barnacles and coral reefs and anemones, dolphins and orcas and crabs and squid, schools of thousands of fish to a singular great blue whale. All enchanting in their very own way, that is, this life under water.

Yet a metaphorical "living under water" can feel less like living in that sea of beautiful diversity and more like living at the edge of the abyss. Ask anyone who's underwater with their mortgage or their stocks. Ask anyone who's drowning in a sea of incomplete tasks, or sinking in mounting debt, or struggling to stay afloat with a never-ending stream of caregiving, or finding out that their grief never fully dries. Ask anyone who is immersed in identities they struggle to sort out and explain, immersed in a story they feel they can't get out of, immersed in a trauma and a past they can't seem to wipe away. Ask anyone who feels in over their head with, well, *life*. Perhaps I should ask you.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.eobv.at/en/news-en/see-underwater/>

What I want us to consider today as an act of tender care toward ourselves is that baptism offers us another view, another story to tell, another way to see the light refracted upon us under water. For in our baptism, we are told the truest story about ourselves: truer than our sufferings or successes, truer than anything else flooding our minds and hearts and bodies and spirits.

In our baptism, we are birthed into new life, just as our lives were formed in the waters of a womb, so too will our new life in Christ be formed in the waters of baptism.

In our baptism, we experience, as our Baptist friend Bill Leonard says, “an outward sign of an invisible grace,” the waters themselves symbolizing the goodness and mercy of God in Christ which washes clean the dust of our sin.

In our baptism, we are united with people in boundless love: across race or resources, gender or generation, continent or creed.

In our baptism, a particular kind of identity and life flows out, one that is primary before all others, even identities that matter deeply in our understanding of the world.

In our baptism, we are no longer, as Paul says in Galatians, “Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female.” We are no longer, as I might add, Republican or Democrat, libertarian or socialist, Black or brown or olive or white, queer or straight or bi, cis or trans or nonbinary, Aries or Libra, Enneagram 1 or Enneagram 9, ENFJ or ISTP, oldest sibling or baby of the family or only child, extrovert or introvert or ambivert, married or single, suburban or urban or rural, dog mom or plant mom or their mom, champion runners or champion nappers, early bird or night owl, scheduled or spontaneous, overworked or underworked or without work, Deacons or

Tarheels or Wolfpacks or even those wily Blue Devils, for *all of you* – all of you! – are one in Christ Jesus.” Baptism becomes the identity that matters most, that rises above the rest. “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality,” Dr. King reminded us, “tied in a single garment of destiny.”<sup>6</sup> A new story – or, rather, an old story – can be told.

Kevin Adams tells us that “baptism is the fulcrum for an entire life, the hinge connecting every episode of life.”<sup>7</sup> So too was it for Jesus, who held to these waters when he begged the cup to pass from him, who remembered these waters when his friends forgot him, who lived under these waters all the way until he died on that cross and was raised in the newness of life from the tomb.

So friends, let me make this plain: *so too can it be for you*. Because from the very beginning until the very end, you belong to God. There is never a moment that God does not see you and know you as their beloved child. Nothing you have done or left undone has or will ever take that belovedness from you. Your belovedness: this is the main story. This is your best identity. It’s in the water too. So live there! Live right there under the waters of your baptism with Christ and your belovedness of God, and let that be the hinge upon which everything else swings.

#### IV.

Another baptismal story, this one not of fictional brothers (where art thou) escaped from a made up life of crime, but of a convicted prisoner whose crime against his family was what some would call unforgivable. Theology professor Ralph Wood was there to witness it, Ralph Wood who was

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<sup>6</sup> Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., *Why We Can't Wait*.

<sup>7</sup> My work this week has been deeply informed by one of the most comprehensive and creative books on baptism I've yet read, whose title obviously inspired this sermon's: *Living Under Water: Baptism as a Way of Life*, by Kevin J. Adams.

formerly a professor at Wake Forest and formerly a member of our church. He was there along with one of his former Baylor students who was now the prison's chaplain, assuring Dr. Wood that this was no convenient jailhouse conversion to try and get quicker parole. You see, not too long ago, the man's wife and daughter had come to visit him in order to forgive him. The man was so unbelievably astonished at their mercy, he "got on his knees and begged for mercy of both God and family."

There that day, the chaplain, the college professor, and the convict stood under the watchful eye of an armed guard. They sang (poorly) a rendition of Amazing Grace, and, as Wood said, "didn't balk at declaring ourselves wretches!" Then, he continues, "after a pastoral prayer, the barefoot prisoner stepped into a wooden box that had been lined with a plastic sheet and filled with water. It looked like a large coffin, and rightly so... pronouncing the trinitarian formula – in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit – the pastor lowered this new Christian down into the liquid grave to be buried with Christ and then raised him up to life eternal. Though the water was cold, the man was not eager to get out. Instead, he stood there weeping for joy. When at last he left the baptismal box, I thought he would hurry away to change into something dry, I was mistaken. 'I want to wear these clothes as long as I can,' he said. 'In fact, I wish I never had to take a shower again.'"<sup>8</sup>

To his declarations of freedom in Christ, the chaplain reminded him of Martin Luther's confession that "even in baptism the old Adam remains a frightfully good swimmer." Would he do as he declared that day: to return home, to become a good man, a good husband and father, to join a church and

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<sup>8</sup> Adams, p228-229.

bear witness to God's grace? Will he refuse to let these waters dry, even after he takes the clothes off? Will he live under water as he dreams?

Will we?

Amen!