

THE POWER OF OUR BAPTISM

Sermon by Rev. Patty Farr
Based on Isaiah 42:1-9 and Matthew 3:13-17
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“Quick and easy are magical words with enormous seductive powers,” says author Sue Monk Kidd. *“Advertisers know that if they put [the words quick and easy] on a product it sells better - whether the product is instant potatoes, instant money, or instant relief. We’re told that we can walk off ten pounds in two weeks, melt off five inches in five days, or just take a pill and do it overnight. We’ve been lured by promises of getting new glasses in an hour, an oil change in thirty minutes, and a pizza in twenty. Is it any wonder that we’re fine-tuned from an early age to seek out the instant fix? We want life to respond like our microwave ovens”* (*When the Heart Waits*, p. 23).

Sometimes, without even realizing it, we look for short cuts in our religious faith as well. At times we’d like to get quick and easy answers from the Bible or from our worship or prayer time to the most difficult and complex questions in our lives and in our world. We struggle with the question of why there is evil in the world. We wonder why we or the people we love must contend with illness, with marital discord, family tensions, job stress, and loss. We privately ask why we ourselves continue to sin, be mean-spirited, judgmental and selfish. Why can’t we learn just to be loving and kind? In our pain, we are tempted to want the answers to come to us as quickly as programs pop up on our computer screens. It’s hard for us to slow down and just live with the really deep questions of life. On TV, complicated life problems are neatly solved in quick thirty-minute segments. So we can be seduced into believing that a painless, swift transformation of all *our* problems might also be possible - if we just pray sincerely enough and believe in God strongly enough.

But the truth is, no matter how long we’ve been Christians, our lives are still difficult sometimes, still filled with things we don’t understand. Life is more like an inscrutable mystery than a box of instant potatoes. In college I came across a line of poetry by William Butler Yeats describing life as *“terrible beauty.”* Terrible beauty. That is life - awesome, often perplexing and frightening but truly magnificent - a gift. The more we

open ourselves to the “terrible beauty” of our lives without demanding quick, simple answers, the more we find our relationship with God deepening and the more we find *ourselves* evolving.

A very large part of faith is learning how to dwell patiently with our questions. The poet Rilke wrote to a young friend who was struggling, “Live everything. Live your questions now, and perhaps even without knowing it, you will live along some distant day into your answers.” As followers of Christ, we have to live with the questions for a long while, maybe even our whole lives, instead of expecting answers to arrive easily and magically. When we let go to the terrible beauty of this life, it eventually dawns on us that God has been right here with us all along, in our questions, our sorrow, our difficulties, our struggles to understand. In Isaiah 42 we hear these words, “I am the Lord, I have called you...I have taken you by the hand and kept you...(Isaiah 42:6). And in chapter 43, we hear God promising us, “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you...When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; for I am the Lord, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior” (Isaiah 43:2ff).

It is not about “quick and easy.” It’s never been about “quick and easy.” Faith in God is about surrendering our need to have things go the way *we* think they should. It’s about being changed and transformed slowly, thoroughly, painstakingly, from the inside out, sometimes through the fire, sometimes through the flood, being led by the Holy One, who loves us completely and who knows us better than we know ourselves.

Jesus never promised that following him was going to be easy. One woman put it this way, “If you think God leads you only beside still waters, think again. God will also lead you beside turbulent waters. If you have the courage to enter, you’ll think you’re drowning. But actually you’re being churned into something new. It’s okay...dive in.” (Sue Monk Kidd, When the Heart Waits, p. 10).

Sometimes I want to protect others and maybe even myself from “diving in.” It’s hard to fully trust the process that Jesus is inviting us all to enter into with such faith and abandon. For a relationship with God is a real ride, isn’t it - a journey not just through still waters, but through white water rapids, too. That is why when Jesus said, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you” (John 14:27), some of us who have known Jesus for awhile might be tempted to reply, along with St. Teresa of Avila, “If this is how you treat your friends, no wonder you have so few.” Sometimes we may feel like telling Jesus we’ve had quite enough of his peace and his friendship. In fact we need a little rest from his kind of peace! For Jesus’ peace is an unsettling peace.

When Jesus first stepped into the chilly waters of the Jordan River to be baptized by the hand of his cousin John the Baptist, the Gospel of Matthew tells us that “suddenly the Heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom

I am well pleased” (Matthew 3:16-17). The words that Jesus received from God that day echo the words Isaiah heard coming from God six centuries before: “Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him...He will not grow faint or be crushed...” (Isaiah 42:1, 4). From these passages we learn some extremely important things. We learn that our baptism into the life of faith is a baptism into *great power* – the power of the Holy Spirit. Through our baptism we tap into the Spirit’s power to protect and love and strengthen us from our first day to our last, and beyond that last day into the next life. We learn that God loves us with an absolute love and delights in us with unutterable joy, as a parent loves his or her beloved child. God has great plans for us and will uphold us through every darkness, every difficulty, until we are complete and whole.

A little later in this worship service you will have an opportunity to step up to the baptismal font to renew your baptism. You will be anointed and blessed with the same healing waters of the Spirit that first touched you on the day of your original baptism. We all know what a wild ride it’s been since the day we were first baptized. Each of our lives has been changed and redirected by the touch of Jesus. Like the disciples who went before you, you too have come through some very hard times when it was only your faith in God that saw you through. God doesn’t promise physical safety at every moment, but something much deeper. God promises to be a midwife to our souls. God, through Christ, will be with us through everything, even our death, and all the small deaths and rebirths we experience throughout our lives, to make sure that we come out vibrant and thriving on the other side.

Julian of Norwich, the 14th century English mystic, knew this to be true. She lived through an extremely tumultuous time in history, beset by great disharmony in the church, the Hundred Years’ War between France and England, the aftermath of the Peasants’ Revolt, and three outbreaks of bubonic plague. And yet Julian, sitting in her little basement cell with its window looking out onto a busy street in Norwich, England, heard Christ say to her, “I may make all things well, and I can make all things well, and I shall make all things well, and I will make all things well; and you will see yourself that every kind of thing will be well.” These tender words brought so much comfort and joy to Julian’s struggling heart that she was overcome with a sense of well-being.

When I went through a time of anxiety and depression in my early twenties, very similar words came to me. I had quit seminary and didn’t know whether I would ever return. I didn’t think I was cut out for the ministry because I could be so overcome with darkness, fear and despair. I was ashamed of my own vulnerability and weakness. Yet one morning I woke up hearing Christ assuring me, too, that all would be well, and that if I would just keep my eyes on *him*, I would start to see how I could use my own humble life to bless and gift others. This is the same promise Christ holds out to each and every one of us. In the midst of all kinds of trials and difficulties, he whispers with a smile, “I can make something good come out of even *this!*”

You might remember the name Joseph Girzone. He is the man who wrote all the best-selling Joshua books about what it would be like if Jesus returned to the earth today. Father Girzone claims that it was only through his trials and difficulties that he found the wisdom to write his books. Beginning at age 16 and lasting for twelve years, Girzone was thrown into a deep, dark depression in which he couldn't feel the grace of God in his life at all. "During that time," he writes, "I wanted to give up the seminary [and] go home...Every time I thought about doing it, something kept telling me, 'No, stay, don't give up. You're going through this so you can understand the pain, the hurt, and the anguish of people's lives, so you'll be able to help them later on. Looking back on that pain and depression,'" Girzone said, "I realize that at that time I learned more about myself, more about God, more about people, and more about life than I did during any other period of my life. My greatest period of growth took place during those twelve years of horrible depression."

Storms may rage, our hopes and dreams may tumble down around us, but we stand firm in the midst of it all. We come to realize that our baptism has conferred on us a mysterious power. It is the power of God's grace. That grace is with us at all times. God will see us through everything, evolving us from glory into glory until we realize that all God's promises *do* mysteriously come true: All will be well, and all will be well, and all manner of thing will be well. Thanks be to God.

Let's pray together. O God, you are with us beside still waters and beside the turbulent ones as well. It is all gift. Thank you for making all things well. AMEN.

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