

*Based on Genesis 1:1-2 and Luke 3:21-22. Waters of Belovedness.*

*I need a touchstone*, Donny said, as he sobbed in my office, having just spoken for the first time out loud of the abuse he suffered in his teenage years at the hands of a family member.

*I need something to hold on to when the trauma takes over and I am shaking and I can barely breathe.*

The man I am calling Donny had initially scheduled the appointment with me to discuss getting baptized. Or, to be more precise, getting re-baptized, which we in the Presbyterian Church technically do not do. One baptism is sufficient, we say, to signify and seal the grace of God upon our lives and our membership in the church universal. Although some other Christian denominations do require it, we do not ask anyone to get re-baptized when they join our individual congregations.

Thank God, instead of just telling Donny *no, we don't do that*, something in me said I should ask him why. And the depths of pain revealed in the story that unfolded would break your heart into a thousand pieces, as it did mine, as it did his.

The truth is we all have some kind of broken-hearted secret story we hold inside throughout this life. Hopefully not as painful as physical and emotional and spiritual abuse at the hand of an uncle. But difficult, just the same. A lost job or a lost relationship. A kid in trouble or spouse in chronic pain. Or even just the aches and pains of aging. The truth is we all need that touchstone to turn to when the trauma takes over and we are shaking and can barely breathe.

Donny was right to view baptism as that touchstone. This very simple, yet somehow magical thing we do when we take a dip of water and plop it on your head and call you *blessed*. This river of grace that flows from the beginning of time to the end of time, and in every time in between. A touchstone, yes, for healing whatever wounds we bear in these bodies of earth and water and wind and word.

In a sweeping mythic narrative whose deep truth dwarfs any contemporary need to read this sacred story as literal or scientific fact, our Scriptures tell us that creation itself comes from the marriage of a dry and barren soul-sucking desert on the one hand and a deep dark chaotic storm system on the other. And a wind or breath or *Spirit* of God is swooping over these deep chaotic turbulent waters of primordial existence. And the Word of God says, "Let there be!" And there is! Over and over and over again! And God sees that it is good! Nothing less than beautiful.

It would have been so wonderful if we could have just closed the book right there. But we didn't. We fell.

We can call it the Garden of Eden and the Tree and the Apple. Or we can call it the profound failure of the human race to rest in Sabbath delight for the glory of creation and the blessed miracle of each one of our lives.

Whatever we call it, we now know evil, as well as good. We now know ugly, as well as beautiful. And by the time we get to the baptism of Jesus, the people of God who are our biblical ancestors have indeed known ugliness and evil of every kind and practiced ugliness and evil of every kind. As, I am afraid, have we.

As far as they – and we – can tell, the land of promise and plenty is devolving dangerously close to that formless void and chaotic turbulent deep water of chaos that God calms in the beginning. In the time of Jesus, one response to that chaos is to gather at the river around a man named John, who proclaims *a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins*.

So often we equate repentance with badness: I did wrong. I confess. I promise not to do it again. And this is certainly one way to understand that term. But the Greek word *metanoia* is about *transformation!* A new heart! A new mind! A new life! A new creation dawning from whatever chaos of deserted land or turbulent water would drive us to despair! And it is happening all the time!

A baptism of true repentance can be a powerful, powerful thing. A drug dealer can decide to turn his life around. An addict can seek help in recovery. A child who has nothing can find a teacher who truly cares. A gang ... or twenty gangs! ... can gather at a church and learn to listen to one another. An abused spouse can leave a toxic relationship. An old cynic can learn to love. I have, at one time or another, in the course of my ministry, seen every single one of these things happen. A baptism of true repentance can be a powerful, powerful thing.

The great debate in biblical and theological scholarship around the baptism story from the Gospel of Luke has been about why *Jesus* needs to be baptized. If he is truly without sin, scholars wonder, what was the point?

But baptism is broader—both then and now—than the individual sins we commit and our need for forgiveness from them. As Donny's story teaches us, baptism is also about the sin committed *against* us and our need to be healed from it. And Jesus knows more than his fair share about that.

Jesus really does, in the end, “take on” the sin of the world. More like it is dumped on him. Jesus is betrayed, denied, despised, rejected, beaten, oppressed by an occupying power, spat upon, tortured, killed. Experiencing in his own flesh the absolute worst of what we call “man's *inhumanity* to man.”

The baptism of Jesus truly is a touchstone for that trauma yet to come. It flows from the same river of grace that was the foundation of our identity from the beginning of creation. With the same Spirit of God swooping yet again over the face of the waters. And the same Word of God speaking yet again through the chaos, saying, “This is my Beloved ... in whom I am well pleased.”

Which is what Jesus proclaimed throughout his ministry to anyone who would pay attention. You are God's Beloved. And you. And you. And you. Nothing less than beautiful. God is so pleased with you. Let this be your touchstone throughout your life.

*Why don't we reclaim your baptism?* I said to Donny, as he sobbed in my office, having just spoken for the first time out loud of the abuse he suffered in his teenage years at the hands of a family member.

*We can gather at the font with your husband and your daughter and anyone else who is special in your life. You can tell us all your story. Speak the truth of your pain and your hope for a healing touchstone. We can all remind you how much God loves you and wants you to be well. And we can dip our fingers together in the water from the font and place them together on your forehead. And speak together the words of Jesus proclaiming you*

*Beloved. And you can know in your soul what you feel in your body: a baptismal oasis of healing grace, flowing with the peace of healing and renewal and love in community.*

Which is exactly what we did. But we did not stop there.

There was a marble in the font, as there are marbles in the font at SPC. Donny's husband picked up one of those marbles and placed it in Donny's outstretched palm.

*Here's your touchstone, Donny's husband said. You can take this moment with you wherever you go. Carry it right in your pocket and grab hold of it whenever you need to remember you are nothing less than beautiful.*

And so can we.

Let the church say, Amen!