

Father in heaven, who at the baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan proclaimed him your beloved Son and anointed him with the Holy Spirit: Grant that all who are baptized into his name may keep the covenant they have made and boldly confess him as Lord and Savior; who with you and the Holy Spirit lives forever and reigns, one God, in glory everlasting. Amen.

Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?

Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?

Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?

Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?

Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?

Grant, O Lord, that all who are baptized into the death of Jesus Christ your Son may live in the power of his resurrection and look for him to come again in glory; who lives and reigns now and forever. Amen.

Today, we remember and celebrate the Baptism of our Lord. *Later today the Emmanuel community will welcome new members to this baptismal family.* And so the question today is, do you renew your own baptismal covenant? The community of faith has a few opportunities each year to ask this question and this is one of those days. To help us answer this question with care and integrity, the lectionary has given us a series of texts that layout, albeit a potentially disturbing, theology of baptism and a life lived in the spirit of the baptized God. I'd like for us to consider a couple of concepts this morning from these texts and each come straight from the ancient Hebrew itself. The first is *tehom* and the second is *ruah* and from these concepts a realization of the transformative movement of the Holy Spirit in Baptism.

The texts this week perform a narrative arc that develops this theology for us over a timeline of the people of God. We begin at the beginning of the world, move to the beginning of Jesus ministry and ultimately to the beginnings of the church.

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of *tehom* (the deep), while *ruach* (a wind) from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light.

tehom

The deep as understood by the ancient peoples, was an abyss of chaos, uncertainty, and impending death. It is the void. In other places throughout scripture it is personified as a beast or dragon of the sea. This is the world as was known to the ancient world. The waters, the deep were to be feared. People feared these waters because their very lives were dependent on them. If the waters rose too high, imminent doom was at hand. Their homes, their crops, everything was dependent on the deep waters being kept at bay. Water still to this day has this kind of frightening potential, though engineers have learned how to tame and harness the deep to create energy and irrigate dry places, water is still a chaotic force that can rupture life as we know it.

The earth was a formless void and darkness covered the deep. Where is God?

ruach

a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. God's spirit hovered or brooded over the face of the deep is another way it can be translated. From the very beginning, God is present, hovering, moving. *ruach* is the same word used later in Genesis to talk about how God animated the dirt, thus creating Adam. God is present in the midst of the chaos in the form of a Spirit.

There is another way to tell this same story. John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river

Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him.

John makes his way into the wilderness, a man clothed in animal hair who ate bugs and wild honey. John is a wild man living in a wild place. John lives a life not too different than how the world existed in the beginning...wild and untamed. And not only this, but he uses the very element represents life and death in their day...water...to bring people into a repentant and transformed life. Isn't it interesting that the movement of God is one of entering the deep, the wilderness, the desert, the waters and to come out transformed by the Spirit that is hovering and moving just above the chaos and uncertainty.

Even more poignant is when Jesus embraces this movement and he himself dives into the void and as he rises a voice from heaven comes with a dove-like image naming Jesus as beloved.

This same movement is present in our reading from Acts. These early followers were living in a place of darkness. They had not even heard of the Holy Spirit and were living out of a baptism of the repentance of sins. There was more in store for them and God showed up in the midst of their ignorance and suddenly they begin speaking freely and speaking truth in ways that were new and transformative.

This movement of God into the void, into the deep, into the very chaos and coming out into illumined, and transformed reality is the very movement of Baptism. I would go as far as to say that Jesus' movement from Gethsemane to Golgatha, from the garden to the cross is him living out his own Baptismal identity. Baptism is being present in chaos, uncertainty, into death. Remember how I said it was potentially disturbing?

An unfortunate flaw in modern Christianity, in our theology, has been a movement upward into the heavens to a God who is distant and removed from our experience. It has somehow seemed safer to believe in a God who is other, who transcends reality and who is out there--or more realistic

is up there. The movement of God throughout Scripture is always downward. The earth was formless and void and God hovered and spoke into the darkness. God walked in the Garden with Adam and Eve. God came to Abraham just in time before he killed Isaac. God came to Moses in the desert in a bush. God fought with Jacob and named his people Israel. At Jesus' baptism the heavens were ripped open so that God could come down. Even when Jesus ascended, the angels asked the disciples, "Why are you looking up?" Even at the end of the story what happens? Jesus comes back to earth and a new world is created.

From the beginning God is seen always moving toward the dirt, toward Adam. This movement is called *kenosis* in the Greek. I'm sure Hunt or Beverly have used this word before in their wonderful sermons. It is the idea of God emptying Godself into the world. God is moving into the deep, *tehom*, breathing *ruach*, life and light into the darkness. As one's who are made in the image of God, our movement too is into the deep, into the darkness. Our baptism is one of submersion, under the water and into the chaos of life. And in grace and faith, we are brought up out of the waters as beloved children, breathing life, the very Spirit of God. But it is in *tehom* where we experience the trauma and chaos of life that God begins the transformative work in our lives. In our tradition, we do ourselves a disservice when we sprinkle water, or cup a little bit in our hands because we lose some of the symbolic power. But the texts do not let us forget, this covenant that we make for ourselves and on the behalf of our children is no easy or even fun task. It is hard and it is painful when we choose to live out our baptismal covenant.

It can be overwhelming to think of all the places in life that could be described as deep, dark, formless and void. But we all know where those places are in our lives. We know those places in our world. Wars, racism, patriarchy, climate change, and the list goes on. And I'll be the first to admit, I fail daily to live out my baptismal identity in this world. I deny my baptism most of the time. But each day as I shower in the morning I am reminded and I have a new opportunity to suffer with others and work to bring about God's transforming work in my life and the life of the world.

I understand if this seems too abstract, but it is a call to radically adjust how we see and perceive what is going on within and around us. Living this kind of baptismal reality takes shape in small, day to day ways. It means having an honest face to face conversation instead of passive aggressive email exchanges or withholding something. It looks more like asking why you don't like something and getting underneath it than just reacting to a surface level situation. Sometimes it will mean swallowing our pride and personal preference to uplift the vision and good of the whole community. These are always tough calls and difficult to do in the moment. But rarely does Baptismal life take the road of least resistance. The road we're called to journey on is difficult and may seem narrow at times, but it is a good road and leads to life.

And here's the good news...God is here. Emmanuel, God is with us. God does not rid the world of chaos, but illumines it so that we do not have to be afraid in our uncertainty of whether things will work out. And because we covenant with a God who is present, we experience unspeakable joy and consolation. It is precisely because God is present and suffering with the world, that we can have faith. It is not because God is all powerful and far off and can fix things for us. God is present today in the waters of baptism and bread and wine of the eucharist which are both signs of God's death and resurrection. These are Sacraments of life, of life with eyes wide open and present to what is really going on within and around us. This is the abundant life Jesus showed us, it is life of the full spectrum of human experience.

Today on the baptism of our Lord, will you, will I renew our own baptismal covenant? For those us yet to be baptized, is this a life you desire? I sincerely hope so, for Christ's sake and the sake of the world. Amen.