

Let the Journey Begin *Luke 2:41-52; Psalm 29*

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Eleven-year-old Darren stood at the edge of the diving board at the local YMCA... for 25 minutes. His swimming teacher was treading water in the deep end, calling out to him to no longer hesitate and jump on in. His classmates were clinging to the pool wall encouraging him, “You got this, Darren! You’re the man!” His mother was looking through the glass in the observation nook squeezing her rosary, praying to Jesus that her son would just finally go for it.

“Ok, ok,” Darren said with a tremble in his voice. He took a tiny step forward and then three leaps backward. “No, no I can’t,” he shrieked. A collective groan echoed throughout the pool room. No one was sure if he would ever brave the water.

Water is dramatic. For all of us, water possesses this dualistic nature. It can be terrifying. It can be refreshing. It can be life-killing. It can be life-saving. What is your relationship to water? What are your earliest memories of it? Is it something that you have loved to always immerse yourself in? Or are you honestly still afraid of it?

Since the beginning of time (when the Spirit of the Lord blew over the watery chaos to create life), water has been a source of unpredictable power. It has sent sailors to the bottom of the sea and brought explorers to unexpected places. It has drawn strangers together at the well, and it has covered cities and islands like a blanket. Too often when we come to the font, we like to focus on the sweetness of water: that which refreshes us, restores us, redeems us. We don’t like to lift up what is dangerous about water. So, we tame it. We control it. But what would happen if just for today, we allow ourselves to really *trouble the water*—to meditate on the part that is most terrifying? Perhaps by doing this, we might find unexpected *good news* just below the surface.

Now, Mary and Joseph must have been terrified. Certainly, any parent or guardian here today understands the sort of fear that washes over them when a child goes missing—even for a moment, let alone three days in a bustling city at festival time. Back then, there were no amber alerts or cell phones or missing person ads. In ancient Jerusalem, being lost in such a place could make someone vulnerable to smugglers or slave catchers or soldiers. One could be robbed, tormented, taken advantage of, killed. This was no place for even a twelve-year-old Jewish tourist (on the brink of manhood) to wander off alone.

Throughout the centuries, many scholars and people of faith have been critical of Mary and Joseph for having lost their son. We might feel the same way. I mean how do you just happen to lose God incarnate? We wonder how they could let him go missing for so long? Why did they just assume that he was with other friendly travelers? Why hadn’t they secured an emergency meeting spot: “*midnight at the mikvah, don’t be late, honey*”? What kind of parents could just let their child wander off?

People were asking similar questions last year during the heartbreaking incident with the four-year-old boy who fell into the gorilla exhibit at the Cincinnati Zoo. On a video taken on someone’s phone, we could see the gorilla, Harambe, pulling the boy

through the water and then seemingly protecting him from it. It was a chaotic moment that didn't stop there. After the gorilla was shot, the nation remained conflicted—both devastated that the zoo had killed this innocent animal and at the same time, relieved that this young boy was safe. But what was most amazing was the world's immediate, fierce reaction towards the boy's mother. Online campaigns called for her to be charged criminally for losing sight of him. One of the many tweets read, "You killed [a gorilla] for protecting a child whose parents can't contain their own children!"¹ Another said, "Harambe was killed because of stupid...irresponsible parenting."²

For Mary and Joseph, their criticism would not come from a "tweet"; rather, they would place it upon themselves. After three days of feverish searching, they surely had lost all hope. Their son was gone.

When we speak about baptism, we express that it is a symbol of our new life in Christ. But we forget that baptism also represents a significant loss—something goes missing. The old life vanishes so a new life can be born.

Not unlike the Jewish *mikvah* baths used for conversion ceremonies, the earliest Christian baptismal fonts were shaped like tombs. Jesus followers would walk into the tomb bath and immerse themselves in the water, metaphorically dying with the crucified Christ below the surface. And then they would walk up and out, a fresh new soul resurrected through the power of the Holy Spirit. In our tradition today, we don't routinely practice immersion baptism, but the essence is still the same: typically, as infants we are brought to the font by our parents, where before community, we celebrate that through God's grace we are freed from sin and death and invited into the joy of fresh new life. There are no shortcuts in baptism, just as there are no short cuts to Easter morning. No way to skip to the end, fast forward to the good stuff. We need the loss, the death, that which is now gone in order to truly relish the salvific gift Christ Jesus brings to our lives. To put it simply, baptism water-marks the end of something, but it also marks the beginning of that which is endless. It begins our journey of faith in a God whose love is boundless and world-changing.

That day in Jerusalem, something about Jesus did die: his childhood, his reliance on his parents' protection. At Passover time in the holiest of cities, he wandered away to immerse himself in the Jewish faith they had instilled in him since his birth. He loved it, and wanted to explore it even more. So he ventured off on his own—without permission, without a plan. Through his teenage rebellion, he buried his childhood and began a new life fit for the danger and wonder of God's only Son.

He did not run away that day—not really. Rather, he ran towards what had been tugging at him his whole life. He elbowed his way through the long temple lines. He boldly planted himself before the high priests and rabbis. He did not stay silent. He asked questions. He challenged the answers. This was the essence of his faith. And all were amazed (and maybe some understandably annoyed) by this eager young man. Yes, that day Jesus the child died when he jumped feet first into an unknown journey, and it was there in the terror, in the danger of it all, that his ministry was born.

"Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" Jesus' first words in Luke's gospel take his parents' breath away. Once they had found him there, they were no doubt exhausted, relieved, probably very angry—who could blame them?

And we have no idea how 12-year-old Jesus delivered his line: maybe it was

sweet tenderness or maybe it was more like an exasperated whine. Either way, the message was the same, “Why are you searching for me when you know I have already been found? Mom and Dad, you introduced me to the turbulent waters of faith. You yourselves knew what it was like to trust God and to dive into the unknown. You brought me on long pilgrimages by foot each year to the holy city. You taught me how to praise God on my knees singing “the voice of the LORD is over the mighty waters.” You introduced me to a community that despite being oppressed continues to faithfully believe—no matter the cost.

So, here I am amongst my people, the ones you showed me to love. Here I am in God’s house, the One who calms the seas with just a voice. Here I am—right where I belong—where the Lord has always been waiting. How did you not know that I must be here?”

How did you find your way here? Here to the water? Who taught you first to dive into your faith? Do you remember? In today’s scripture, Jesus reminds us that we do not come to the water alone. We come as part of a Christian family willing to trust together in that which feels most terrifying: a life that does *not* promise calm seas or the easy road. It is a life that *does* promise hard work, rebellion, loss, sweat, and the possibility for world-changing transformation, a glimmer of hope that God’s peace, love, and justice can and will wash over.

Next weekend, thirty-seven youth and adults from our congregation will be taking our own leap of faith and heading to Charleston for our winter mission education trip. We will be looking at environmental issues that the city is facing, and its connection to race and poverty. When our youth signed up, no one asked what the itinerary would be (In fact I still haven’t told them.), but it was as if it wasn’t important. This church family has raised our young people up to take bold risks, to face whatever challenge lies ahead, to trust the water. That’s what true faith entails.

As Darren frantically tip-toed around the diving board, his teacher called out to him, “Darren, “You can do this! We believe in you!” Finally, Darren took a breath, closed his eyes, held his nose, and took the tiniest, tenderest jump off the board. When he felt his feet in the air, his mouth dropped; and when he burst through the top of the water, he took in a great big gulp of lukewarm chlorine. He panicked and began to move his hands and feet about. Finally, he felt two arms wrap tightly across his belly and pull him up to the surface. He inhaled a gust of fresh air with the same joy one feels when reuniting with an old friend. And in that moment, he’d never felt more alive, more afraid, more exhilarated. He had done it. He was immersed in water—for the first time. And he wasn’t done yet. “Now kick,” his teacher said. “Kick hard.”

Here at the font, our journeys of faith begin. Something old is gone and something new awaits us at the surface. Here we jump into the unknown and immerse ourselves in terrifying, glorious water. We let the danger, the risk of faith, wash over us because the good news is this: we believe, we know that God is always here—ready to catch us. We need only have the courage to trust that life-changing grace and the chutzpah to jump right in!

Notes

1 Grinberg, Emanuella, “In Gorilla’s Death, Critics Blame Mother, Cincinnati Zoo.” CNN, 30 May 2016. Web. 5 Jan. 2017.

2 Kimble, Lindsay, “Mom of 4-Year-Old Who Climbed into Zoo Pen Defends Herself from Backlash After Zookeepers Killed Gorilla.” *People*, 30 May 2016. Web. 5 Jan. 2017.