

It's only fair that I begin with a disclaimer.

The heavens did not open up over me this week, there was no voice, and the Holy Spirit, from which we literally get the word and concept of *inspiration*, did not appear as a dove gently alighting upon my shoulder.

If anything, it pooped on my head and flew off quickly, and I came to Saturday with no sermon ideas and the loathsome assignment of preaching on baptism yet again.

After so many babies and baptismal lessons, meetings and sermons across almost a decade at Resurrection, after so many families for whom baptism seems to lack the excitement and life-changing power of an auto club membership, this I must confess to you is probably the last subject I want to preach about, the least interesting, least fresh topic I can imagine at the moment.

Now that I've built up your interest to a fever pitch, let's get to that sermon!

Elli Thompson, Jill Linkus and Matt Wenz, Beloved children of God, affirm their baptisms today as they take the plunge to join Resurrection Lutheran Church.

I'm not so confident that they actually know what they are stepping into.

This lovely faith community isn't always sunshine and sweetness.

Just this week, there was a tornado of emails arguing back and forth about certain details in the final version of the church's proposed 2011 budget.

The tone of these emails varied from respectful to...not.

I want to share a snippet of one of these emails that is particularly on point:

We're all frustrated that it didn't work.

At the end of the day, Resurrection is a large dysfunctional family, and this [is] another disagreement between family members that will be resolved in some form, and we'll all move on to the next. I hope, [name omitted here], that as you take the time with your family, that you're able to find all the good in Resurrection (for there is so much) and enjoy all the things that brought you to Resurrection in the first place.

It is true that this is a wonderful community, a sacred gathering of saints.

It is also true that this is a flawed community, an asylum wall to wall with sinners.

We sometimes but don't always treat each other with Christian kindness.

The pastor can be whiny and immature, apparently even from the pulpit.

What Matt and Elli and Jill are joining as members today is a soiled mixture of mutual love and self-absorbed stupidity, of inspiration and irritation, justice and jackasses, faith and finger pointing, compassion and cruelty.

The baptismal river flowing through this corner of heaven's kingdom is a soiled mixture of water and waste, just like the Jordan River.

The author of Second Kings records the reaction of Naaman, commander of the Syrian army and leprosy patient, when Elisha instructs him to wash seven times in the Jordan to become clean:

*"I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy!
Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel?
Could I not wash in them, and be clean?"*

He turned and went away in a rage.

Unlike Jill, Matt and Elli, apparently, Naaman had standards.

Now, John the Baptist, a prophet in the mold of Elisha's mentor Elijah, stands in that same river, a few centuries filthier, baptizing the people of Israel and promising One on the way that will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire, which have got to scrub you cleaner than Jordan River water ever could.

Pastor Jen Rude, whom many of you know, elaborates:

Our vision of baptism is often so sanitized as we watch cute, clean babies sprinkled with water that is clear and fresh, replaced faithfully by the altar guild each week.

But this river would have been mucky.

It's where people bathed, washed clothes, and other sorts of things societies without sanitation systems use rivers for.

Think about Lake Michigan on one of the days the beach is closed because of hazardous pollution.

This is where Jesus comes.

That, of course, is why we call this story the Gospel, why we name it the Good News.

It is down into the mucky Jordan River, and into the mucky trickle of human history, that the presence of God named Jesus steps.

Like Naaman, John protests, as do all of us who hold standards for divinity and righteousness, who understand that God deserves far better than our soiled river and reputation, far finer than the stench and touch of manger straw and human skin.

John argues with Jesus as we all argue with God, and with one another, certain that we know better, certain that we can do better than what we have and how we are and where we stand and what we are doing.

Yet Jesus insists that all righteousness is somehow fulfilled in our muddy river, that the place where the pleasure of God happens is in the dust and grime of our earthy story.

God is delighted in the servant who accepts the divine assignment to go to the dungeon and the prison, to the hospital ward and the convalescent home that smells like death and urine, to the river that smells about the same for baptism by the calloused and mud-caked hands of a locust-eating man in the hot sun wearing sweat-soaked camel's hair he only washes now and then upstream from right here.

The astonishing and hardly believable good news is that God steps down into the disgusting sludge of a world stained with the blood of Arizona bystanders and innocent victims everywhere, soiled beyond hope with violence and incivility and senseless atrocity.

The heavens are ripped open and a dove descends to show us exactly where this story is going...it is heading to a cross where the joy of heaven hidden in human skin is ripped open and the life of God drips down as the dark blood of a political victim, a condemned man.

It is down, down into our river, our life, our soiled story, our dysfunctional system, our fragmented family, our mixed and mucky destiny that receives the presence and pleasure of God.

It is down into our toxic reality that Jesus steps, and when we stop our protestations and suspend our assumptions and plug our nose and take the plunge, we also discover what Naaman did.

There is hope in that murky water, there is healing in the blood.

There is righteousness and real love and the delight of God in the broken bread and the bulk rate wine and the tepid tap water and the words of the whiny, uninspired preacher and the national Communion fractured by opinion and the ebb and flow of life in un-sanitized community.

There is new life in the diseased waters, cleansing in the brownish river, hope somewhere, somehow in the desperate swirl of our common humanity.

Of all places, Jesus came to the Jordan.

Elli, Jill and Matt came here.

And for reasons we can barely begin to guess or to grasp, God is well pleased.