

Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

Mystic, Connecticut

Sermon from January 10, 2010

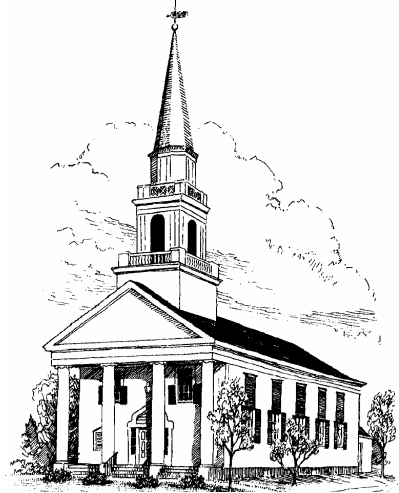
Rev. Ann M. Aaberg

“Aquatic Affirmation”

Scriptures:

Psalm 29

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22



For some of us it's a cup of coffee. For others it's an invigorating shower. For others, it's the alarm's snooze button, hit multiple times. Still others, a breakfast blender concoction full of vitamins. Whatever method you use to get yourself going in the morning, at this time of year, it just stops working.

It's January. It's winter. It's dark. It's holiday letdown time. It's back to what we put off until after Christmas ... only now it's after Christmas. Back to work, back to school, back to our regular routines, back to the projects we envisioned all kinds of time to tackle after the holidays, only we didn't count on not being able to get out of bed. Or off the couch. Or out of the chair.

The cold temperatures, the icy sidewalks, the overcast skies, the shortened daylight, all contribute to our desire to hibernate. That brisk walk in the sunshine is much harder to accomplish now. It's just so much easier to work on finishing the box of chocolates from Christmas.

And speaking of Christmas, we just spent a good month, if not more, in excited anticipation, expending all sorts of energy preparing for our celebration and now we're left with only random pine needles under the couch no matter how many times we've vacuumed. It could be we don't need to get going; maybe we just need a nap!

Letdown. Lethargy. [Now, here I must interject that if these symptoms, which are common to many this time of year, are more acute for you, longer lasting, truly debilitating, and are not funny, please see your doctor. Clinical depression is real, as are a host of other physiological ailments which do need professional attention.] For many, however, some fresh air, a little sunshine each day (if you can find it), some physical movement, and avoiding sugar and refined carbohydrates (which we've been eating for weeks) will refresh our energy. Social interaction helps, too.

Or, you could simply employ the cold water method. I thought the suggestion to splash cold water on one's face originated with my Dad who promoted it throughout my adolescence when I had trouble getting up for school. Used to do it in the army, he said, when you had to be awake and alert at a moment's notice. But recently I've noticed those groups of people who take annual whole body plunges in frigid waters as some sort of January ritual. The L Street

Brownies from South Boston run and jump and swim into Boston Harbor every New Year's Day. There's an Annual Polar Bear Swim in Vancouver, Canada. And a Coney Island Polar Bear Club who does the same thing. Icy plunges abound locally and globally. And when you see the photos and footage, there is no question, these people are *awake*. Their eyes bulge, they run in place, they shiver, they make high-pitched sounds—they're awake.

Baptism is an outward and visible sign of God's invisible grace. Baptism is an outward and visible sign of God's invisible grace. We baptize with water as a sign of our baptism in the Holy Spirit. And I find it both curious and comforting that on the second Sunday of January each year, when we are weighed down by winter and languishing in letdown, we encounter the baptism of Jesus. Down into and up out of the waters of the River Jordan, probably not as cold, but certainly resulting in a new awakening: for Jesus, and for all those people who were on the shore with him, and for all of us.

The baptism of Jesus is encountered in all four gospels and this morning we read Luke's very brief version, but which is characterized by what Presbyterian Pastor Ernest Hess from Atlanta, Georgia terms "Lukan distinctives", those elements which distinguish Luke's version of Jesus' baptism from the others. Verses 21 and 22 read: "Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'"

There are several outward and visible strategies we can employ to re-energize ourselves at this time of year, many of which I just mentioned, *physically* healthy practices; but we are whole people with souls and spirit, too, which yearn to be alive in God, and through which God's invisible grace also inspires us and moves us forward. I invite you to look with me now at three elements contained in those two verses which we can lean on.

Robert Brearley, another pastor from Georgia, tells us to notice that Jesus was baptized right along with all the other people who were baptized. He writes: "Jesus simply got in line with everyone who had been broken by the 'wear and tear' of this selfish world and had all but given up on themselves and their God. When the line of downtrodden and sin-sick people formed in hopes of new beginnings through a return to God, Jesus joined them. At his baptism, he identified with the damaged and broken people who needed God."

Both Brearley and his colleague Ernest Hess, point to another Lukan distinctive: Jesus' praying. Jesus is baptized and then he prays. Brearley continues to write: "He will not undertake his public ministry of teaching and healing in his own power and abilities. The source of his strength will be beyond himself. The Holy Spirit will encourage him all the way, even when the way becomes difficult."

So, Jesus lines up beside all the people to be baptized and then he prays. And while he's praying, the heavens open and the voice comes: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

I had a classmate in seminary who once offered to our discussion his take on the power

of prayer. He overheard his grandmother pray for him once and said he would never forget it. To hear his own name spoken by someone who dearly loved him in a conversation with God was so moving and made him feel so special and so loved. Jesus hears from his Father, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

Three elements of Luke’s version of Jesus’ baptism that we can take and embrace and incorporate into our own lives: Jesus is right alongside us always and gets it and gets us – no matter what we’re going through; Jesus prayed and prayed often and taught us to pray, to rely on the deep well of the Holy Spirit when our own runs dry; and third, just like Jesus, God names us and loves us. We witnessed our doing the same thing here this morning with Coco and with every person we baptize: we used water as a sign of new life, and we said her full name and we prayed and we held her and welcomed her and told her in the name of God that we would love her. My guess is that there is no doubt among this gathering that God is well pleased.

You, too, were baptized. If you weren’t, you always can be. If you were, someone said your name and used water and woke you up to a new life and prayed over you and, by doing so, showed you that same love, the love that comes to us from God. Each and every one of you is beloved by God.

And so, on this January day, as we struggle to clear the fog and fuzziness of too much holiday and not enough sunshine, I invite you to remember your Baptism. Remember your baptism so that you may continue to draw upon God’s grace. Even if you were an infant or a small child, recall now the grace and inspiration that is available to you just because God loves you. Remember that God knows your name and share the joy of that recollection by praying aloud for the people in your life within their earshot.

Whether you need a boost or you need a rest, remember your Baptism. The cleansing and awakening water.

Whether you need to get moving or you need to slow down, remember your Baptism. The saying of your own full name.

Whether you need to wake up or you really need a nap, remember your Baptism. The prayers said over you.

Whether you’re feeling down or you’re on top of the world, remember your Baptism. The outward and the inward celebration of you as a child of God.

In your moments alone with God, in your heartfelt pleas and in your sincere thanksgiving, remember your Baptism. The love, the new life, the reliable grace that will always be with you.

And when you do, remember, too, the baptism of Jesus, our eternal companion, God’s son, our Savior. Allow it to move you, to wake you up, to carry you through. Amen.

