

SERMON TITLE: "Living Water: Birthing Water"
SERMON TEXT: John 3:1-17
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: August 1, 2021, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

Aren't you glad that we got some rain this week? What a relief that has been! Now, if only we can get a whole bunch more. Because we've been in such an extreme drought this summer, I thought it would be a good idea to do a sermon series on water stories from the Gospel of John. Last Sunday, we started with the story of Jesus' first miracle, as told in John, chapter two. Jesus was with family and friends at a wedding. When the host ran out of wine, Jesus turned water into wine.

Out here in the dry western United States, we might have a greater need to turn wine back into water. It seems like water managers are trying to squeeze every drop of water they can from the Colorado River and the other major watersheds of our region. In spite of the little bit of rain we've had here in Northern Utah and the strong rainstorms they've had in the southern part of the state, all our big reservoirs and lakes are at their lowest levels ever recorded. The Great Salt Lake, Lake Powell, and Lake Mead; our own Pineview Reservoir; and all the other water bodies will need huge amounts of rain and snow to reinvigorate them. It's like they need to be reborn.

Birthing water is the focus of today's scripture reading from the Gospel of John. In chapter three, we overhear Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus. Even though Nicodemus was a fully-grown man, Jesus was telling him that he needed to be born of water and the Spirit. Let's dive into this story and see how we too could come alive with this birthing water.

1—PHYSICAL BIRTH

On one level, this conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus about rebirth begins with the material realities of physical birth. Jesus obviously wanted to talk about being born from above, born again, or born of the Spirit, but Nicodemus wasn't quite ready for that yet. As soon as Jesus said the

word “born,” Nicodemus rushed to object, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” And that’s when Jesus mentioned the need to be born of both water and Spirit.

We’ll get to that Spirit part later. First things first. Our physical bodies are essential to our life—and water is a big part of that. As a baby is growing in the womb, it’s surrounded by amniotic fluid. When the water breaks, the mother knows the baby is ready to enter the world. And, even after we’re born, our physical bodies are still very involved with water. “Up to 60% of the human adult body is water, and certain parts of our bodies have more. The brain and heart are composed of 73% water, and the lungs are about 83% water. The skin contains 64% water, muscles and kidneys are 79%, and even the bones are watery [at] 31%.”¹

Here are some of the things that water does for our physical bodies. Water is

needed by the brain to manufacture hormones and neurotransmitters. [It] forms saliva [and aids in] digestion. [It] keeps . . . membranes moist. [Water] allows [the] body’s cells to grow, reproduce, and survive. [Water] regulates body temperature [through] sweating and respiration. [Water] acts as a shock absorber for [the] brain and spinal cord. [Water] converts food components needed for survival [and] flushes body waste. [Water] lubricates joints [and] helps deliver oxygen all over the body.¹

So, even though Jesus wanted to get Nicodemus thinking about the Spirit, starting with the water of physical birth made sense. After all, it was God who made us this way and called our creation good. As stated in verse 16, it’s because “God so loved the world”—that is, the physical world of land and seas, plants and animals, and flesh-and-blood human beings—that God “gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but have everlasting life.” And, as we read in verse 17, God’s intent isn’t to condemn, punish, or destroy the material world. God’s great desire of love is to save the world and all the watery bodies that inhabit it. That’s why this story of living water is a story about physical birth.

2—SPIRITUAL BIRTH

Eventually, however, Jesus did move the conversation on to the next level. Jesus also wanted to talk about the spiritual birth that was needed by Nicodemus and any of us who desire to participate in the kingdom of God. But, even as the conversation moved to the importance of the Spirit and spiritual rebirth, there was still a connection to water.

Last Sunday, when I began this series, I started in John, chapter two. If I had begun with John, chapter one, we would have read the story of Jesus' baptism by John in the Jordan River. I saved that story to go with this one today because Jesus' baptism is a good illustration of what Jesus was teaching Nicodemus. You may recall that when Jesus was being baptized in the Jordan River, the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus like a dove. On that day, Jesus was born of water and Spirit. So Jesus knew what he was talking about, and he wanted Nicodemus to have this same kind of experience.

Similarly, in the many stories from the Book of Acts that we read in May, June, and July, the coming of the Holy Spirit was closely associated with baptism. You may recall that the new believers in the early church often received the Holy Spirit just before, while, or soon after being baptized in water. And that's why many interpreters of this Nicodemus story have understood "being born of water and Spirit" to be the spiritual birth that occurs when a person repents of their sins and is baptized.

Unlike Holy Communion, which we partake on a regular basis, Christian baptism is a once-in-a-lifetime sacrament. That infrequency makes it a little hard for us to hold onto our feelings about the experience. Many of us were baptized when we were babies and have no memory of it at all. Even if we were baptized as teenagers or adults, that was so long ago that a tremendous amount of water has passed under the bridge since then. Fortunately, however, we do have a ritual of baptismal reaffirmation in our United Methodist Hymnal that we can use anytime we feel a need to remember our baptisms. An occasional use of this reaffirmation ritual allows us recommit ourselves to God, renew our life in Christ, and be reborn by water and the Spirit.

3—SOCIAL KINGDOM BIRTH

If you're here in the sanctuary, I invite you to take hold of the red United Methodist hymnal and turn to page 50. On page 50 you'll see the Congregational Reaffirmation of the Baptismal Covenant. As I read these words on page 50, think with me about their deep meanings and implications.

Brothers and sisters in Christ:
Through the Sacrament of Baptism
we are initiated into Christ's holy church.
We are incorporated into God's mighty acts of salvation
and given new birth through water and the Spirit.

In just that little introduction, you hear the words "initiated" and "incorporated." When we receive the water of baptism, we are drawn into the family of faith. Just as water pumps around in our bodies to buffer, nourish, and flush, so does our birth in water and Spirit allow us to get along with, encourage, and improve one another in the community of the church and the larger society in which God calls us to live and serve.

And, yes, being born of water and Spirit does also birth us into that kingdom of God that Jesus mentioned in John 3:3. What does that kingdom look like? Well, we can keep looking at our Baptism ritual for some ideas. On hymnal page 50 again, notice that it asks:

Do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness,
reject the evil powers of this world,
and repent of your sin?

See the next question?

Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you
to resist evil, injustice, and oppression
in whatever forms they present themselves?

How about the next question?

Do you confess Jesus Christ as your Savior,
put your whole trust in his grace,
and promise to serve him as your Lord,
in union with the church which Christ has opened
to people of all ages, nations, and races?²

There are more questions, but you get the idea. Being born of water and the Spirit isn't just a Jesus-and-me experience, nor is it only for our heavenly salvation after we die. When baptismal water and Spirit get together, there's power for changing a whole society into the kingdom of God where evil is rejected and where injustice and oppression are actively resisted. Those baptized in water and Spirit are born into the kingdom of God, where we become intentional participants with Christ in bringing about healing and hope for all of human society. Being born of water and Spirit and into the kingdom of God is no small matter. As the baptism ritual says, we become "incorporated into God's *mighty acts* of salvation."

Wow! For me, at least, that conjures up images like God parting the waters of the Red Sea to liberate the Hebrews from Egyptian slavery. Living water truly is water that births us into something new—in our physical bodies, our spiritual lives, and our human society.

CONCLUSION

In pre-COVID times, if we wanted to do a Congregational Reaffirmation of our Baptismal Covenant, we would all walk up to the baptismal font, dip our own hands into the water, and then touch our wet fingers to our heads. Since COVID is still hanging around, I'm not sure we should use a common bowl of water like that. So, we'll do a pandemic adaptation. When you come up for communion in a few minutes, I'll invite you to get some hand sanitizer from the stations and imagine that you are using water. Apply it to your hands and put a tiny bit on your forehead. If you're watching this service from home on Facebook Live, of course you can use the water you have. Let's all affirm our faith in Christ. Let's allow ourselves to come alive through birthing water.

¹https://www.usgs.gov/special-topic/water-science-school/science/water-you-water-and-human-body?qt-science_center_objects=0#qt-science_center_objects

²The United Methodist Publ. House: Nashville, 1989.