

I wonder if God has a special fondness for water. Some of the most important moments in the Bible involve water such as Noah's ark, or the escape through the Red Sea or the wedding at Cana, or the events happen on or near a body of water such as a lake, or as in today's Gospel, a river. The Church even has a sacrament involving water, the sacrament of Baptism.

By its nature, a sacrament is not for the intellect to parse and comprehend. A sacrament is a manifestation of God at work transforming, uniting, renewing, reclaiming the world and all of us who are in it. To help us come close to God, we have rituals around sacraments that are as practical as they are symbolic. But these rituals are not magic; God is not dependent on nor constrained by how we perform rituals. The purpose of rituals is to help us step out of our expectations or illusion of control to glimpse the presence of the holy, to recognize the sacredness of the water we are near, or the ground upon which we are resting, standing, or sitting.

One of the best examples of this comes from the comedy movie *O Brother, Where Art Thou*. For those who have not watched it, *O Brother* is loosely based on Homer's *Odyssey*, about a man named Everett, who breaks free of a chain gang with the help of two other convicts named Pete and Delmar by convincing them he had a hidden treasure he would share if they helped him escape. The movie is a series of comedic yet meaningful encounters the three characters have on their journey to the treasure, which they must get to before it is lost forever under water from a new dam.

In one scene, the three characters were hiding from the police in the woods when they heard music. It wasn't the call of the siren, but a choir on their way to the water singing about going down to the river to pray. Drawn by the song, the men follow the choir to a lake where a minister was baptizing people. One of the characters, Delmar, ran into the water, said something to the minister, who then baptized him. As Delmar emerged from the water, he did so with a sense of renewal that meant he was going to live differently. He even promised, "It's the straight and narrow for me from now on."

As the movie progressed, Delmar really did live into his promise. Although it wasn't a drastic change, he did think about situations differently. Still on the run from the law, he didn't intentionally participate in any activity that would harm someone else. When his friends took a pie left on a windowsill to cool (because they

were hungry and afraid of being recognized in a store), Delmar left money in its place. And when his friends spoke, he listened with care, was kind and honest in his responses, didn't blame or call them names when he frustrated or angry. Delmar still dealt with the stuff of sin and the harm it causes, but from a different perspective, one where he somehow knew he carried with him and in him what the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, The Most Rev. Michael Curry calls the antidote to sin. Love. The love Delmar carried with him eventually made a difference in his friends, even the cynical Everett who at the end of the movie, when all his schemes and cleverness failed him and he faced his own destruction and consequences of his lies, dropped to his knees to pray to God for help. In that moment, the promised flood waters washed over the three characters. No longer the water of destruction, the flood was the characters' salvation, which was the true treasure. In its way, *O Brother Where Art Thou* is a charming exploration of the sacrament of baptism and its embodiment of God's love and God's judgment which is salvation, not damnation.

We can also recognize this in today's Gospel when Jesus went to the Jordan River to be baptized by John. In so doing, Jesus not only began his public ministry, he transformed the baptism of John from that of repentance to salvation. What John the Baptist was offering was a response to sin – the sin in people and the world. Sin is connected to baptism like death is connected to resurrection. They can't be separated because they are part of the same thing. Sin, if you remember, isn't necessarily doing bad things. Sin is intentional turning away from God to cause harm. Sin is a form of selfishness and leads to all manner of problems, division, and suffering. Sin is both out there in the world and in us; we all have the freedom to choose ourselves, our will, our desires, over God's will. This doesn't make us bad, by nature, it just part of how life works. Remember, God made humanity in God's image, proclaiming us good. That is our nature. But we sometimes forget that, especially when we turn away from God.

John the Baptist wanted to prepare people for the arrival of the Messiah, who would restore them to right relationship with God, by participating in his baptism of repentance. It was a ritual and opportunity to renounce an individual's sins, to be ready for the Messiah by turning back to God. Jesus, it can be argued, didn't need a fresh start like that. This is why John expressed reluctance to baptize Jesus, insisting instead Jesus should be the one baptizing him. If that is what baptism was meant to be, then John would have been right. But God had other intentions. Remember, this event took place in the water, and God often chooses water for reclaiming people and relationships.

This is probably why Jesus did not capitulate to John's suggestion. Instead, he was baptized the same as all the other people who came to John, showing that God's love is not separate nor above even the worst sinner. God is with the sinner, in the very same water, on the very same earth. God's salvation is not punishment for wrongdoing, it is not a flood of destruction, it is love that endures through anything, and like ripples on water, it is a love that flows, and can transform, renew, unite, reclaim, and redeem, it is a love that powerful because it comes first to our level to slowly, gradually, through the journey or odyssey of life, be with us, never losing hope we will chose that love over any of our own schemes, goals, or desires.

Today we are called, like the song in the movie, to go down to the river of baptism to pray, to listen, and to remember our connection to God and each other, and God's love for all life, for you and for me, the earth, and for the water. We might not be literally going to a river, but perhaps whenever we see water today when we are washing our hands, cooking, or drinking it, maybe we can pause for just a second and wonder at God's fondness for water by transforming it into a symbol of our salvation.