

# “Grace Flowing from Water and Spirit”

Isaiah 42:1-9; Acts 10:34-43; Matthew 3:13-17

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From the Pulpit

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A baptismal meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, January 8, 2023, The Baptism of Christ, dedicated to all the newborns, infants, children, teens, women, men, and seekers who have been baptized into Christian faith at First Congregational Church since 1852, to my outgoing Senior Minister Member Minister Advisory Group: Kristen Blanks, Gerry Hudson, Jen Provenzano, Tom Kiesel, Steve Sterrett and Duan Cannon in gratitude for all their listening and support through the years, to Mark Williams as he goes out into the world and seeks new avenues to serve and always to the glory of God!

**“Grace Flowing from Water and Spirit”**

Isaiah 42:1-9; Acts 10:34-43; Matthew 3:13-17

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Jesus appears. Nothing is said about all the years and all that happens in his life since his infancy. If we were counting on Matthew to fill in the blanks of 30 years, we shouldn't have held our breath. Blue is not our best look (unless we are Avatars from the Planet Pandora).

Jesus simply appears.

For thirty years Jesus has waited on the sidelines in a small town in the hills of Galilee named Nazareth. All this time he has been working in the Carpenter's Shop and performing the duties of an oldest son in a growing Jewish peasant family. He has been waiting, knowing that the success of his mission or any mission in life is timing and his time is yet to be. He has been waiting for the hour to come, for the summons to sound and finally, when John the Baptizer appears at the river, in the desert, Jesus knows that time for appearing has arrived.

How does he know this is the time to come to John in the River Jordan for baptism – for the repentance of sins? Simply this – never in all the history before this had any Jew ever submitted to be baptized. It was inconceivable. Baptism was used only by Jews for those who came to their faith from another faith or no faith at all.

It was literally beyond belief that any member of the Chosen People, any son of Abraham, anyone who claimed connection to the Lineage of King David would ever **NEED** to be baptized. Baptism was for sinners **AND NOT CHOSEN ONES**. It was saved for those who recognized their sins, who submitted to this act as though they had to clean up their lives, confess and be forgiven, turn everything around by the power of God's Spirit and the presence of water to wash away all their sins.

This national movement of Jews coming out into the desert from the cities, towns and countryside, coming out to John to go down into the muddy Jordan River and confess their sins and get cleansed by water and the Holy Spirit was like no other movement that had happened in the history of Judaism. Jesus knew this and he knew that was where his coming out party was to be!

So, Jesus appears. And John can't believe his eyes.

I totally get this. Don't you? The one whom John has been proclaiming as greater than himself, as the one who all are to follow, appears and asks to be baptized. Imagine you are in John's place. You are the vessel of God's love and mercy stepping out on faith to welcome people to a new way of living and loving, a way which will be led by the true Messiah, the son of God and then this Messiah of God steps into the water inches from your face. He is The CHOSEN ONE. He is sinless. He is pure – and he is asking to be baptized – like everybody else?

And Jesus speaks beautiful words to John as they stand face to face. He simply says, "Let this happen now." He gracefully releases John from all his reservations and it is Grace that abounds in the all the moments that follow.

John is humble in this moment. All the flames of fire we associate with John are doused by the presence of Jesus and the power of God's Holy Spirit.

**FOR NOW, John simply baptizes Jesus.**

What transpires proves that John is right. When Jesus comes out of the water all Heaven Breaks Loose. As one translation says, "BANG! The heavens open and the Breath of God comes down upon like a dove. And God speaks and She says, *"This is my son, my beloved in whom I am well pleased."*

That is correct. **She says...** The voice of God, according to Matthew, is feminine. God speaks in a feminine voice – at least in this moment and in many others throughout scripture. For all of you who have been saying for years that the voice of God is feminine –

you win the Mega-lottery of Biblical Interpretation. For all who are shocked, check out your Greek. Although it may have been presented incorrectly for 2000 years, it is true. God's voice is feminine. I could stop there... but there is more to say.

Jesus is sent on his mission by her. She sends him forth into the desert blessed and beloved to set out on his work. It is there, we will meet him again as he encounters his second conversation – this time with Satan. But that is another story for another Sunday – the first Sunday of Lent or February 26th, not for the first Sunday of Epiphany.

There is so much to unpack in this baptismal story. Jesus waiting and timing is first appearance. John is silenced and humbled. The Holy Spirit is a dove descending and the voice of God as she offers love, blessing and sending. We have grace abounding in water and spirit.

There are many surprises in this story. They are all wrapped by Grace. Grace surprises us all of the time. Grace is found in the waiting of a young carpenter named Jesus; in the face of John when he first meets Jesus in the water; in the Spirit gently arriving like a dove and in Jesus emerging from the water blessed by God in all her glory. Grace is found in silence, in waiting, in meeting face-to-face; in the burst of a heaven opening and shining forth on a cloudy covered day, in receiving a voice of love and a blessing, in stepping out of the muddy waters of our lives and going forth to serve.

Baptism is our graceful entrance into our life of faith in Jesus. It splashes and cleanses. It lands like a dove and sends us out to serve. Today, as we renew our vows of baptism, as we step into this season of light and delight, let us receive the fullness of grace in this experience and in this day.

Whatever has kept us away from the love of God, let the graceful presence of water and Spirit wash that away. Whatever anger and resentments we are hanging onto, let the graceful presence of God's Water and Spirit wash that away. Whatever we hold onto that keeps us judging another rather than loving another, let the graceful presence of God's water and Spirit wash that away. Whatever belief you cling to keeps you away from loving someone else unconditionally, let the graceful presence of God's water and Spirit wash that away.

In the words of Jesus to John as they stood face to face in the River Jordan, "Let it happen now." Amen.

