

Great Vigil of Easter 2021
with baptism

Genesis 1:1—2:4a

Exodus 14:10-31; 15:20-21

Isaiah 55:1-11

There was a path along the river,
Where the boy liked to go,
Year after year,
When he was visiting family.
Spring and summer,
And sometimes in the fall,
He would slip away from the house
And go down to the river,
And walk along the path,
Until he came to the enormous old willow tree,
With branches hanging way out over the water.

As he grew, he climbed farther and farther,
Until one day when he was almost grown.
That day he went up as high as he could go,
And as far out over the water as a branch would hold him.
And there he sat, his legs dangling,
Leaves all around his head,
And the sun shining down,
The river drifting slowly by,
And he was drifting with it,
Thinking of nothing.

Until all of a sudden,
Everything was full of light,
Sharp and clear,
Totally alive.
The sun was gleaming off the river
And the water was full of light
And the leaves were speaking to him
And he was keenly aware and utterly present in the moment.
But only for a moment,
And then it was over.

An old man came into my office one day
To tell me that story,
And when he finished,
There were tears in his eyes.
After a long silence, I said,

You must have thought of that moment over the years.
I have thought of it every day of my life since that day, he said,
And I have never told a soul.

We talked some more,
And then, as he was leaving, he said,
I am glad I told that story.
I wonder how things might have been different,
If I had told it sooner.

Would his life have been different,
Do you suppose,
If he had let the light shine,
Let the water flow?

That moment of light and water,
In and out of time,
At one with all things,
That moment lay buried within him,
A treasure that he kept secret from the world.
It gave him beauty and peace;
It was his touchstone and his private joy.
But near the end of his life,
He wondered –
Was it to hold close,
Or to celebrate and share?
His life was lit from within by the water of life,
Seen for an instant and embraced for a lifetime.
But no one knew about the light and the water in his life.

Light and water are the essence of life,
And we offer them as sign and symbol
In the sacrament of baptism.
They are the means by which we express
The truth that is already present:
The grace,
The welcome, acceptance, and love
Of the God who breathed over the waters of creation
And brought light into being with a word of power.
The God who acts for freedom and deliverance,
Parting the waters with a mighty hand.
The God who offers water to the thirsty,
Freely, abundantly.

God's action in our lives
Can be seen as clearly as light sparkling on water,

Or wind rippling the water.
God's vision for the world
Is like daybreak, showing clearly what was already there.

We respond to this love,
This vision,
These actions,
When we come to waters of baptism
And promise to let what God has already done
Change our lives.

Baptism doesn't change anything
About God's love for us,
Or our belonging in God's world.
God already loves us, welcomes us,
And invites us to live peaceably
In a world created for good.
That is true from the beginning,
And will never change.

So why does baptism matter?

Baptism matters because we need to express,
In word and action,
The truths that shape our lives.
We are embodied creatures,
Social creatures,
Thinking and speaking creatures.
So we need to act with our bodies,
In community,
What we have struggled to understand and express
In our minds and hearts.

Deep truths can lie buried in our hearts,
And give richness to our lives,
And perhaps be glimpsed by those around us.

But it's when we do the hard work of bringing them forth,
Giving them shape in word and action,
That we become co-creators of the world
God is still bringing to fullness.

When we come to the waters of baptism,
Waters that echo the waters of creation,
Of exodus,
Of reconciliation and return,

Of promise fulfilled,
When we come to the waters of baptism,
As Jesus did,
We make a commitment
To let God's love,
Jesus' passion,
The Holy Spirit's power
Change our lives –
And to let that show.

We make a promise to let what God has done
Give us hope, and strength,
And the will to act.

God is always doing incredible things:
Showering sunlight on the water
And bringing water from the rock.
And giving frail and fallible human creatures
The power to seek the good,
To work for justice,
To speak truth,
To forgive.

Baptism doesn't make us good or keep us safe.
But it changes our lives.
It allows us to enact what is already true,
To show on the outside what is already inside,
To trust that it is never too late to return,
To trust that nothing too broken to mend,
Nothing too terrible to be forgiven.

There are many ways to embrace and enact these truths.
Baptism is the way of the Christian household.
It is the way we, as Christians,
Begin, and begin again and again,
To take to our hearts,
And express in our words and actions,
Our glimpses of all God has done for us.

The world needs people
Who act on the knowing of their hearts,
Who let their faith shine like light
And flow like water.
The world needs people of every faith
And the good people who profess no faith
To speak of what they know,

To act on what they believe,
To stand up for what is right.

For us, as Christians,
Baptism means a commitment to these faithful actions.
It is what we promise,
It is our gift,
And it becomes our life.

We begin again, now.
This holy night, when the light returns,
Is the time to welcome new Christians to this way of faith,
And a time for all of us to renew our promise,
To let the light we have been given shine through us
And to return to the water of life.