

Come to the Water

At the end of chapter 2, the writer of Matthew tells us that the holy family returns from their time as refugees in Egypt and chooses to settle in Nazareth, a good distance from Jerusalem and Archelaus, Herod's son. Then the narrative fast-forwards several decades to John, a wilderness preacher. [Read 3:1-17]

As you may know the gospel of Matthew is concerned to connect the Jesus we meet here with the Messiah promised in the Hebrew Bible. The writer will tell us repeatedly over the chapters to come that this or that event is to fulfill something written in the prophets. It happens in our text this morning with John, too. In at least one text in the Hebrew Scriptures, it is said that Elijah will appear just ahead of the Messiah. Elijah was also known for his interesting wardrobe choices and diet. And so we get John—who as one scholar notes—“wears the costume and eats the diet. He's fully committed to this role.”¹ Scratchy clothes—check, leather belt—check. Locusts seem like an odd choice to my pizza and cheeseburger-loving self, but they are considered clean—meaning ok for faithful Israelites to eat. They are also free and readily available to those who are poor and living on the margins. It's not that John has read his bible and casts himself in the role of Elijah. He is clearly called to this role. In all four gospel accounts he is the herald of the beginning of Jesus' ministry. He knows that change is afoot, that the Messiah is not only coming but is in fact near. John is not part of the religious elite. He is an outsider who is not caught up in the trappings of power that comes from cozying up with Rome. And so he becomes a living breathing voice to all who find themselves on the outside with him, those whom the powerful discount and overlook. Those who have every reason to long for a Savior. He declares not only that it is time to turn from the bad but that there is something—someone good to turn toward, the Messiah who comes to offer new life enlivened by hope and justice. So he meets them at the Jordan, the river that holds so much power in our ancestors' story, in our story. It is the Jordan that the Israelites cross to enter the Promised Land; it is the Jordan that marks the end of one life and the beginning of another. So John meets

¹ https://ecologian.wordpress.com/2019/01/03/a-funny-thing-matthew-3/?fbclid=IwAR1V4OxQXnS9Pz43nnaNF1eXWFXyEnmD63os9iAptfc0kBc7bmZznXaP_qA

them in these holy waters to help them remember what new life and promise meant earlier, to help them understand what new life and promise still mean in Jesus the Messiah.

Because they have started to forget. Or perhaps they have forgotten entirely. Much has happened since that long ago wilderness trek that first took them through the Jordan. The glory days of King David's kingdom were short-lived; the kingdom divided and then was defeated. Their ancestors were driven into exile. The Temple was destroyed. And they have traded one oppressor for another, repeatedly. Each new leader has styled himself as Lord or Savior or both and more. And yet there has been very little that has offered true redemption or hope or justice, especially for anyone outside the halls of power. And so John meets them at the water to help them remember that there is another way, another One whose power is not reserved for the ones whose names are on plaques or letterheads, but for each and every woman, man, and child. Maybe John needs to remember and be reminded, too. Because even preachers need reminders of what it is to believe in the God whose ways are not always as visible as palaces and royal processions. In the face of a broken system that seems to call all the shots and wield all the power, it can be good for all of us to return to the water.

Water is—after all—essential to our survival. For a people living in an arid climate, the Israelites were likely more aware than most of just how essential water is. But *we* tend to forget. Health experts give us tricks and tips to help us get enough water. There are apps and life hacks to help remind us. There is even a water bottle that glows when you've gone too long without taking a sip. It's gimmicky and maybe a bit silly, but it is also urgently serious. Because to go without water is to deprive our bodies of one of our most basic needs.

Lewis Hornby is described as “a grandson on a mission.” As a student in London, Lewis became increasingly concerned about how easily his grandmother, a dementia patient became dehydrated. Hornby points out that, “Many [memory patients] no longer feel thirst, don't know how to quench thirst, or don't have the dexterity to drink.”² After his grandmother was hospitalized for dehydration, Hornby wanted to find a creative way to help:

In addition to seeking advice from psychologists and doctors, he opted to ‘experience’ life with dementia himself through the use of virtual reality tools and a week in a care home.

² <https://mymodernmet.com/lewis-hornby-jelly-drops/>

Once he was familiar with what dementia patients need, he brainstormed what they *want*. ‘From my observations, people with dementia find eating much easier than drinking. Even still, it can be difficult to engage and encourage them to eat. I found the best way to overcome this is to offer them a treat! This format excites people with dementia, they instantly recognize it and know how to interact with it.’³

So Hornby created Jelly Drops:

Each of these colorful ‘candies’ is made up of mostly water, with gelling agents and electrolytes making up just 10% of their composition. Available in a rainbow of colors and presented in packaging reminiscent of a box of chocolates, Jelly Drops are an easy and engaging way to avoid dehydration—a common problem for those suffering from degenerative neurological diseases.⁴

And they work.

Case in point? Hornby’s own grandmother’s reaction: ‘When first offered, grandma ate seven Jelly Drops in 10 minutes, the equivalent to a cup full of water—something that would usually take hours and require much more assistance.’⁵

I am in awe of Lewis Hornby’s creativity and brilliance, but I am perhaps most in awe of the way his love for his grandmother has driven him to come up with a better way for her to get the water her body needs to thrive as best it can even in the face of a devastating disease. What a gift! And it hinges on something as simple as water.

Moments ago Eli invited the children to touch the water in the font. As we confess our sins, many weeks I pour water into the font, because I for one can use some help remembering to return to the water, to hear and see the water, like grace poured out in abundance. And I am guessing I am not alone. We are baptized only once, and yet every time we baptize another, every time we install officers, we are invited to return to the water, to remember our baptism, to remember the Christ in whom our new life begins, to begin again with and in him. We need to get back to the water, and we need help remembering what this water is all about.

Ahead of Jesus’ arrival, John preaches repentance and confession of sins, a baptism that reminds us of God’s determination to wash away all that weighs us down and divides us from God and one another. He speaks

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with passion about the need for those who are baptized, those who have turned away from the former life to turn toward a life that bears good fruit, a life that thrives, a life that nourishes others. He warns that the one to come will sort the bad from the good and toss all that is not worthwhile into the fire. And then Jesus shows up and invites John into the water with him and calls on John to baptize him, which throws John for a loop. Here is this One whose sandals John is unworthy to carry asking John to baptize *him*: “to fulfill all righteousness,” Jesus says. To reveal fully what righteousness, right relationship looks like. And it is at that moment when the heavens part and God declares “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” It is *that* moment when God applauds from the heavens and shouts from beyond time and space. It is that moment when even John’s ideas about who this Jesus is supposed to be are blown wide open. It is in that moment that even John—the renegade, locust-eating, fire and brimstone preaching prophet is made new, too. This is what it looks like for the kingdom of heaven to draw near.

Because yes, Jesus expects us to live lives worthy of him, to value people over power and to fight for others’ needs over our wants. Yes, he comes to bring judgment on the many ways we fall short as people created in God’s image. *And* like Lewis Hornby, he also comes and walks around in our shoes to see what it’s like to be us, and for us to get to know him, God’s own Son up close. Because the God we meet in Jesus Christ wants to know us, all of us—the vipers, the locust-eaters, the renegades, the skeptics, the ones who have kept all of our resolutions and the ones who could not find the will to make any this year. And he wants us to live the life God created us to live from the beginning. Jesus comes to offer us life that is abundant and free. He comes to offer us the water of life. Drop by drop, this water quenches our deepest thirst, washes away our darkest fears, and brings us back from the brink of death itself. Even when we forget. So much has happened, so much pain has been shared, so much anger has been stirred up, so little trust remains, so much has been lost, including us on occasion. We may have forgotten, but we have not *been* forgotten. So hear the invitation again: come, meet Christ in the water and remember your baptism. Remember what it is to be washed clean and claimed as God’s very own, to hear God proclaim to you, “Here is my beloved child. With you I am well pleased.”

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.