

Matthew 3:13-17 ~ Acts 10:34-43

Step into the River

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The Rev. Dr. Laurie Brubaker Davis

Introduction to Scripture:

Where does your resistance begin? For John the Baptist, he immediately resisted the idea of baptizing Jesus, the one whose sandals John felt unworthy to carry. “I need to be baptized by you and do you come to me?” is what Matthew (and only Matthew) wrote in 3:14. I imagine he was thinking “This can’t be right. On so many levels. You’re the Messiah, and I am not. You don’t sin, I do. Why do you even *need* a baptism of repentance?” But then John overcame his resistance, and baptized Jesus, immersing him in the River Jordan. And when Jesus came up out of the water, suddenly the heavens were opened. Good call, John.

For Peter, in the Book of Acts, his resistance to baptizing Cornelius gets tested and bested only after a vivid dream repeated three times with a voice saying to Peter “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.” Peter’s reason for resisting the idea of baptizing Cornelius is the opposite of John’s. At the time it was unlawful for a Jew to associate or even visit any Gentile all of whom were considered to be profane and unclean. But *baptizing* one? That seemed totally wrong. Cornelius was a Gentile centurion of the Italian Cohort: a man of a different religion and different culture than Peter. How could baptizing him, possibly be right? We pick up the story when both Cornelius and Peter are in the same room sharing their parallel mystical experiences that have drawn this unlikely pair together. That’s where our scripture begins. We are about to hear Peter’s sermon sorting out this latest surprise: the core of Christ’s message is really to fulfill not some, but all righteousness. Does Lord of all, really mean Lord of everyone?

Sermon:

Where does my resistance begin? I will be honest. In the Lord’s baptism story in Matthew, it begins with the word “righteousness.” It sounds churchy and boring, “judgy” and narrow. Let’s try to make friends it. Especially now that we are in the year of Matthew (Year A in the 3-year lectionary cycle). It will keep popping up, whether we like it nor not. I’m confident we can rehab it, by re-habituating ourselves to its true meaning—which is actually the opposite of churchy and boring, judgy, and narrow. “Righteousness” is a call to action at the very heart of being a Christ follower. It’s in the very first sentence that Jesus ever speaks in Matthew. We heard it in our first lesson that Isaac read. It’s what Jesus says in response to John the Baptist’s objection to baptizing Jesus. He says to John, “Let it be so for now for it is proper for us to fulfill all righteousness.” (Matt 3.15)

The Hebrew term for a righteous person is *tzaddik* which means *one who is obedient to the divine will*, as Jesus interprets in his Sermon on the Mount. Take a look at Matthew 5 – 7, if you haven’t lately. This is not some stuffy, goody two-shoes keep-your-nose-clean kind of living. This kind of righteousness, according to Jesus means doing for, putting yourself out there for, the “least of these” through radical acts of compassion that turn the world upside down. Jesus drives

home this point in Matthew 25 with the parable of the sheep and the goats. The ones who do for others, and the ones who don't.

Today, *this kind of righteousness* means Savior Jesus getting baptized by off-the-grid, intense, riffing as he went, John the Baptist. John had already taken the traditional Jewish purification ritual, known as *Mikveh*, something performed repeatedly after natural life cycles and activities that made people ritually unclean; and changed it into a once in a lifetime baptism of repentance or atonement. Yes, *this kind of righteousness* calls for improv and agility. Jesus then took John's new application of the *Mikveh* and added his own new layer: baptism as initiation, as identifier, as life purpose-giver. To what purpose? To fulfill all righteousness. That is the work of baptized people. Jesus took the waters of baptism drawn deep from the well of tradition and added something new, something never before.

We are here this morning as part of a long continuum of people borne out of the River of Righteousness that grants worth and worthiness to all, to everyone. This deep and urgent River of Righteousness grants identity and shared- purpose beyond ourselves. This is the baptism we will affirm and claim later in this service. Here's the thing: However greatly we may like the sound of it, I believe we also resist it. Maybe because it's hard to accept being loved simply for who we are. Maybe it's because, like Peter, we think we've already widened our circle of inclusivity enough. The question I hear today in the Voice from Heaven is this: Given wherever each of us is this morning, how can we step into the River of Life, the River of Righteousness more fully? The answer is different for each of us.

I have two stories of righteousness and resistance, that help us see how exciting (not boring) how sacred (not churchy), how expansive,(not judgy) and how surprising the work of *fulfilling all righteousness* can actually be. The first takes place in Alamo Heights, a neighborhood in San Antonio, Texas. It is considered one of the best places to live in Texas. It is written by one of my favorite authors, Naomi Shihab Nye, an American-Arab writer and poet. She writes:

On a block of upscale, finely landscaped homes in the Alamo Heights neighborhood, one house stood out—sleekly modern, pale green minimalist, no curtains at any windows, and a front door that could have been designed by an astronaut—matte silver, studded with planetary bumps. It had been for sale a moment only before the Sold sign was slapped across the realtor's name. Someone had really wanted that house...

Jenna and Brianna, who lived across the street in a regular house with a front porch and geranium pots, and liked to lie on their stomachs at night in their twin beds, staring out the window, felt fascinated. Lucky people. No one would buy their house that fast. "If they have a kid, I hope it's a boy," muttered Jenna. Brianna sighed, "It won't be. It never is. Whatever you want, it's always the other thing..."

They saw their neighbor the day she moved in. She stood in the front yard long auburn hair streaming loosely across her shoulders. She was staring at her own new house with a pensive look, and appeared to be fifteen or sixteen. She had a backpack in one hand and an

oversize orange purse on her shoulder. “She should get a different purse,” muttered Jenna. “Clashes on her hair.” “Anyway, who needs a purse if you have a backpack?” said Brianna...

Jenna walked up to her. “We saw you this morning,” she said, “We live across the street.” “Oh” she said, “Hi.” “What’s your name?” The new girl had an inch-long straight scar under her left eye, as if she’d been bitten by a dog in a small town without a good plastic surgeon. “It’s Lily,” she said, almost whispering. Brianna noticed it first—her beige shirt was buttoned wrong.. “We’ll see you around,” Jenna said. “Let us know if you have any questions,” added Brianna. But they didn’t mean it...

A week later, after they’d reluctantly dined twice with Lily in the lunch room, invited her over to play Bananagrams in their sitting room, and asked if she wanted to go to the movies on teacher work day—they wrote her a letter. A combined welcome and apology letter...

“We did not plan to like you,” the letter said. “Because your house is so beautiful. Sorry it sounds weird, but it’s true. We have a regular house and thought you would be too cool. But after we met you, and discovered you were just like the rest of us, with plenty of flaws—your shirt buttoned wrong on the first day, your voice which is a little too soft, your hair which could use a trim (they did not mention the scar or the strange slurping sound Lily made when she drank milk) we like you after all. If you’re interested in going to the Battle of Flowers parade, just let us know.”

In the baptism of Jesus I hear this message: God likes you for your flaws. And God loves you for the ways your flaws flow into the river of righteousness that reverses roles, breaks boundaries, imparts divine impartiality. Sure, we start from the point of resistance. More often than not. I know I do. But if we step in, anyway-- in this river we will more deeply experience God. In this river we will experience surprising uprisings of heaven on earth. Listen to the invitation in your resistance.

Now let’s take a big geographical leap from Texas to Germany, to the city of Husum to the story of Tante Tina, (told by Ruthilde Kronberg and Patricia McKissack). *Husum hugs the shores of the North Sea. The good people of Husum are reveling in their annual winter festival. Colorful display of food, drink, and toys and the enticing rhythms of dance bands spill out over the frozen waters. (Sounds like the good people of Wisconsin, to me.) Everyone has gone out on the ice far from the shore of the North Sea to skate, to dance, to eat, and to drink—everyone that is except Tante Tina.*

Tante Tina, a lame old woman and the widow of a sea captain, is not well. She watches the beloved festival from her bed, near the window, in a house perched high on a wall by the sea. From that vantage point, what she sees strikes terror in her heart. A small but dark cloud approaches from the west, unseen by everyone below. It is the unmistakable sign of an oncoming and threatening storm. How well she knows that sign, as the aging wife of a dead sea captain. She still can hear his voice warning her what that sign portends.

What she sees she cannot tell. After a struggle to open her window, she screams out the danger to no avail. Her lone voice has no hope of piercing the merriment below, enjoyed at table and played in the lilt of tunes. Tante Tina sees what no one else sees, the telltale cloud of warning.

She speaks what no one else hears. She cannot dismiss what no one else notices. She steps into the river of reversal, the river of sacrifice and divine mercy for all, to a point of focus and bold offering. Surrounded with the tumult of the heavens, the upturning of the celebrations, and the impending terror of the people, she prays into certainty without pausing to calculate the cost. From the wellspring of other old ones, Simeon and Anna, she is strong with clarity for she has heard and seen. She, an unlikely bearer of salvation, sets a burning coal to her straw mattress and somehow manages to crawl out of the flaming torch that was her house. Neighbors and friends way out on the ice see the burning building, not the old woman crouching outside, and rush off the ice to put out the fire and to save the life of the one who is saving them. Before long, the western cloud brings the stormy wind that breaks up the ice in a death-threatening flood. But all neighbors and friends are now safely ashore.ⁱⁱ

If we live into the deeper waters of what our baptism means, young or old, strong or weak, we can immerse ourselves in the water that transforms our surface resistances, our narrow ideas of what we can and cannot do. This river erodes our categories of who we think we like and who we are sure we don't like. This river fulfills all righteousness by calling us sometimes to be the one who saves others, and other time to be the one who needs saving.

We are well aware of other rivers: rivers of violence and hate; rivers of abuse and addiction; rivers of denial and deceit that threaten the future of our planet's ecosystem and the future of our democracy. The River of Righteousness is deeper and wider. And right here. Waiting for us, beckoning us: to live into our baptism, together.

ⁱ Naomi Shihab Nye, *There is No Long Distance Now: Very Short Stories*, (Green Willow Books, HarperCollins, New York: NY, 2011), from "We Like You for Your Flaws, pp. 107-110.

ⁱⁱ Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, ed. *The Abingdon Women's Preaching Annual, Series 2, Year A*, (Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN, 2001), from sermon by Martha Brunelli, "Voice and Vision," pp. 56-57.