



Down by the River

Luke 3:17-22

Isaiah 43:1-7

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“Ol’ man river, that ol’ man river, he must know somethin’, but don’t say nothin’, he just keeps rollin’, he just keeps rollin’ along. He don’t plant taters, he don’t plant cotton, and them that plants ‘em is soon forgotten; but ol’ man river, he just keeps rollin’ along.

“I gets weary and sick of tryin’; I’m tired of livin’, and scared of dyin’, but ol’ man river, he just keeps rollin’ along.”

I think that those of us who’ve ever heard Fred Fox sing these lyrics have a special feel for the passion and the resignation in them: the river just is, and all our suffering, all our pain, our lives themselves are just sideshows to the main event of ol’ man river, who doesn’t change, doesn’t feel, doesn’t care -- just keeps rollin’ along. For all the change around us, some things just always seem the same, and it’s way beyond our weak little human selves to do anything about it.

But this is what God says, in Isaiah 43: “When you’re in over your head, I’ll be there with you. When you’re in rough waters, you will not go down. When you’re between a rock and a hard place, it won’t be a dead end – because I am God, your personal God, the Holy of Israel, your Savior.” The Good News is that God is busy with and among – and for – us. He says, “I’d sell off the whole world just to get you back, trade the creation just for you. So don’t be afraid: I’m with you. I’ll round up all the scattered children...whom I created for my glory, personally formed and made each one.” Today, we celebrate this creation, this round up in ordination and installation.

John the Baptist has a piece of this work, calling everyone to “pay attention, ‘cause God is at work around you.” He preaches that baptism isn’t just some new thing to do, the latest fad: it’s your life that’s changing, not just your skin getting wet. Both this story from Jesus’ life and what we’re doing today have to do with God’s acting right here in human lives, God’s kingdom breaking in and breaking us free from that unchanging, impersonal, uncaring, ordinary world. The reality of God’s kingdom couldn’t be more different from that river that just keeps rollin’ along.

We're going down to the river, the Jordan River, where Jesus was baptized. Where the Kingdom is ignited by fire, where the Holy Spirit changes you from the inside out – where your life is given a clean sweep, and the good stuff is separated from the rest.

When Jesus came to be baptized, it wasn't because he was repenting of any wrong; he came to mark the shift between the thirty years that had gone before and the ministry which began on that day. He came to mark the shift between John (who was telling everyone that God was about to do something powerful and new) and himself, the one who was going to do that new and powerful something. He was baptized -- last of all, Luke says -- and began to pray, when the Holy Spirit came down on him, and God himself spoke – and just as we name our own children at baptism, named Jesus: he said, “you are my Son.” God told Jesus who he was; God claimed him after thirty years of life, and so began Jesus' work as God among us. The time had come – something new started happening.

For us, baptism is now a sacrament, a visible sign of an invisible reality, a moment in time when things change forever but seem to remain the same. Baptism is our entrance into the community of faith, the church – and we show this act of God in human actions: with water and words, we display God's call to us and claim on us. It's all those things through the action of the Holy Spirit. And though you may not look any different – except a little wet, maybe – you are forever changed.

These men and women who will come up here, some to be ordained, all to be installed, have already been baptized; but they're all about to change, too. They have been called – by God, through your voice and election – to be changed. In a few moments they will be set apart, given a new role, become something new: fulfilling their duties of service to us and to God, called and claimed by God.

Probably again. Most of them have answered God's call to ordained service before; but as the saying goes, “That was then: this is now.” God's call isn't just confined to a few years, a certain age group: he's an equal opportunity human resource manager.

So each call is new; each task is different; and God works through them all, and calls you and me to the ones set for us.

And that, too, is an action of the Holy Spirit. Remember that John the Baptist said that Jesus has his winnowing fork in his hand, to thresh the wheat from the chaff.

Even if you've never been on a farm, you probably know how this works: you want to separate the kernel of wheat from the hard, inedible covering, the chaff. The person doing the dividing, the thresher, tosses the wheat into the air, and the chaff, which is lighter, is blown off to the side, while the heavier wheat falls straight to the ground. It isn't just the tossing that does the work, it's the breeze that blows away, that carries away the chaff.

In the languages of the Bible, the word for wind, breath, and spirit are the same. The wind of the Spirit, like the wind that separates the wheat from the chaff, will blow

through these people and separate them from who they are now, and make them whom God has called them to be at this time, in this place.

God is all about the future; God is in control of that future. That doesn't take away from the past – even though they're changed, our new class of elders and deacons will still carry with them their past, their history, which is also the story of God's work in them, and in us. The wind of the Spirit may blow change, but it also calls us to cherish who we are, where we come from, and how we got here. When God named and claimed – or reclaimed – Jesus at his baptism, he remained Jesus of Nazareth – but with a new work in front of him.

You may feel that life has lost its luster. You may even have looked for signs of God in vain. You may feel that “Ol' Man River's” got it right, that nothing does ever change, and God's just watching from up in heaven, looking at all the silly stuff that we're doing here on Earth.

But God's still got your name on his lips, and he still claims you as his own. And in the lives and work of this congregation, in the lives and the call sent out to the new elders and deacons of Valley, you can see God at work. Oh, they won't look any different, any more than you looked different after you graduated high school or got married – or were baptized; but they will be. God will put words in their hearts; he'll give them inspiration and insight to do what we've asked them to do: “When you're in over your head, God will be there; when you're in the rough waters, you won't go down; when you're between a rock and a hard place, it won't be a dead end.” Words for them; words for us.

People talk about going down to the river, as a search for change, transformation, an opportunity to let go of that burden that's dragging you down. That word's for you, too: God wants all of us: “sons from distant lands and daughters from faraway places” and he will “change you from the inside out.”