

## The Truth That Remains

Luke 3:15-22

Epiphany 1, c,1/7/07

Civil War buffs will hear this scripture about the baptism of Jesus and the immediately following news that Jesus is led by the Spirit into the wilderness with a different set of ears than the rest of us. For they hear “wilderness” and their memories click back to the Battle of the Wilderness and a very strange baptism story comes to us from our nation’s Civil War.

Winter had settled in over Virginia, and both Union and Confederate sides had slowed their fighting considerably. In the Confederate camps there ministered a devout chaplain by the name of Willie Ragland. Reverend Ragland preached the Gospel quite fervently, and one day a soldier by the name of Goodwin was convicted by the message and converted to the Christian faith.

Goodwin seized upon the idea of being baptized in the nearby Rapidan River, which was the dividing line between the Confederate and Union troops in that area. Confederate officers tried to discourage the idea, knowing that any man who approached the river was sure to be picked off by Union snipers. But Goodwin was determined to be baptized into his newfound faith, so the officers finally agreed.

Reverend Ragland, Goodwin, and about fifty Confederate soldiers left their weapons behind and made their way cautiously down to the river. Union soldiers, perplexed by these unarmed men wading out into icy waters, held their fire. Then, the Confederate soldiers began to sing an old hymn from those days:

"There is a fountain filled with blood,  
Drawn from Emmanuel's veins;

And sinners plunged beneath that flood,  
Lose all their guilty stains."

The old soldier Goodwin prepared to die to his old self.... And to rise again a new creation in Jesus Christ.

Some of the Union soldiers, moved by the sight, left their weapons too, and, lining up along the opposite side of riverbank, joined their voices in singing:

"And since, by faith, I saw the stream,  
Thy flowing wounds supply,  
Redeeming love has been my theme,  
And shall be ' til I die."

One little moment of peace in an awful war.

It would not be long before both sides were once again fighting and killing each other. But there was that one astounding moment when both sides gathered to honor the saving work of God's Spirit. And even in the midst of war, they were all wise enough to drink in the wonder of it, to savor it.

The Bible speaks of what happened with Jesus after his baptism. The Spirit of God led him into the wilderness.... Where he would not be bothered by the normal activities of life, even eating. He was devoted to the absorbing of this new state of being, to absorbing what it was that God was calling him to be. Today we celebrate the Baptism of our Lord Jesus Christ, and I suggest that the best way we can honor His transforming baptism experience, is by reverently embracing, and reverently remembering, our own.

What do you remember of your baptism.... or if you were too young, your moment of confirmation, or conversion, or your first public confession of faith?

I was baptized 37 years ago, but I can remember much of it like it was yesterday.

At age 16, after straying confused from the church for 4 years, I had just the week before, mysteriously found myself in worship one morning, and even more mysteriously been pushed forward at the time of the invitation by a force that I have never understood, to stand there before the church and declare my faith in Christ for the first time. It was not a conscious decision, but it was a clear one and a sincere one.

The next week the smiles on their faces showed that the members of my home church, First Christian Church in Ocala, Florida, were delighted to see this awkward teenager dressed in a white robe, ready to walk down the steps into the baptismal pool. They knew what this could mean, but I... I was having flashbacks. Of Sunday School classes and vacation Bible schools, of long sermons that I didn't fully understand, of youth fellowship events – one especially, when playing water polo in a swimming pool I was stunned when our minister, the Rev. Paul Aushermann had playfully, but forcefully, grabbed my head and held me underwater for a long, long time- and now there he was again, in the water ahead of me, holding out his hand. Bidding me to enter the water.... and die.

The words the apostle Paul in the letter to the Romans were in my head:

“Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the

glory of the Father, **so we too** might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. (*Rom. 5:3-5*)

And there was Rev. Aushermann's hand...

Then there is this big blank out, like the white out of a car sliding about in a blizzard..... where things happened to me and with me... but it was as if mind and body split, the body... the old "tired of fighting it" teenage body gave in to the ancient call... gave in to the congregation's love and hunger... and gave over to this man representing John the Baptist... and was buried in the waters of the pool...

Time stopped.

Do you know what I mean? We don't allow this happen often enough, but then..... as in every holy moment.... time stopped.

It is what we feel and sense, when lost in the rapture of singing, or when we find that our self has totally disappeared in the embracing depths of prayer...

when the calm and the peace are so complete that there is no room left for the old self, the self-conscious self.

Another Spirit is in charge. One that is not ruled by Timex or tamed by timetables.

Things were going on with the body.... pulled up from the waters, words of blessing from Rev. Aushermann, water dipping off the robe onto the landing, the steps downstairs, and finally to the quiet of the changing room.

While in that precious eternity without words.... for mind and spirit the heavens were torn open. The peace of heaven flooded. Forgiveness.

Calm. God was well pleased. I didn't hear words, but deeply knew all this to be true.

I am sure that by clock time, this all passed quickly. When my self returned enough to think again, it seemed like the same old me. It was only a matter of minutes before "spiritual amnesia"<sup>i</sup> set in and I forgot the status I inherited, like you inherited, like Goodwin inherited, like Jesus inherited in our baptisms... as God's Beloved children. And that was distressing. One wants those rare, wondrous moments to last forever.... but they don't. But the good news is that the truth those moments reveal... the understanding of our place in God's design... the recognition that God is pleased.... What those moments reveal... this truth CAN last. That TRUTH REMAINS.

Did you see movie *Tender Mercies*? Robert Duvall plays Mac, a down-on his-luck country songwriter who battles the bottle. He fights back with the help of a young widow who offers him room and board at her roadside Texas motel in exchange for handyman help. Grace finds a toehold in Mac's life, and eventually both Mac and the widow's young boy, Sonny, make the decision to be baptized.

Driving home after the baptism, Sonny says to Mac: "Well, we done it Mac, we was baptized."

Peering into the truck's rearview mirror, Sonny studies himself for a moment. "Everybody said I'd feel like a changed person. Do you feel like a change person?"

"Not yet," replies Mac.

"You don't look any different, Mac. Do you think I look any different?"

"Not yet," answers Mac.

Like Sonny, we don't always see ourselves as changed people. There are times when we can perceive who and where we are only by looking into the rearview mirror... revisiting people, places, and events that have gone before... and made us who we are today.

For the Christian, the first place we return to should be our baptism or those other moments of transcendence that God has granted us, so that we can RE-Member.... to literally put back together, the truth that they unveiled.

The world may tell you that those blissful moments were an illusion. No, my friend. The Gospel teaches that these highest moments are God's revelation of the way things deeply are & are supposed to be. They may be rare, but they are true. And long after the experience is over, **THE TRUTH REMAINS.**

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<sup>i</sup> Laurence Hull Stookey's term