

## **“The Water Is Fine”**

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Congregational Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts  
January 8, 2023 – First Sunday after Epiphany/Baptism of Christ

[Isaiah 42:1-9; Matthew 3:13-17](#)

“Happy New Year!” How many times have you offered this fine greeting/wish to folks over the course of the last week? Probably too many times to keep track of. And that’s a good thing! For we should wish for other people to be happy or find happiness as the new calendar year begins. It’s good to desire a happy year for others and also for ourselves, and many of us have been busy over the course of this last week doing new things in order to make our lives happier or better. Many of us have resolved to exercise more (or even some), and perhaps you’ve witnessed with me a huge leap in the number of people out jogging this last week. Likewise, many have resolved to eat better, and I’ve seen a conspicuous decrease in the amount of candy taken from our office candy bowl over the last several days. And a full 1/3 of Americans who drink alcohol have resolved to take the month off, making this a dry January; many others have resolved to drink less, making it a damp January. These are but a few common examples of people working to make good on whatever it is that they’ve resolved to do in the new year to make it a happier one, and I hope that you are well on your way to making good on whatever it is that you’ve resolved to do to make your own life better or happier.

Today, on this Baptism of Christ Sunday, we are remembering the story of the day that Jesus experienced a new beginning of his own at his baptism. At the time, he was thirtyish and living 60 or so miles north of Jerusalem in region of Galilee. As we learned in last Sunday’s reading from the gospel of Matthew, Jesus’ family settled in Galilee, in a town called Nazareth, sometime in his childhood, going there after living for a while in Egypt to avoid the wrath of Herod, king of the region of Judea, who had the young children of the Judean town of Bethlehem, where Jesus was born, put to death after learning from visiting, foreign Magi that a star in the sky showed them that a new Jewish king had been born and Jerusalem’s religious leaders told him that the Messiah, who would be his rival for power, would be born in Bethlehem. But that king, Herod the Great, eventually died, and with his son Herod Archelaus ruling over Judea for Rome as brutally as

his father did, the family of Jesus was led by God to return to Israel, but to settle not in Judea, but beyond the realm of Herod, in Galilee.

We don't know much about Jesus' life during the years he lived there in Nazareth, but he likely would have carried on whatever trade his family was engaged in. As Joseph was a craftsman, building and repairing furnishings and/or structures out of wood or stone, that's likely what Jesus was as well. But all that changed after Jesus had hung up his tool belt in Nazareth and went down to the Jordan River to be baptized by his cousin John.

John had been baptizing people in the waters of the Jordan River as symbol of repentance, an act signifying that someone was resolving to change in some way, for their old self to be washed away and for a new self to emerge from the waters. 30-year-old Jesus did not come to John to be baptized as a symbol of his turning from a life of aimlessness and sin, but to symbolize that he was leaving behind his old identity as a craftsman of Nazareth, a builder and fixer of things, from the refugee family of Mary and Joseph, and that he was resolving to begin a new life as a prophetic teacher, healer, and helper of people. His new identity was affirmed right in that moment as heaven opened up, God's Spirit came upon him, and God's voice exclaimed that he was indeed God's beloved Son.

This was Jesus' unique identity, but those of us who were baptized as he was baptized, also claim a new identity in baptism as Christ's followers. We are part of the living Body of Christ. We are God's beloved.

I am reminded of a scene in one of my favorite movies, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, by Joel and Ethan Coen, in which the three main characters, Pete, Delmar, and Ulysses Everett, who are convicts that escaped from a chain gang in rural Mississippi sometime in the 1930s and find themselves wandering through a forest as they flee from a posse seeking to capture and return them to chains (or worse). While in the forest, in a quiet moment, they hear the sound of a singing congregation as they stream through through the woods to a nearby river to be baptized. Pete, Delmar, and Everett seem transfixed by the scene of the gathering congregation, when Delmar suddenly bolts for the river, rushes into it with with the congregants, and gets baptized himself. Upon returning to his fellow, stunned escapees, while still dripping wet, he exclaims, "Well that's it, boys. I've been redeemed! The preacher done washed away all my sins and

transgressions. It's the straight and narrow from here on out. And heaven everlasting's my reward!" Everett replied, "Delmar, what are you talking about? We've got bigger fish to fry." Delmar continued, "The preacher said all my sins is washed away, including that Piggly Wiggly I knocked over in Yazoo," to which Everett stated, "I thought you said you was innocent of those charges." Delmar exclaimed, "Well I was lyin'. And the preacher said that that sin's been washed away, too. Neither God nor man's got nothin' on me now! C'mon in, boys, the water is fine!"

Yes, the water of baptism is fine. The newness symbolized in baptism is fine. Being reminded of our new identity as God's beloved whenever we witness a baptism, whether it is somewhere in the woods of Mississippi, or right here in this room, where we will participate in the baptism of a child next Sunday, is fine. Your identity as a baptized child of God is fine.

This new year, resolve to better live into your fine identity as a follower of Christ and God's beloved. Make Christ's way of living in selfless, serving love become more of your own way. Resolve to let the knowledge that you are forgiven of your past set your spirit free. Come on in, friends, the water is fine!