

## A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

*Immersed*

Luke 3

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As we move into a new year, it can seem like time moves on quickly. The biblical narrative of Jesus' life moves along quickly as well. We move with it from Christmas to Epiphany, and the next thing we know, we are standing on the banks of the Jordan River as Jesus is being baptized.

Immersion. Immersion in water is the meaning of baptism which in the New Testament is simply *baptizo*. The practice of *baptizo*, or immersion as a ritual cleansing, becomes a core Christian practice as a sign of initiation into the faith and church and participation in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. Baptism first appears in the New Testament through John, the baptizer, who was doing this out in the country at the Jordan River. People were flocking to him to hear him preach and to be baptized. One day, Jesus Christ, the son of God, the Word-Made-Flesh, Emmanuel, God-With-Us was one of them.

Christians follow him in baptism. Jesus told his disciples to baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. Christians have done so since then. Some have poured water over the head of the one being baptized; some have sprinkled water over the head of the one being baptized; some have performed the ritual when a child is a newborn as a sign of the commitment of their parents and community to nurture their faith. We fully respect these forms of baptism here at DaySpring. We receive members baptized in various Christian traditions, with various baptismal practices. Each is beautiful and meaningful in their own ways. Our practice: when we do it, we baptize when a person is ready to say for themselves "I'm in: I'm in for being who God is making me to be in Christ. I receive Christ as gift and grace, and I need him. I need to be saved from all that is not God around me and within me. Jesus is my savior. I give my life to him. I receive my life from him. I'm in. God brought me in." As a sign of all of this, we immerse---in a cow trough, as it happens to be.

Baptism literally means immersion. Immersion means to involve oneself deeply in something. A person can be immersed in their work or in a good book. When you are immersed, you become completely submerged in something. Perhaps this kind of focus stretches beyond our imaginations in a time when our attention is pulled in so many directions, all at once, all the time. So imagine then the alternative—being so fully present, so fully awake and alert and attentive to something or someone that they have your full, complete, undivided, unseparated, un-distanced, unmediated heart and attention. Your full self. This is what love is.

Does this mean at baptism that Jesus was lowered into the waters of a river? Yes, I think that's what it means. We have a mental picture of what this may have looked like then by what we do now when we baptize. A person being baptized trust-falls into the water, all the

way in, all the way down. A proper soaking. Jesus went out to John at the Jordan river where John was preaching and baptizing. Jesus joined him and the crowds there. And he was baptized--The Lord of the Universe, immersed in the water.

God's relationship with water is usually anything but immersion in it. It's more often negotiated at some distance.

At creation, God's Spirit hovered over the waters. That's something that's going to happen again and again. There's God, there's the water, but God's not in the water. And neither are God's people.

In the Exodus, God's people stood at the end of the Red Sea and didn't go one step further, until by miracle and Moses they walked away from Egypt on dry ground, through the parted sea.

Later, for good reason, the people of Israel, came to see all water and especially the sea as danger. Their ancient enemy, the Philistines, arrived by boat on the sea. Jonah's fleeing from God was arrested by a storm at sea. For Job and the Psalmist, it's where the Leviathan lurked. Water was not a comforting sign of God's presence but an omen of God's absence.

Sometimes Jesus spiritualized the idea of water. He spoke of thirsting for righteousness. He said to a woman he met at a well: "I am the living water. Drink of me and you will never thirst again."

He also commanded it. When the disciples were in a storm on Lake Galilee, Jesus stilled it. Jesus walked on the water out to the boat on another time.

At Cana, Jesus at a wedding took one look at the vessels containing water, and said, "Let there be Cabernet Sauvignon," and there was Cab.

God has commanded. God has remained above or beyond. There's God and the water, but God's not in the water.

The pattern is set from the first page of Scripture and extends to all things. God is above, beyond, apart, near but not with, in charge but not in. This distance can be good, but it is something other than being soaked; it's different from being submerged to the point where you can't breathe until you learn to breathe a new air. All of this is good. It is somewhat different from love.

For many of us, this is intuitive—this way of seeing God and God's relationship with water and Creation and us--because it is exactly how we picture God. God is above, beyond, apart, sometimes near but not with, in charge but not really involved. God's out there, up there, beyond. God's interested in us, but not manifestly present to us. Not really with us. It's how we picture God. For many of us, it's how we experience God.

We echo this understanding of God when we speak of lifting our prayers up to God, or of communion as a symbol of God's salvation but not actually having to do with God's presence, or when we live as functional atheists.

We do well to remember and articulate God's otherness. In the grammar of faith, God is Creator, and we are creature; God is sovereign, and we are dependent. God is God, and we are not.

But then we come to this story, and we find ourselves on the banks of the Jordan River. And the God who is other, who is Creator, the God who is sovereign, the God who is God...got involved--more than involved. In the incarnation, God was immersed in humanity.

Baptism is a sign of the Creator's commitment to and immersion in creation. It's not hard to imagine a deity taking a very different path. Most human stories of other deities are of transcendent beings that remain above and aloof, asking from humans only deference and sacrifice, offering to humans merely a passing hope of good fortune in exchange for their allegiance. God could have stayed where the Greek gods roamed and theists want to imagine God—above, at a distance, beyond creation, distant from our lives, our troubles, our love, our life.

God chose a different way. It's the scandal of the incarnation. God got immersed. Jesus' baptism is a sign of God's total immersion in human life. It's also a foreshadowing of the depths to which God will go. Immersed in water in the beginning. Immersed in the darkness of the tomb at the end. Life here is risky business. That is also signified by the water. Jesus's submersion in the water is his immersion in the risk of taking on human life, especially when the human life he takes on, takes on the structures and forces that reduce human lives to something less than human life.

John knew this and paid the price for it—he was beheaded by Herod. Jesus knew this, too, and also paid the price—he was crucified by Pilate. Jesus' disciples would come to know it, too—and they also paid the price of truly living by losing their lives and finding their life in him.

On Day 1 of his public ministry, Jesus's baptism said it all: he will be soaked in the things that make us afraid and the things that kill us. He's in the flesh; he's in the water; he's in this life. He's in our life.

Baptism is God's way of saying, "I'm in. I'm in for all of it; I'm in for you." If you've ever felt like you were drowning, God's in it with you. "In this one act, Jesus steps into the common and inescapable experience of living in a broken, sin-soaked world." He declares "genuine and costly solidarity with us and our neighbors (Debbie Thomas)."

Christ was baptized into his humanity—immersed in a humanity he shared with you and me. The question is not his sinfulness for which baptism is an antidote. The question is the fullness of his solidarity with human life. He's all in.

To be baptized in whatever outward form is to be immersed in the death and new life of Christ. It's a sign of truly living in the form of dying to self and birth to new life, of lowering and rising, death and resurrection.

In Christ, God is no longer separated from us but has chosen us and chosen to be soaked in the lives we live and share. In him, relationship with God is possible, and it is everything. It's everything that makes us alive.

Eugene Peterson, in a powerful passage, writes: "We cannot be human if we are not in relation to God. We can be an animal and be unaware of God. We can be an aggregate of minerals and be unaware of God. But humanity requires relationship with God before it can be itself... A relationship with God is not something added on after we complete our basic growth, it is the essential core of that growth. Take that core out, and there is no humanity at all but only a husk, the appearance but not the substance of the human." (*Run with the Horses*, 48)

May we be soaked in Christ that we may live this gift of life that God gave us to live and to live as Christ gave us the opportunity to live to the fullest. We are not adjacent to Christ; nor are we floating above life in Christ; whatever has been true of our life, we are not beyond the life of Christ in us. We come to the moment of faith when we say, "I'm in. As much as I am able, I'm all yours."

I find one moment in baptism to be particularly meaningful. The lowering. The lowering down, down, as an act of trust into the water. The trust this takes! You allow yourself to be submerged. You trust someone else to immerse you under the water. And in that moment, you're all in--all of you in all of him. And discover, in him, by grace, you're truly alive.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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