

“Drowning in Love”  
Luke 3:15-17, 21-22  
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I have in my mind this image of John the Baptist holding certain people under the water just a little longer than others, that he'd let them thrash around a bit before letting them up for air. You know, so those really heavy-duty sinners could truly get the gravity of their situation. To give them a little panic, a little something to remember him by, a little more to live for. Maybe he saw the metaphor long before the Apostle Paul, who famously wrote, “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.” That's the image Paul used, burial. Not just a washing, but burial. Perhaps in baptism we are not actually six feet under, but where there's water, there is most certainly a surface, a dividing line between water and air, an above and a below that surface, and I for one want to be on the above side of the line. Or do I?

If you read accounts of near drowning, that is, people who came close to drowning but survived, they seem to fall mainly into two categories: those people who were absolutely terrified, and struggled to survive or were rescued, but came out of the experience with words of wisdom to share, and those who, after a brief panic, wouldn't really have minded if they hadn't made it back up to the surface. In the former category are the people who learned it is best not to scuba dive on an

empty stomach, or to keep their air supply flowing at a minimum to be able to stay down longer, or surfers who learned just what constitutes a wave that is too big for them, or to only go out with a buddy. In the latter category are those who found themselves in a positively tranquil and bliss-filled state at the bottom of a pool or lake, surrounded by light or music, with a sense of sorrow at being rescued.

Consider how this survivor described his experience: “I was all of five years old when I fell into a river and was quickly pulled down by the current. I felt a wave of calm. I could see the bubbles from the air escaping from my lungs rising to the surface and at the same time I could see myself from above looking down upon my body sinking into the abyss; it was an unbelievably peaceful experience in which no fear was present. I was pulled from the river by my father and revived but I can remember the disappointment I felt being back; so much of me wanted to return to that state. I was brought back for a reason and have no fear of where we do go once we pass on.”

Of course, drowning or near drowning are serious matters. A very great many people drown every year, and a majority of them are young children or teens, too many of whom were influenced by drugs or alcohol when they died. And of those who do come out of the water alive, many near drowning survivors suffer debilitating physical and emotional effects, including, not surprisingly, fear of the water, but also brain damage, nightmares, PTSD, and other maladies. The effects on a family can be very devastating even if the survivor comes out fine, and is

among that category of people for whom, paradoxically, the experience is not particularly traumatic. The thought of a loved one panic-stricken and unable to breathe can be a suffocating one. Yet, at the risk of trivializing the act of drowning, or near drowning, I would like to make the case that baptism is, or at least should be, very much like drowning, if not in water than in love.

Many of us were not baptized by full immersion, and even fewer of us by a mischievous pastor who might have held us under a little longer than necessary. Many of us were just sprinkled on the head as infants, on the surface not too traumatizing, although if the screams I sometimes get are any indication, maybe it is. Perhaps to an infant it might seem like drowning. But let us presume that except for being submerged in what is usually shockingly cold water, the event of baptism is neither very terrifying, nor often accompanied by the kind of peace and bliss described by those who have survived a near drowning. Baptism has largely been reduced to just another ritual, something we do in the church as a rite of passage, even for adults. But let us hope that baptism means more than that, that it signifies something greater than just getting wet, or having a clean conscience, or even becoming a member of the church. Let us hope that in baptism we really do have a sense of newness of life, of dying and being raised from the dead, of participating in something we've never really had access to before, that divine communion, that place that makes us feel a sense of disappointment at being pulled from it, that desire to remain in that state of bliss and peace, that knowing we were brought

back for a reason and having no fear of where we do go once we pass on, those wonderful experiences shared by people who for a time found themselves on the wrong side of the surface. Yes, to “get” what baptism really means in our lives, to experience more fully what it really signifies, I wonder if we need to treat it more like that terror and release of nearly drowning, but making it to the surface for that life giving breath of the Spirit we call air.

There are, of course, several elements of tonight’s story from Luke which could be terror-producing, in both the first century and still today. The first might be simply the prospect of Messiah’s coming. We are told there was quite a buzz around John the Baptist, with people wondering whether he might be the Messiah. Yes, the Messiah’s arrival would be good news, but it would also bring a lot of uncertainty, and probably a lot of bloodshed. We’ve spiritualized our Savior quite a bit for our own purposes but remember that the Jewish Messiah was to be a conquering hero, and conquest does not come without a price, usually of the young men of the nation. This wasn’t going to be a velvet revolution, and war is always terrifying. Earlier in the story, we learn that even soldiers, presumably Roman soldiers, came to him for baptism, knowing they needed to repent, and we can only imagine with terror, what brutality they might confess. In our own time, the prospect of coming face to face with the Messiah ought to give us some measure of trepidation, and a confession of where we’ve missed the mark.

And then there's the matter of the Holy Spirit and fire. I suspect too that the very prospect of baptism, and the repentance it required, was a little anxiety producing, but then to add on top of that the business of a whole new kind of baptism, with some very unknown elements, might turn anxiety to terror. Maybe that is why John was so successful. People figured they'd better get a baptism while it was only with water, and not the truly scary, uncontrollable stuff, as if they really had any idea, as if *we* really have any idea, of what the Holy Spirit is capable. And finally, there is the whole winnowing fork, threshing floor, chaff burning with unquenchable fire scenario. I'm not even a farmer and that sounds pretty terrifying to me. For those who knew what really happened when the chaff was set ablaze, it must have been a terrible image. Pick your image of judgment today, and see if the prospect of its imminent arrival doesn't cause you a sleepless night.

And all of that Biblical stuff is not even to mention whatever terrifying life experience or emotional baggage those people were bringing with them out to the desert, what abuse, or neglect, or failure, or pain they may have been living with, hoping it could be washed away in the waters of the river Jordan. Living under Roman occupation under heavy taxation, amidst poverty and violence, when women and children were treated more as property than people, all of this would have made for a life from which an escape in baptism would indeed have been desirable, if for nothing more than a break in the whole dire routine. Indeed, they

probably already had that drowning sense of thrashing around helplessly, of suffocating, of being held down, long before John the Baptist might have decided to make an even deeper impression on them by keeping them under the water a little longer. Maybe you've felt like that too.

We don't have a record of what life was like for these people after they came up out of the water. We don't know whether, for them, something had changed. Indeed, we might suspect that not a whole lot changed, for precisely the reason John offers, that his baptism was simply of water, and not of spirit and fire. Perhaps this is why Jesus came to John in the Jordan, to show what baptism in him, in his name, into his death and resurrection, would look like, that when you come up out of the water of the Messiah's baptism, you don't just fill your lungs with air, you get filled by the wind and the breath of the Holy Spirit and you get to hear the words we all really want to hear: "You are my son, you are my daughter, the beloved. With you I am well pleased." That is what baptism is about, not a near drowning in water, but a true drowning in love. In Christ, you don't need to leave the medium of your transformation. It is no longer something separate from you, you don't leave it behind. Rather, you become part of it, it becomes part of you. I am reminded of this scene from the film, "The Abyss," in which the captain of an ultra deep sea installation is required to descend even lower into a deep water trench to save his crew and vessel, a trip for which a different kind of preparation is required. (Watch clip: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2OxstD2jN08>)

If you've seen this movie, you will remember that Bud goes on to experience the mysteries of the Abyss, which are depicted in very divine images. He experiences a new wonder and reality and comprehension all because he is literally breathing what he could not breathe before. His old, air breathing self is drowned, replaced by what is required to experience the divine. He is a new creation; the old has passed away, and with it his fear. Only bliss remains, and a connection he never could have imagined, a science fiction version of "You are my son, the beloved. With you, I am well pleased."

It may seem like science fiction to believe such communion is possible, but the truth is even stranger than fiction, and a lot more wonderful. You see, this divine communion is found precisely in this water, in this ritual we perform. Like John, we baptize with water, but Christ baptizes with the Holy Spirit and fire, and it is a wondrous combination that makes all things new, beginning with your life. It is good, from time to time, to remember this generous fact, and tonight, I invite you to take advantage of the opportunity to remember your baptism, and the divine communion into which it ushered you. There are two bodies of water here in the front of the church, the little one in which you may come and dip your hand and remember your baptism, and the bigger one, into which you are invited to plunge your whole head, in hopes that you may experience the terror and release our baptisms imply, to remember from where you came, and in whom you now belong. If you'd like, I can hold your head down just a little longer. Friends, come to the

waters of your baptism, and remember that in them, you are always drowning in love. Amen.