

WGUMC January 20, 2013 "Passports"  
Isaiah 43:1-7 and Luke 3:15-16, 21-22

"When you pass through waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you." [Is 43:2] I wasn't so sure about that when my co-worker with A Christian Ministry in the National Parks announced that he was going to perform a baptism in the Yellowstone River early the next morning. Never mind the frigid water. Like John the Baptist, he was going to baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire and warm things right up.

Tucker was a Young Life leader from Arizona and a Christian on fire for Jesus. I was assigned to work with him at Tower Falls in Yellowstone Park the summer of 1985. We scooped ice cream during the week and on Sunday led worship services in the Tower Falls campground amphitheater and also at Roosevelt Lodge. We were supposedly supervised by a pastor at the Methodist Church in Mammoth Hot Springs thirty miles away.

And so not long after the river baptism, I hitched a ride to Mammoth to talk to the pastor about Tucker. As college students and guests of the National Park Service, we were expressly forbidden to perform baptisms or officiate at the Lord's Supper. For one thing, we weren't ordained. For another, this was an ecumenical ministry, and we were supposed to stay a long way away from the arguments that different bodies of Christians get into over the sacraments.

But Tucker took his orders, he said, from a higher power. He was one of those who pushed Jesus in ways that pushed me and a lot of other folks away. So, I told the pastor that I didn't like the way Tucker was manipulating vulnerable park employees, young adults who were far away from family and friends and feeling lonely. He'd single them out and then take them off on a fishing trip. A few days later, he'd come back with another notch in his belt.

The minister listened to my concerns and then told me that there wasn't much he could do. For the rest of the summer, Tucker kept trying to save everyone, especially me. He told his friends to pray for me, that I wasn't a true believer, and that I was going to hell. He told me that he had the gift of prophecy, and one day when I was riding with him in his pickup, he prophesied that I was going to have a meaningful encounter with Jesus Christ that summer (apparently implying that I'd never had one).

Thanks to Jesus, I survived Tucker. I went back to school. Later, I went on to seminary (what he liked to call "cemetery school"). And long ago, I forgave him. For, I discovered that as I grew and gained understanding and confidence in my own faith, I no longer needed to take offense at his.

Looking back now, I regret having ratted him out over the river baptism. After all, John the Baptist wasn't ordained, either. And aside from the danger of slipping on the rocks and

drowning in a swift-moving river, aside from the risk of hypothermia in water that is 33°F, he probably didn't do anyone any harm and maybe did some good. At any rate, I came to appreciate that God chooses many ill-equipped leaders who are a little rough-around-the-edges to spread the Good News. You're looking at one of them.

So, Tucker, if you're out there listening, I'm sorry, dude. And, by the way, your prophecy came true, but not in the way you expected. I have had many meaningful encounters with Christ in the years since we met.

It's been an amazing journey that took me from Montana to Boston to North Carolina to Idaho and to Oregon and then to California. And that's what I want you all to get out of my river baptism story today. Baptism is just the beginning of an incredible journey. You can think of it as your passport to a wide, wide world of grace.

Look at your passport. What does it have on it? Your picture, your name, your place and date of birth. In other words, your passport says who you are and where you come from. But you don't need an official passport to tell you these things. The Bible tells you who you are. It doesn't contain your photo, but it contains the living word of God that says: "I have called you by name, you are mine...[No matter what,] I will be with you...For I am the Lord your God...your Savior." [Is 43:1-3]

What God said to the people of Israel, God also said to Jesus and now says to each of us when we are baptized. Baptism is the public ceremony in which God names you and claims you and promises to be with you.

Now passports are stamped with official seals so that you can prove your identity in different countries. And while you may get a baptismal certificate, the real proof of your citizenship in the kingdom of God is the invisible seal God stamps on your heart, the one that is engraved with the words:

"Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you." [Is 43:4] With that seal comes this assurance from God: there is nothing I wouldn't do for you, no price I wouldn't pay for you, no place I wouldn't go to get you and bring you back home to me. [Is 43:4-6]

I recently discovered that my passport is about to expire. But unlike a passport, your baptism will never expire unless you want it to. So, who wouldn't want to be baptized? I suppose there are folks who would decline the offer because they fear all Christians are like Tucker, and they don't want to be swept away in snow-melt waters. Then there are those who figure that they shouldn't be baptized because they've never had what others would consider a meaningful encounter with Jesus Christ. But that would be like requiring you to be an experienced traveler before letting you apply for a passport! Friends, the Christian life begins at the beginning, and for many, baptism is the beginning. It gets you out of the gate and onto

the plane, so to speak. And once you're in the air and looking out the window, you discover that there's a whole world of faith out there. And God wants you to explore it.

Even Jesus had to begin at the beginning. Ever since the New Testament was put together, Christians have been wondering why did Jesus have to get baptized? John came preaching a baptism for the repentance of sins. But Jesus had no sin. Yet he came to be with people who were drowning in their sins, and that's where his ministry would begin. It's almost as if baptism had the opposite meaning for Jesus. We get baptized to get rid of our sins. But when Jesus was baptized, he was preparing to take on our sins.

Jesus was already the Son of God, but it wasn't until his baptism that the dove descended and the voice spoke: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." [Luke 3:22b] From that point on, Jesus had a job title and a lot of traveling to do. And we who have been baptized do, too.

We are God's sons and daughters now, and faith is the journey we must take. But we won't get very far if we travel alone. When I was under siege in Yellowstone Park that summer, I sometimes felt very alone in my struggles and doubts. But I had my Bible. I wrote letters to my boyfriend on the East Coast. I called my parents from a payphone. In July, they came to visit me and, feeling sorry for me, offered to take me home. But knowing that God accepted me and that my family supported me, I decided to stick it out until the snow started falling and the park started shutting down the first week in September.

I learned that summer that if we ever hope to survive all the challenges to our faith on this journey, we're going to need some trustworthy traveling companions. Jesus went with a tour group. It was composed of twelve men and several women. And before long, his disciples became his family. When you are baptized in the faith, when you are pronounced a son or daughter of God and a brother or sister of Christ, the church

becomes your family. Church members have your back.

Wherever you are, you can call them on your cellphone. If need be, they'll come and rescue you and take you home. But just knowing that they're there can give you the strength to stick it out until the season ends.

This morning, we are baptizing an entire family. I've never done this before. So, today marks one of the highpoints of my ministry. I'm sorry that I don't have any water from the Yellowstone River. But I have a few drops from the Jordan River, and I guess that will do. I want to say to the Kunde family that you have a remarkable opportunity to make a new beginning, to get your passport stamped and head out together into the wide world of God's grace. Don't worry that you're not sure where to go or how to get there, for you are now part of a much bigger family, God's family, and your new sisters and brothers in the faith are more than happy to help you find your way. And the people say: Amen.