

“Of Power and Water and Walls and Grace and Doubt”
 Rev. Dr. David A. Kaden
 Baptism of Our Lord (January 13, 2019)

>>Open our eyes that we might see wondrous things in your word, Amen.<<

One day, the leader of a monastery, an Abba, told his disciples that he wanted a new shirt for his birthday. The disciples were delighted, for rarely did the Abba ask for anything. The finest cloth was bought. The village tailor was summoned to have the Abba measured. And the tailor promised, by the will of God, to make the shirt within a week. A week went by and a disciple was dispatched to the tailor while the Abba excitedly waited for his new shirt. The tailor told the disciple, “There has been a slight delay. But by the will of God, the shirt will be ready tomorrow.” Next day the tailor said, “I’m sorry it still isn’t finished. Try again tomorrow and, if God wills, it will certainly be ready.” The following day, when the shirt still wasn’t ready, the frustrated Abba said to one of his disciples, “Ask the good tailor how long it will take if he keeps God out of it.”

That story reminded me of an op-ed in *The New York Times* written five years ago by Julia Baird on the topic of the absence of God.¹ The op-ed is an ode to doubt that begins with these words: “Certainty is so often overrated. This is especially the case when it comes to faith ...,” she writes. Baird then lists some famous people who’ve wrestled with doubt. “[The Protestant Reformer John] Calvin and [the writer] C.S. Lewis, have acknowledged times of uncertainty,” she writes. “The Southern writer Flannery O’Connor said there was ‘no suffering greater than what is caused by the doubts of those who want to believe,’ but for her, [this was] ‘the process by which faith is deepened.’ Mother Teresa, too, startled the world when her posthumous diaries revealed that she [experienced periods of doubt].” “[And] just over a month before he died, Benjamin Franklin wrote that he [had] ... some Doubts [about Christ’s] Divinity: ... [But] it is a Question I do not dogmatise upon,” wrote Franklin, “‘having never studied it, and think it needless to busy myself with it now, when I expect soon an opportunity of knowing the truth with less trouble.’”

One person Julia Baird focuses on in her op-ed about doubt is the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby. “When the ... archbishop of Canterbury [admitted] that at times he questioned if God was really there,” she writes, “... *The International Business Times* called it ‘the doubt of the century.’ ... [One] journalist wrote excitedly, ‘Atheism is on the rise and it appears as though even those at the top of the church are beginning to have doubts.’ ... But [the] Archbishop[’s] candor only makes him human,” writes Baird. “He may lead 80 million Anglicans worldwide, but he is also a man who knows anguish, rage, incomprehension, and the cold bareness of grief. He lost his firstborn child, Johanna, a 7-month-old baby girl, in a car accident in 1983, a period he has described as ‘utter agony.’” And during that dark time, the Archbishop identified with the doubt-filled Psalm 88, “which describes the despair of a man who has lost [everything] and cries out, ‘Why, Lord, do you reject me and hide your face from me?’ The psalm [ends] bleakly: ‘Darkness is my closest friend.’”

The litany of well-known people who doubt in Julia Baird’s op-ed is a reminder that to doubt is human. “Doubt,” she writes, “acknowledges our own limitations and [can] challeng[e our] fundamental beliefs.” “Doubt,” she says, “is a crucial part” of belief. That final statement -

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/26/opinion/julia-baird-doubt-as-a-sign-of-faith.html>

doubt is part of belief - reminds me of something Rabbi Abraham Heschel once said: “We are closer to God when we are asking questions than when we think we have [all] the answers.”

The backdrop of today’s Old Testament reading from Isaiah 43 is ancient Israel’s own doubt and questions. Isaiah 43 appears in the second half of the composite book we know as “Isaiah.” I say “composite” because it’s likely that several prophets spanning centuries wrote portions of the sixty-six chapters that make up our biblical book of Isaiah. The second half of “Isaiah” begins in ch. 40, and is sometimes called “Deutero-Isaiah” because it was written about two hundred years after much of the first thirty-nine chapters. The setting of Deutero-Isaiah is exile. The people of Israel are in captivity in Babylon - modern day Iraq. Their home city of Jerusalem and the temple where God was thought to dwell are in ruins, leading to a national crisis of faith, and to questions and doubts about whether heaven was empty - whether God was missing, to refer back to that story about the Abba and his shirt. But the questions and doubts of the time helped to produce some of the Bible’s most beautifully anguished poetry, including Psalm 88 - a favorite of the doubting Archbishop of Canterbury. The poet who penned that Psalm cries out to God on behalf of an exiled people, and claims that they feel “helpless” and “full of troubles” and “forsaken” like the “slain in a grave.” The context of exile also helped to produce some of scripture’s greatest promises - promises like those found in today’s Old Testament reading from Isaiah 43. To a people who feel “helpless” and “abandoned” as Psalm 88 says, the prophet who composed Isaiah 43 speaks on God’s behalf and says to the exiled people: “you are mine”; “I *will be* with you”; “you are precious in my eyes”; “I love you”; “I *am* with you”; “I will gather you and bring you home.”

We read these ancient promises today - promises birthed in the context of Israel’s most intense and anguished questions and doubts - because these promises are baptismal promises, promises made to each of us at baptism, the moment when we, as Isaiah 43 says, “pass through the waters.” Promises that hold firm - and promises we can cling to - during the exiles of life: the hardships that lead to doubt; the suffering that leads to questions; the times of darkness when we grope for light; the times when we feel unworthy. On Tuesday, Darrell Goodwin-Moultry wrote a devotional piece for the UCC’s Daily Devotional called “Worthy.” “It was a Friday afternoon,” he writes, “and I was serving as a volunteer chaplain. A woman came in looking for another colleague; she was scheduled for art therapy. I do not see myself as an artist; at best I am a stick figure guy all the way. I am the type of person who would prefer that someone else take notes on the board because my handwriting would be illegible and not worth the effort. The woman shared that she had taken a bus for over an hour to meet my colleague [the art therapist], and she wasn’t keen on just coming back at another time. My internal voice said aloud ‘not it, not me, not now.’ I heard my voice loud and clear with all of the rational reasons about why I wasn’t the one [to provide an art therapy session to this woman]. That other voice, the one that sometimes echoes as a still small voice and at other times loud, deafening and even blinding suggested that ‘I was [the right person]’ for such a time as this. After some resistance, I found myself playing yogic music [in the background] with an adult coloring book [in front of me]. [But] I was listening with an open heart and mind to [this woman’s] journey and struggle. During a pause I was led [for reasons that I cannot quite explain] to say [to her] boldly ‘you are worthy.’ She stopped coloring and looked at me with tear-filled eyes. I knew those words struck every part of her that believed she was not worthy. In her eyes I also saw the parts of me that felt and feel unworthy.”

Goodwin-Moultry ends that devotional piece with this question: “What if we believed we were chosen, for this day and for this hour, and that we are worthy?”

The waters of baptism - the water we sprinkle on babies, and re-sprinkle on ourselves once a year, accompanied with the words “remember your baptism” - these waters reach back to all those stories in scripture about water and grace and God’s promises. Sprinkled water reminds us of the creation story, when God’s spirit hovered over the waters before she birthed the world in love. Sprinkled water reminds us of Noah’s flood, and how God showed grace to people in the midst of chaos. Sprinkled water reminds us of the Exodus story, when God parted the waters to save people. And sprinkled water recalls the promises of today’s Old Testament reading from Isaiah 43, which speaks of “pass[ing] through waters,” and speaks God’s words to us: “I will [always] be with you,” says God; “you are [always] precious in my eyes,” says God; “I [will always] love you,” says God; “I *am* with you [now],” says God; “I will [prepare a] home [for you]”; you are worthy, just as you are, of my love and grace.

The problem the New Testament gospel writers faced when telling the story of Jesus is that if baptism is a symbol to remind people of God’s love and grace and acceptance, why would Jesus need to be baptized - Jesus who embodied these promises of God? Let me get a bit wonky for a moment. The four New Testament gospel writers have different perspectives on the baptism of Jesus. The Gospel of Mark is probably the earliest account we have in the New Testament, and the narrative is straightforward: Jesus goes to the Jordan river to be baptized, and John the Baptist does the sprinkling. Matthew’s gospel adds a rationale to Mark’s story. In Matthew’s version of the baptism story, Jesus goes to the Jordan river, asks John the Baptist to baptize him, and John resists, saying that he needs to be baptized by Jesus not the other way around. But Jesus insists, and John reluctantly sprinkles him with water. In the Gospel of John’s version of this story, there’s a lot of talk about baptism, but Jesus never actually gets wet in the story - John’s gospel never actually says that Jesus got baptized. In the gospel of Luke’s version of his story - today’s New Testament reading - there’s a fascinating twist. It’s not clear from Luke’s story who actually baptizes Jesus. The first half of today’s story talks a lot about John the Baptist - his ministry and message - but when it comes to sprinkling water on Jesus’ head, the story is strangely cryptic about who does it. In the verse prior to the one that says Jesus got baptized, in today’s story, it says that John was locked away in prison. Luke never actually says that John the Baptist baptized Jesus. All Luke says is: “the people were baptized, and Jesus also was baptized.” Luke doesn’t name names of who actually did the sprinkling.

Scholars have long suggested that the reason for this discrepancy in the New Testament gospels’ versions of the Baptism of Jesus story is because the gospel writers were wrestling with the idea that a sinless Son of God needed the cleansing waters of baptism. But let me suggest a different idea. What if the discrepancies we see in these stories aren’t about concerns over Jesus needing cleansing from sin, but rather concerns over grace? Baptism is a symbol of grace - of God’s grace and eternal favor and acceptance showered upon us. Maybe the gospel writers are wrestling with Jesus’ baptism not because Jesus didn’t need to be cleansed, but because Jesus didn’t need to understand grace. Jesus embodied grace in the New Testament - grace: the favor, the love, the acceptance of God; Jesus embodied the baptismal promises of Isaiah 43: “I will [always] be with you”; “you are [always] precious in my eyes”; “I [will always] love you”; “I *am* with you [now]”; “I will [prepare a] home [for you]”; you are worthy, just as you are. Yes, maybe the discrepancies in the Baptism of Jesus

story in the New Testament are evidence that the gospel writers were wrestling with a symbol of grace - baptism - being sprinkled on the embodiment of God's grace: Jesus. Jesus didn't need baptism to be reminded of God's grace; he lived it. He lived what writer Serene Jones once called the "profoundly countercultural" notion of grace. "In world where we're too often defined by our job, bank balance, education, appearance," she says, "God reminds us: You are worthy and valuable. You deserve to love and be loved."

Let me close today with a story about grace as told by blogger T. D. Smith.² Smith writes: "In my sophomore year of college, I stopped going to church. Like many of my peers, I was busy with school, distracted by friends, and didn't find church necessary. Surrounded by intelligent non-believers, I realized that through years of Sunday school, sermons, and worship services, nobody had explained to me why we believe any of it. ... The foundation of my beliefs [was] ... replaced by a question: *Why should I believe ... ?* To non-believers, that question is obvious. To me, it was eye-opening, crippling and gut-wrenching. I had happily marched through high school, confident that I had faith figured out. I went to college, asked why, and suddenly everything I thought I knew collapsed. ... I vividly recall laying awake at night in an anxious sweat, trying to make sense of God [Then] on a snowy day after [a] Christmas Eve service I went for a run up and down Cathedral Hill in Saint Paul [Minnesota], praying (shouting) to a God I hoped was there. I begged God for something to help me figure out how to believe. For the first time since I'd begun asking why, I got an answer. In my mind's eye I saw an image of a reassuring hand resting on my shoulder, and I felt that reassurance in my heart. I'd like to tell you that I was knocked to the ground by The Lord, or that I heard [God's booming] voice from the sky, but I didn't. I'd like to tell you that I unlocked the great logic puzzle of life and proved beyond a doubt that God exists, but I didn't. I had a feeling, and it felt like God. ... I called out for God, and I felt something. Was it just a feeling? I don't know, but starting from that feeling I began rebuilding my faith. ..."

I love that story, because it's a personal story of doubt and questioning; and it's a story of grace - baptismal grace - grace that says we are loved by God just as we are - a God who meets us wherever we are on life's journey. Amen.

² <http://thesaltcollective.org/dont-know-god-neither-thats-okay/>