



Sermons from
First Presbyterian Church

“Wade in the Water”

The Rev. Evans L McGowan

January 15th, 2012

Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

Mark 1:1-8

I grew up in Austin, Texas, and whatever you think about Texas it’s probably true. It’s that big, that conservative, and that hot. No matter what part of the state we were from or what political affiliation we had, one thing we Texans loved was the river. I went to more swimming holes than playgrounds growing in Texas. I loved to jump in, whether it was from the banks of the river or high up on the cliff. There’s a certain abandon one has to have – or rather, let go of – in order to jump into water.

A little over a week ago I was in Immokalee, Florida with the high school mission team. We were tearing down a house that had fallen out of shape and the owner was facing hefty fines if something wasn’t done. After a long day of working in the sun, we went to a cold swimming pool in the late afternoon and.... I just couldn’t do it. I couldn’t jump in that water. I just couldn’t get over the thought of freezing cold before I could really enjoy myself.

I’m sure many of you have stories involving wading in some body of water somewhere. As we watch these people go down to the river, I wonder: Which one of these fellows is more like you today?

- Would you get so excited you couldn’t take it anymore, jumping first and loving every minute of it?
- Or would you hang back a little, curious but letting someone else go first to test the temperature?
- Or would you look on in dismay, wondering what has gotten into those crazy folks who are now all wet?

Would you be coming out of the water, claiming the preacher had forgiven all your sins and exclaiming, “C’mon in, boys – the water is *fine!*”? Or would you still be standing on the banks, saying, “C’mon, man – we’ve got bigger fish to fry!”

Sometimes, something is keeping us out of the water.

Come, Children, Let's Go Down, Let's Go Down, Come on Down
O, Children, Let's Go Down, Down in the River to Pray...

In our text today, we read about John the Baptist inviting people to come into the river Jordan. But let's not forget who John is – he's a little... different. Tomorrow we celebrate the life of Martin Luther King, Jr. and all he and his community did for the civil rights movement. But let's not forget Dr. King said a lot of things that made many people uncomfortable, and not all followed him into the wilderness. Like all prophets, he was ahead of his time. And I wonder... would we follow him today?

Turning back to John... Dressed in camel's hair and eating locusts? To our ears, Mark might as well have said John's living in a **van** down by the *river*! I mean, seriously, who is going to take this guy for real if he's dressed in animal hide and eating insects?!! Actually, there's a reason Mark gives this description, and it's not to discredit John.

The hairy animal hide tied with a leather belt echoes the description of Elijah in II Kings 1:8. These were tumultuous times in the land, and the Jews were looking for the return of Elijah, the prophet who'd been *swept* away into the clouds. Today, it would be like someone wearing a simple tunic that reminded you of Jesus' time.

And the locusts? It turns out that eating locusts is specifically permitted under Jewish law, according to Leviticus 11:22. Both locusts and honey were uncultivated and therefore pure items of food in the eyes Jews, having never been touched by human hands. It would be like someone surviving off the wild berries and nuts of Michigan.

But why all the way out in the wilderness? The wilderness had special significance, too, for the Jewish people. This is where they fled oppression from Egypt, and in John's time, Rome. This is where they received God's law and the covenant. Venturing into the wilderness was seen as a return to God. These people were thirsty for God, thirsty enough to go out in search of the living water.

What are we afraid of? What excuses have we made to not follow God into the wilderness, to not step into the River of Life?

Come, Children, Let's Go Down, Let's Go Down, Come on Down
O, Children, Let's Go Down, Down in the River to Pray...

Here is the provocative message of John: repent and be baptized, and all your sins are washed away. Thirst for the Living God, and your thirst will be quenched. Seek God in places that may surprise you, and you will be pleasantly surprised.

What opportunity, what relationship, what community is inviting you in? What is holding you back?

This is the open invitation of God's grace. The river is cool and waiting. Close your eyes and imagine with me this river... you're standing by the riverbank... you feel the hot sun beating on your head and shoulders... your feet ache and the dirt and dust grinds between your toes... then you take a breath... and then a step... into the cool waters ... towards that man in camel hair and smelling of honey stuck in his beard... and with a little trust, you lean back into his arms, and he lets you down into the river... the waters enveloping your body, rushing over your face and blocking out the sun... there is darkness and then the shock of even colder water... for a moment you wonder if you'll be lifted back up... and then strong arms lift you up and back into light and warmth of the sun... you emerge into a new life as the drops of water fall like tears down your face... the dirt is gone, the sun dries you skin, and the whole world is bathed in a new light...

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O, Children, Let's Go Down, Down in the River to Pray...

Oh Good Lord, show us the way.

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