

When It's Time To Renew  
Matthew 3:13-17

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In the immensely popular movie "O, Brother, Where Art Thou?" three convicts by the names of Everett, Pete and Delmar run into a baptism down by the riverside. While Everett makes fun of such acts of piety, Delmar, moved by the Spirit, plunges into the water and presents himself to the preacher for baptism. Rising from the water Delmar says to his friends, "This is it, boys. I've been redeemed; the preacher has washed away all my sins and transgressions. It's the straight and narrow from here on out. Heaven is my everlasting reward. Come on in, boys, the water is fine."

By the waters of baptism we are initiated into Christ's holy Church. By the waters of baptism we are incorporated into God's mighty acts of salvation. By the waters of baptism we are given new life by water and the Spirit. And all of this is a marvelous gift of God's amazing grace. Come on in, folks, the water is fine.

By the waters of baptism we drown the devil. It was Crestwood, Kentucky, more than 20 years ago now. It was the middle of December and extremely cold. Snow and ice were on the ground. A middle-aged lady in that congregation had found the Lord and asked to be baptized by immersion. Since we had no pool in that church we made arrangements to do it at the Christian church across the tracks. At the appointed time, a little group of us made our way across the slippery road. When I walked in the sanctuary and dipped my hand into the pool I made a terrible discovery. The custodian had forgotten to turn the heater on for the water. It was cold. It was really, really cold! I turned to Ann and said to her, "Do you want to put this off for another day? We can reschedule this." And she

said, "I waited half my life for this moment, I want to be baptized." So shivering together we stepped into the baptismal pool. As her lips turned blue I baptized her in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. As we climbed the steps out of that baptismal pool she turned to me and said, "Howard, you just froze the hell right out of me!" I said, "Ann, that's exactly what I planned to do!"

Sin is such that you've got to kill the stuff to get rid of it. Radical problems call for radical cures. So we come to the waters of baptism to drown that which threatens to kill us.

Evil is alive and well on planet earth. There may have been a time when we questioned that. There may have been a time when we thought science would save us. There may have been a time when we thought progress would propel us into liberty and justice for all. But nobody really believes that any more. The terrorists have struck, the buildings have fallen, evil is alive and well. We know the ugly face of the evil one himself. We know what it is to go up against the powers of wickedness that threaten to undo us and destabilize all of creation. We are face to face with the evil one. We understand it. But even more than that, we struggle with it down in the depths of our hearts. We know the fight of the soul between right and wrong, good and evil. We know that the war wages within. Or as the old poem says,

*Within my earthly temple there's a crowd  
There's one of us humble; there's one of us proud.  
There's one who's sorry for his sins  
And another who's unrepentant who sits and grins.  
From much corroding care I would be free  
If I could ever determine which is really me.*

Come to the water. Renounce the forces of wickedness. Resist the evil one. Repent of your sins. Come to the water today. Come on in friends, the water is fine.

At the waters of baptism, we discover a Savior. When our younger physician son, Brad, was in college he earned his summer money by working at the wave pool at Kentucky Kingdom in Louisville, Kentucky. He managed the pool, a popular place where hundreds of people gathered daily for recreation. It was his task, very simply, to make sure that nobody drowned. Every night at dinner we would get reports on the number of rescues made that particular day. The question finally became, "Brad, how many people did you and your staff save today?" It was an appropriate question. After all, a savior is somebody who does something for us that we cannot do for ourselves.

Adults would get in that pool. They should have known they could not swim in the deep when the Big Kahoona came and the waves were high. But they didn't have sense enough to stay where they were safe. They were in way over their heads and somebody had to save them. Children were there through no fault of their own. Someone neglected them. They didn't know the difference, yet they were there. Without somebody to rescue them, they would be lost. Teenagers were there thinking they could swim better than they really could, not understanding the danger of the moment. Suddenly they were over their heads and couldn't get out. Somebody had to come in and get them. That's what a savior does. A savior comes to help us when we can't help ourselves. As I listened to those stories night after night, I remembered an old gospel song I used to sing as a kid.

*I was sinking deep in sin, far from the peaceful shore  
Very deeply stained within, sinking to rise no more.  
But the Master of the sea heard my despairing cry  
From the waters lifted me, now safe am I.  
Love lifted me, love lifted me,  
When nothing else could help, love lifted me.*

Four-year old Amanda had developed a fever. Her mother took her to the doctor. The doctor, trying to make that bridge of communication between a physician and a child,

looked into her ears and said to her, "Is Donald Duck in there?" "No," said Amanda. He looked up her nose and said, "Is Mickey Mouse up there?" "No," said Amanda. Finally he took a stethoscope, put it on her heart and said, "Could Barney be living in there?" Amanda, now disgusted with the whole thing, looks up at the doctor and said "No, Sir. Jesus lives in my heart and Barney is on my underwear."

Whether you are 4 or 40 or 94 today, you can walk out of this place with Jesus Christ in your heart. That is the promise of His grace. Don't let anybody leave here without Jesus Christ in your heart. Come to the waters. Come on in folks, the water is fine.

At the waters of baptism we develop the boundaries of life. Rivers that refuse to flow in their banks create floods. I've worked floods in disaster relief. They're a mess. They're disasters, they're difficult, they're damaging, and they're destructive. The powerful force of water with all of its wonder suddenly becomes a destructive enemy when it fails to live within its boundaries.

I'll do as I please. Have you ever said that? I've said it way too much in my life. There's something at the core of my being that would rather live outside the boundaries than inside the boundaries. I prefer to do it my way. Yet, life becomes difficult if we do not discover a way to live within the boundaries. Imagine what it might be like if there were no rules and no regulations and all of us simply chose to do whatever we decided to do at the moment? After all, we're free, we can be our own persons, do our own thing. What kind of world would we have? Anarchy, the political scientists would say. So we come to a stoplight. I don't have to obey the rules; I'll do as I please when I get there. How long would we make it in society that way? A group of kids get together at a park to play ball. One throws the ball, another bats the ball, another runs the bases but there is no organization, there is no structure, there's no order, no discipline to it and pretty soon the whole thing is confusing

and everybody goes home. Life does not function without boundaries. And so we are formed by the faith in order to be a mighty stream for God.

He was a proud navy captain on his first ship. He was determined not to be outdone by anybody, anywhere, anyway. When he saw a light coming in his direction he informed the signalman to send a message, "Move 10 degrees to the south." Quick came the reply, "You move 10 degrees to the north." Not to be outdone, this captain of the ship sent a second message. "Move 10 degrees to the south. This is the Captain speaking." Immediately there comes the reply, "Move 10 degrees to the north. This is the lighthouse speaking!"

There are forms and functions which make life productive. So we ask you to embrace the Christian faith as found in the scriptures of the Old and the New Testaments because these words become a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. Come to the waters. Come on in friends, the water is fine.

By the waters of baptism, we dive into the stream, a stream of faithful discipleship. I don't remember exactly when it happened in the tides of time. But, the Lord came to me one day and said, "Howard, it's time to quit playing at the pool. Come with me to ride the rapids." To say that I was scared is more than you can imagine. I liked it at the pool. It was extremely comfortable beside the still waters. I liked to sit around with my friends and see our reflections in the water. But the call of God was persistent.

So, reluctantly at first, I found myself slipping out into the raft with this divine Guide. "Is the river deep," I asked? Are the rapids treacherous I wondered? You see, fundamentally I am scared to death of water. My mother instilled that in me. My Guide just smiled and said, "Enjoy the ride, Howard," as we pushed away into the current of the stream.

For a while the ride was absolutely wonderful, I couldn't have asked for anything better. A nice stroll down the river on a sunny afternoon. The fish were flopping, the birds were flying, the flowers were blooming around the banks, and the trees created a wonderful canopy from the sun. *And old man river, it just kept rolling along.*

Then suddenly we began to take up speed and move faster. I began to feel the rocks pounding against my feet in the bottom of the raft and I became afraid and scared. I looked over to Him and said, "What on earth am I going to do, how am I going to hang on?" and He just looked back to me and smiled and with a pat of the hand said, "Stay with Me. We'll make it down the rapids." I found myself intensely afraid. Tossed here and there, back and forth, up and down, in the routine of trying to make it over the rapids. I wondered if I could survive but somehow we got through.

There I learned a lesson, perhaps the best lesson in all of my life. If you're going to ride the rapids, you've got to go with the flow. Oh yes, sometimes I fell out of the boat but He pulled me back. And most of the time I found myself way in over my head, but He always had a way of reaching for me and we got through the rocky fall together.

The writer of Revelation talks about a river of life that flows through the city of God. It is only in more recent years that I have come to understand that when He called me out of the pool and set me on the river, it was the river that leads finally and eternally home. You see, this road of discipleship is a lifetime adventure. Come to the waters; come on in, my friends. The water's fine.

At the waters of baptism we delight in community. I know it is not always easy. Somebody said the Church is a little bit like Noah's ark, you couldn't stand the stink inside if it weren't for the flood outside. I've found that true in my 56 years of being in it. But I need to tell you today, folks, God is not calling you to today to take a solo jet ski. This is a

freighter ship. This is not any casual vacation cruise ship that we have boarded. It is a working ship. No, you're not always going to like the people who travel with you. Yes, there's going to be work to do. No, every one of your needs is not going to be met. Yes, you are going to have to work here.

We are going to ask you for your prayers, your presence, your gifts, and your service. We ask you for sacrifice. We ask you to do more than you want to do sometimes. But that's the nature of the ship. It's the ship that will take us home. Or as the old African spiritual used to put it:

*'Tis the old ship of Zion, 'tis the old ship of Zion,  
'tis the old ship of Zion,  
come on children, get on board.*

*It has landed many a thousand, it has landed many a  
thousand, it has landed many a thousand,  
come on children, get on board.*

*Ain't no danger in the water, ain't no danger in the  
water, ain't no danger in the water,  
come on children, get on board.*

*It will take us all to heaven, it will take us all to  
heaven, It will take us all to heaven,  
come on children, get on board.*

Come on in, my friends, the water is fine. Amen.