

Luke 3: 15-22 H₂O: A simple thing

You probably recognize the chemical formula found in this morning's sermon title. H-2-O: otherwise known as water. It is a very simple chemical formula. This formula has even made it outside of the chemistry textbooks to appear as a brand name on a drink now available where advertisements claim it is somehow much better than the water obtainable regular water. Two atoms of hydrogen and one of oxygen, both gases, combine to form water, a liquid. Vast amounts of energy are released. Liquids have very different properties than gases. The most obvious is that they are visible while gases are not. Both gases and liquids can flow and change shape according to the container which holds them. We only see this in the liquid state. But water is not an ordinary liquid. It has some very unusual properties. It expands when chilled to the point of changing into a solid instead of contracting. We don't think about water and its unusual properties because water is so common in our lives. We just know that before winter and freezing temperatures arrive we have to drain water from things that might freeze. If we don't the container may rupture because water expands as it freezes. This is just common knowledge. We are taught early in our education that water covers the majority of the earth's surface. I distinctly remember the pictures sent back from space which first showed us the earth from space. How different it looks with its covering of blue water and green vegetation from the stark pictures of the moon's surface. I also remember early biology lessons which emphasized how much of my body was composed of water. Water composes a major portion of every cell of every living organism. Biological processes depend upon this molecule and its unique properties. Life, as we know it depends upon this molecule for its very existence. Physicists and others evaluate whether or not life exists or ever has existed in the solar system by whether or not there has ever been water present. For the most part, we fail to realize the importance or power of water until we encounter drought or flood. We have manipulated rivers and channeled waters in this country so that deserts have become farmlands and dams provide power for our electrical grid. Water is present in many aspects of our life, we take it for granted. Perhaps this is why we also do not notice its frequent appearances in Scripture as the important revelations that they are. This year the Horizons Bible Study which is used by Presbyterian Women as a guide for their study has departed from the usual by not focusing on a single book from the Bible. Instead the study is called *Come to the Waters* and uses scripture from the entire cannon to focus on various aspects of water throughout scripture. It begins with the waters of creation and ends with the river of life. This study considers the waters of baptism, dangerous waters, stormy waters, waters of justice and righteousness, streams of mercy and the living water offered to us. It also considers the absence of water. Skimming these topics is one way to show the importance of water in our spiritual lives as well as our physical lives. Perhaps one of the reasons water appears so predominantly in Scripture is the reality of how important it is to our survival physically. Water—essential for life—but also capable of destroying life. When we look at the Biblical narrative we find that water has always been seen as having these two roles in the story. The peoples of that time did not have the science to describe water's unique characteristics. They did not know that all living things contain water, but they did know that without water they could not live. They feared large bodies of water and viewed them as sources of danger and chaos. In Noah's story water features in the destruction of the wicked upon the earth through flood. When the Israelites

fled Egypt, the parting of waters by God led to their deliverance from Pharaoh's pursuing army which was then drowned when the waters returned. While they wandered in the desert they accused Moses of bringing them into the desert to die of thirst. To enter the Promised Land the Israelites crossed the Jordan River. Other times water when played a role include the stories of those who met at wells, including Jacob and Rebecca and Jesus and the Samaritan woman who learned from Jesus about the living water which quenched the deepest thirst eternally. There are so many images from our texts where water forms an essential element of the story. There are so many ways God uses water as image and metaphor to reveal things of importance to us. We also have these same basic images of water today—as a substance essential for life, one which quenches thirst, one which cleans away dirt and also one which can sweep away all the things which we have built during a storm. We also have these images of water revealing important things for our spiritual life. Our text from Luke this morning features the waters of baptism. It is a familiar fact to us that we have four accounts of the life of Jesus, three of which are pretty similar but no two are exactly alike. Often there will be an event described only in one. It is rare that the same event is described in three, and only that Jesus was baptized is found in all four. This indicates that the baptism of Jesus was very important to all the different people who were gathered into the early church whether they were from a Jewish or gentile background. Our text begins with John the Baptizer and the expectations of people who came to him in the wilderness by the river Jordan. We are told that John is proclaiming a baptism of repentance. He calls out those who have relied on their being "children of Abraham" who have the Torah but are not living according to its instructions. "Brood of vipers" he calls them. And when they ask what they should do, he instructs them to share what they have, to be honest. The message is to return to the ways of the Lord. The people respond to this by wondering if he is the promised Messiah. John's response was that his baptism was with water while the one who was coming would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. The people are to prepare for the coming of the Lord. What John offered was a baptism of repentance, one which cleansed. Baptism as a cleansing or purifying ritual was common in Judaism at that time. Special baths that had water running through them were a feature in the homes of the wealthy, their elaborate channels of supply of running water can still be seen in the archeological remains at Qumran. We too often think of baptism as washing away our sins. The lyrics of a hymn we will sing in a few minutes speak of the cleansing baptism of Christ's blood. This association of cleansing by water is strong both on the literal level of washing away dirt and the metaphorical removal of sin. But the baptism of Jesus was important to the early church for an entirely different reason. The synoptic gospels vary in some of the details about this special baptism, but there are some details which are striking in their close similarity. Despite how differently the three synoptic gospels begin, this baptism is the event which marks the beginning of Jesus' Galilean ministry. It is the starting place for the work he came to do. Another detail found in all four accounts is that the heavens opened and the Holy Spirit descended like a dove as a voice from heaven declared: You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased. If we examine these two common themes we see that they are about the identification of Jesus. John tells the people who come to him that the one for whom he is preparing the way is greater than he is. John is pointing to Jesus. Although Luke does not raise the issue of why Jesus' baptism is so important, it is a question often considered. Matthew tells us that Jesus said it was necessary, but why? Theologians often argue the point, saying that in this act Jesus took his place with us

as sinners. The incarnation which we just celebrated did that. Jesus had nothing to repent, no sin to be washed away—and really does being cleansed prevent one from becoming dirty again? Or does baptism prevent future sinning? If the point of baptism was in cleansing, how often would we need to be baptized? It seems important that Jesus' baptism occurred before Jesus began his work. When Jesus was baptized, the Holy Spirit descended and identified Jesus as God's son. It seems to me that it was a commissioning, a blessing given on the work to be done. God named and claimed Jesus at this point. When we think of baptism, it is important that we understand this claiming that happened. Throughout the remaining gospel narratives it is important to note that Jesus did not baptize his followers. He called them and gathered them together as he went about the countryside teaching and healing. He claimed them to carry on his mission. Yet Matthew tells us when Christ ascended those disciples were told to do three things: to go, to teach and to baptize in his name. What did baptism in his name mean? It meant that the disciples were to go out and teach what he had taught, the love of God. An important part of that teaching was that God's love through Christ named and claimed people as belonging to God. This is the lesson for us. This theme of God's claiming of Jesus, and through Jesus' teachings, his life, death, resurrection and ascension, God's claiming of us. We hold as a tenet of faith that the sacrament of baptism as instituted by Christ is a visible sign of God's invisible grace. Claimed by God's love before we know how essential that love is to us and our well being. Yes, we are in some senses cleansed, but in a more profound way we are claimed. Claimed by this love, nurtured by the Holy Spirit we are asked to surrender our will to God's will for our lives. The path we are called to follow may seem dangerous and require that we venture into places where we cannot see the outcome. Baptism according to Martin Luther is just the beginning of a process. Yes, water is a simple molecule. It is indeed essential for life. Its power can change landscapes on the face of the earth. So too is the water of baptism, the claim that God makes upon us. In these waters, God claims you and me, which by graces cleans us. These waters also have the power to transform and change us. Look at the water in the font and remember always that God loves and claims you. Thanks be to God.