

Wet, Wild, and Wide Open

Matthew 3:13-17

Cradock Presbyterian Church

January 13, 2013

Wet, wild, and wide open. What a title for a sermon!

I read this passage, and I thought about all that it meant, and it made me think about - white water rafting! I went once, a few years ago, on one of the most severe rivers in West Virginia with the youth group from First Pres. It was a totally engulfing experience! Maybe you could even say, totally immersing. But I don't want to get into that "immersion thing" – especially when we're talking about *The Lord's* baptism..

There are some misconceptions about rafting. I was surprised that you get wet before you even start out! You don't get into one of those rafts from a *dock*; you wade out into the water with it, pushing it out a ways and then climbing in. You know, one of the biggest misconceptions about Jesus' baptism is that he went down into really deep water, then disappeared beneath the waves. The Jordan was shallow, in those days; we know that from geological research. So Jesus probably waded out a good ways, just like we did with our rafts.

So: first, you get wet. Next, you float downriver, gently at first. Then the water speeds up. The river narrows and widens, twists and turns; rocks and rapids appear. The river we were on had some of the best (read that "most challenging") rapids in the eastern United States. That means they were *wild*. Violent, high-velocity, with unseen vertical drops, vortexes, things that made the raft tilt at 45 degree or better angles - all these came up during our journey. Some of the rapids were wild enough people actually flew out of the rafts! It was one of the few times I've been glad to be a fat boy! Halfway

down the river, there was a calm area. Our guide laughingly encouraged us to forget about trying to stay dry, to cut loose and enjoy it all, to get “*wide open*.” So we did! We jumped right out of the rafts and swam for a while. A little farther on, off to the side, there was a place where the water went through a sort of “bottleneck” – a narrow path between huge rock walls. As you went through this thing, the water got really fast. Going through that was sort of like being shot through a water cannon. Wild! And it felt like *running wide open!* You know, a little bit out of control. At the end of the trip, the river opened up into a really beautiful wide open place, where we pushed our rafts up onto the beach.

John the Baptist’s life was like that, I suppose. He had the wild first. He came from a priestly family, you remember; but when he was finally considered grown-up, he went out into the desert to live. He might have been out there with a bunch of Jewish monks who studied scripture and lived a rigid life; we don’t know. He sure came out of the desert with strong Bible skills. But besides that, John was a wild man! He ate an awful diet, we know that, but do you know why? Locusts and honey were what Elijah the prophet ate. He wore camel’s hair and leather, a really strange fashion statement! Again, just like Elijah. All this is bad enough, but what he *said*, Man! Depending on which Gospel you read, he called the best religious leaders of the day snakes, pigs, liars, cheats, just all kinds of things that might get you sued nowadays. Or arrested for disorderly conduct. Yeah, John was a wild man, all right.

But he did do something incredibly important: he set the stage for what would culminate in Jesus. The Jewish folk had always had a ritual washing for purification.

John took this washing and tied it to the need for repentance, and he hit the road. Why? Why did he go at this time? None of the Scriptures tells us. We have to assume it was the call of God moving him at that time, to that place, and moving Jesus, too. So his preaching went *wide open*. He called the whole religious establishment to account. He had people coming to him by the thousands to be baptized – the Billy Graham crusades before there was a Billy Graham! He feared no man, and backed off for no one! But one day, a cousin from Galilee came to be baptized – and he went from wide open to nearly shut down.

See, Jesus was an unknown – to everyone but John. Unlike John, there hadn't been a short but spectacular career of crazy preaching and public life. John had had a meteoric rise to fame; Jesus had had nothing of the sort. To the unknowing, Jesus was just one of the crowd. But John knew. And he nearly blew a gasket when he found out what God wanted him to do. HE didn't want to be the one to baptize God's son! He resisted. And in the original language it's clear, he *kept* resisting. "John, you're supposed to baptize me." "But it's not right, I won't do it." "No, John, really, you're supposed to do it." "I just can't!" And this went on for a while. Jesus won out. Jesus knew that this had to be done. And he knew why. He knew what this meant: a ministry to the world that would end at the Cross.

So he came to the water. He started everything out by getting thoroughly wet. He probably wasn't immersed, it was probably pouring, as we've come to know, which doesn't mean "go and argue with your friends and neighbors about how you should be baptized." Here's the point: Jesus came and tossed all caution to the winds— just as wet

as a white-water rafter. He was obeying God, fulfilling what God had planned. This was more powerful than a day on the water fighting the rapids, in light of what followed. As he completed the baptism, a couple of things happened that made it clear that this was the beginning of something really *wild*. *Immediately* the heavens went *wide open* for him; and a dove descended to him. Some folks have said this was the Holy Spirit being given to Jesus at his baptism. No – since he was already the Son of God and God himself, He already had it. This was the *sign* that he had fulfilled a covenant agreement with God, just as the dove came to Noah at the end of the flood to signal a new beginning. This new beginning was the start of a *wild* ride! Jesus in his three year ministry was going to have a wilder, more *wide-open* ride than anyone who ever walked the face of this earth. There was going to be constant danger from the established religious “mob”. He’d heal people sensationally, impossibly. He’d have debates on a level that’d make the current political “debates” about a so-called “Fiscal Cliff” look like child’s play. And heaven with all of its resources was *wide open* to him in those wild days; and *wide open* to him in eternity when his work was done.

Listen, it’s like that in our lives! Or at least, that’s the way God intended it. When you and I assented to baptism, or confirmed those baptismal vows taken for us when we were little, however it was, we did just as Jesus did: we began a journey, a ministry, even, that was gonna get *wild*. Oh, that might sound a little strange to hear! Maybe you’ve never heard it put it that way before! But if we take the covenant with God seriously - and that’s what our baptism and vows were, a covenant - then life ought to be one white-water ride after another: exhilarating, refreshing, a little dangerous at

points, but never dull. Along the way, we might have to pull some friends or even some strangers out of the water! We might have to pass along some tips for how to navigate the next set of rapids, because we've seen these rapids before. While we're on that water, all of God's tool chest is *wide open* for us, so we'll have everything we need. And at the end of the journey, I know what else is wide open for us: the entryway to heaven.

Sadly, so many of us miss the boarding call. We're afraid of getting wet! We're afraid somebody will call us a *wild man or wild woman*. We get afraid of the wide open spaces, and want to stay all closed up tight, in our comfortable little spaces, risking nothing, gaining nothing. If that sounds too familiar, I got a message for you: jump into the water! Go back to your baptism, go back to *Jesus'* baptism, and start the journey over again. Cut loose, and hold on! Then you'll know how wide open God's love is for you, and how thoroughly soaked in it you've always been.

Exactly a month from tomorrow, we'll have our Shrove Tuesday Pancake supper, and Lenten Season 2013. The trip through Jesus' life to the Cross begins. We're thinking about quite a few things that will draw you closer to Jesus as you go. Are you ready to jump in, and hang on?