

# Swimming with the Prophets

BY CAROL YOUNGER

The baptismal waters call to mind the words of Joel,  
“I will pour out my Spirit on them,’ declares the Lord.”  
God offers ongoing opportunities to step into the River  
of Life. Our baptism continues, as we learn to swim with  
the Spirit into a life of deeper faithfulness.

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To be joyful out on 70,000 fathoms of water, many, many miles from all human help—yes, that is something great! To swim in the shallows in the company of waders is not the religious.

Sören Kierkegaard

Four years ago our son asked, “When can I be baptized?” I started questioning: Was Graham ready to meet the waves of ethical dilemmas and tough questions that would wash over him after making his commitment? “When can I be baptized?” he asked, and I wanted to say, “Have you mastered the backstroke? Can you conquer an undertow?” I handed him sentences to learn, facts to memorize, and admonitions to follow, as though I could layer theological life jackets on him. I wanted him to show some expertise, some grasp of the Christian life before he stepped into the baptistery. I was suiting him in scuba gear before his first trip to the pool, enough to make a person cling to the side rather than dive in.

Then I remembered that the first step in swimming lessons is learning to love the water.

What he most needed to see was what I often overlook. The water poured into the baptistery embodies Joel’s words, “I will pour out my Spirit on them,’ declares the LORD” (see Joel 2:28 and Acts 2:17). This water in which we joyfully splash is a Living Water, a gift poured out for us. “When can I be baptized?” my son continued to ask, and in his longing,

urgent tone, I heard myself long to touch Living Water, to be dipped again into Joel's vision of living with God: a vision of being drenched by a River of Life. I remembered the Holy Presence in the world, the Vision beyond our human selves, which leads us to this river. I saw how far I had moved from the waters of my own baptism, how dry the vision, now barely a trickle.

"When can I be baptized?" he repeated, and I responded, "Let's both get in the water. I'll go with you." So we went into the baptistery, Graham, his pastor father, and I. As my husband and I baptized our son together, I touched this River of Life again, reminded that it is not about words memorized, facts told, and admonitions given. This is swimming in the Spirit, loving the Water, and staying in until we can ride the current. The prophet's words, "I will pour out my Spirit on them," offer ongoing opportunities to step into this filled pool. Our baptism continues. We learn to swim with the Spirit. When are we ready for such an exercise? When we're ready to dream dreams, and see visions.

It has been a while since Graham first went into the water. Our swimming lessons continue. Familiar stories of Scripture become passages that challenge. We weave readings, sermons, reflections, and songs into rafts that we hope will keep us afloat in deeper waters. We ask questions we've not asked before. We try to share school, work, church, and daily routines with those whose heritage and lifestyles are different than our own.

"Love one another," Christ commanded and the apostles echoed to those early Christians learning to swim. My Fort Worth, Texas, church practices a weekly discipline of sharing a meal with people in our neighborhood. In serving folks

who rarely sit around a tablecloth with flowers in the center, we learn lessons in friendship. Sometimes it is our children, refilling iced tea glasses with kindness, who minister. When the strokes of hospitality grow tiresome, a person's story, a shared experience, or an expression of gratitude or grace reminds us how good it is to swim.

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Whenever we sit on the side for a while, or wade around too long, the prophets, our swimming instructors in the faith, remind us that it is time to head for deeper water. When our swimming lessons grow difficult, we must repeat them over and over. At times we are barely treading water. Often we choose the shallow end. We crowd into the wading area, and

grow annoyed. We're bumping into other frustrated swimmers, avoiding the exercise for which we were meant.

The prophets help us move toward the deeper end in our faithfulness. They show us strokes we must practice to move forward. To learn them, they say, we must welcome the lonely, the marginalized, the orphan, the foreigner. This practice will pull us out of the shallow area, they promise,

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and move us firmly through the waves.

Suddenly the fellow waders who had annoyed us are a joy to have in the water. There is purpose and fellowship in the deep end. Still drenched by the waters of new life, our baptism continues.

The question is, will we stay in the river and learn to ride the current?

Like many who got into the water at age ten, Graham sometimes wonders if he was ready. If he had known how his love for Christ would lead him to question his use of money, his values and friendships, and the presence of the Spirit as a form of conscience in his life, would he have taken longer to step into the baptistery? He still maintains his love of the water. He keeps listening to the questions that his swim instructors ask: Will you follow if no one swims beside you? Will you forge through deep waters when some advise you to sit by the side and pull up a towel? Will you commit to go the distance, even when you don't yet know your endurance level? Will you find joy in this daily training? Will you trust the one who invited you into the water, even when the water is way over your head?

I no longer expect any certain level of expertise prior to my son's continuing adventure in the water. I just listen to hear the instructor call our names and remind us that it is time for our lessons. I just long for the willingness to understand that faith always leads us beyond where we are into new territory. We splash in this river together, learning to love the water and practicing our strokes, following the community that has gone before us, slowly moving towards the deeper waters of faith.

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