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Larkspur, California  
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Isaiah 43:1-7; Mark 1:4-11  
“Tolstoy, Baptism and New Year”

I just read **Tolstoy's** *Anna Karenina*. There's a fascinating scene on the birth of a baby who isn't baptized in the book but babies lead me to think about **baptism** although Jesus was baptized as an adult. I was baptized in a dream on **New Year's** Eve. Thus, my sermon title: “Tolstoy, Baptism and New Year.”

*Konstantin Levin* is a co-protagonist in Tolstoy's book. We find him in a fluster at the birth of his son by his wife Kitty. Of course, Kitty has the greater difficulty but as a male writer would have it; her husband seems to be in much greater pain.

Kitty is an avowed Christian and Levin not but at the point of the baby's birth Levin prays to God. Later in the novel he seeks religion by reading philosophers and theologians but the more he reads the more confusing it becomes.

He cannot find God or religion through the rational process so he gives up and admits that at the point when all reason goes out of the window he finds the need to pray. So religion is found, not through reason but experience.

For me, Jesus' birth is the most sublime and quintessential birth of all time and yet whenever a baby is born we are drawn to wonder, prayer and mystery which we call faith.

Levin would later reflect on how his religion in his early years (and here's a shout out to Molly!) powerfully influenced his thinking in his adult years. He returned to his earlier faith. He affirmed that his return to Christianity did not jettison reason and it embraced all goodness.

We leap now to baptism. Jesus' baptism was a fulfillment of God's will, a baptism of repentance encouraged in the day. It was a symbol of cleansing and turning towards God. Jesus fully identified with humanity in his baptism.

Most of us were baptized as babies. Baptism is most importantly a sign of God's grace which is freely given. There is nothing we can do to earn God's grace. This is most poignantly expressed in the baptism of a baby. Babies don't do anything to earn God's favor apart from being alive and cute.

God's grace is present at any time of our lives – even when we feel we least deserve it. We are accepted, loved and affirmed for who we are and not for what we have done good or bad. The baptism of a baby is a sign of this acceptance.

Baptism is also a sign of cleansing and renewal for those baptized. Water symbolizes cleansing and going through the water symbolizes going from the old into the new. The Israelites went

through the water of the Red Sea and thus moved from slavery to freedom, from oppression to liberation.

I'm not sure how we experience slavery and oppression in our seemingly comfortable contexts. We certainly aren't enslaved and oppressed like Africans in Lincoln's day or Dinkas in southern Sudan or carpet slaves in India. There are other things that oppress and perhaps enslave us.

At any point along the way we are called to remember our baptism and feel again and again God's grace and thus freedom and liberation.

I am not enslaved or oppressed in any conventional way and yet God saw it fit to baptize me on New Year's Eve in a dream. It was a wonderful experience of renewal and liberation going into the New Year.

Before Christmas a neighbor's condo was flooded when painters broke a sprinkler. Water drenched her condo and rained upon the floors below.

In my dream I was at home and my condo sprinklers burst and I was drenched. As dreams go it wasn't an unpleasant experience. I felt that I was being baptized. I woke on January 1 with a sense of renewal and liberation and I have felt a sense of clarity in my theological thinking since then. Tolstoy helped.

I entered the New Year with a new boldness to express the theology of our reformed tradition and a renewed spirit to affirm my relationship ("relationship" is a key word) with God in Christ inspired by the Holy Spirit.

I was renewed in the sense that I continue to claim, own and appreciate my Christian faith while still remaining in contact and dialogue with adherents of other religions – without apology.

In our faith, we have a strong and vital relationship with the divine whom we call "God." We have a deep, magnificent and rich spirituality and a relationship with each other and the world that is absolutely wonderful. Our mission is to communicate God's good news and to make the world a better and more compassionate place.

The movie "Lincoln" reminded me of the importance of story and that our faith is based on many stories and not dogma although statements of faith are important. That's something else we can proudly affirm: our *Book of Confessions* especially the last two confessions which relate more to our day and age.

Today's gospel story is one among many in God's larger story. Since it conveys Jesus' baptism – his new beginning – I thought I'd repeat it but this time in contemporary language translated by Presbyterian pastor, Eugene Peterson, in *The Message*.

"John the Baptizer appeared in the wild, preaching a baptism of life-change that leads to forgiveness of sins. People thronged to him from Judea and Jerusalem and, as they confessed their sins, were baptized by him in the Jordan River into a changed life. John wore a camel-hair habit, tied at the waist with a leather belt. He ate locusts and wild field honey.

“As he preached he said, ‘The real action comes next: The star in this drama, to whom I’m a mere stagehand, will change your life. I’m baptizing you here in the river, turning your old life in for a kingdom life. His baptism – a holy baptism by the Holy Spirit – will change you from the inside out.’

“At this time, Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. The moment he came out of the water, he saw the sky split open and God’s Spirit, looking like a dove, come down on him. Along with the Spirit, a voice: ‘You are my Son, chosen and marked by my love, pride of my life.’”

It is said that baptism heralds a new beginning of participation in the ministry of Christ for all who are baptized. Such participation initiated in baptism then becomes an ever-expanding process, setting Christians on a journey which lasts the whole course of their lives.

Levin says at the end of Tolstoy’s great novel: “To me personally, to my heart, unquestionable knowledge is revealed, inconceivable to reason, and I stubbornly want to express this knowledge by means of reason and words...I’ll fail in the same way to understand with my reason why I pray, and yet I will pray – but life now, my whole life, regardless of all that may happen to me, every minute of it, is not only not meaningless, as it was before, but has the unquestionable meaning of the good which it is in my power to put into it!”

This sermon touches on my journey and I hope it touches your journey as well as we enter and embark on this New Year together. Amen.