

“Power in Water” by Tim Hall

1st Sunday after the Epiphany (Year A) – January 8, 2023

[RCL:] Isaiah 42:1-9, Psalm 29, Acts 10:34-43, Matthew 3:13-17

Water is a wonderful thing. It literally sustains us and gives us life. And it does so much more. Since the 3rd day of creation, when God separated the water from the land, it has nourished the earth and brought forth good things to eat. We seek its solace, be it on a beach beside the ocean waves or on the banks of a mountain lake at sunset. You can just imagine... “He leads me beside the still waters... he restores my soul.”

Water has great cleansing and restorative power, too, as we see over and over again in scripture. Sometimes in big ways, like the great flood which cleansed the world and gave it a reboot. The saving of the Hebrews and destruction of the Egyptians when the Red Sea closed. Sometimes more subtle. Hagar and Ishmael find a God-given well in the wilderness after their water skin had run dry. Moses draws water from the rock. Naaman, cured of his leprosy by Elisha, after bathing seven times in the Jordan River. The woman whose life is changed when she meets Jesus at the well. The man born blind whose sight is restored by washing off the mud Jesus had rubbed on his eyes.

One of my favorite movies... EVER ... is “O Brother Where Art Thou”. It’s a comedy slash musical about three chain gang escapees in the American deep south of the 1930’s... Ulysses Everett McGill, played by George Clooney, and his two fellow escapees, Delmar and Pete. As they go on a quest for buried treasure, pursued by the law, they come upon all manners of interesting situations and characters, many based on Homer’s Odyssey.

At one point, as they are having breakfast after camping out in the woods, a multitude of people – all dressed in white – begin walking past them in the forest, heading to the river for a group baptism, as they sing... “O brother let’s go down, let’s go down, c’mon down; O sister let’s go down, down to the river to pray.” The three men watch them from the banks of the river as the worshippers wade into the water in double file to the preacher, who dunks them in baptism, one at a time. Delmar is so taken by this scene that he runs into the river and jumps the front of the line to be baptized.

Afterwards, dripping wet and joyful, Delmar declares, “Well that’s it boys. I been redeemed. The preacher done washed away all my sins and transgressions. It’s the straight and narrow from here on out and Heaven everlasting is my reward... Come on in boys, the water is fine.” At which point Pete splashes in to be baptized too.

Equally as dramatic is our scene from Matthew this morning. Picture this... the crowds have gathered again to be immersed in the cleansing water by John the Baptizer. And then Jesus appears, having come from Galilee to be baptized in the Jordan himself. Remember, we had a foreshadowing of this event during Advent, on the second Sunday, when John declares, "I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."

Now, here he is this morning, coming through the crowd! Everything stops. "You should be baptizing me" John says in awe... "Not I you". But Jesus tells him that it will fulfill all righteousness for him to be baptized by John. And so it happens. The clouds open, a dove descends, and the voice from heaven speaks.

Isaiah's prophecy is fulfilled. "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations."

No matter which revised common lectionary year we are in, A, B, or C, the first Sunday after the Epiphany is always celebrated as the Baptism of our Lord, Jesus Christ. This year, which is year A, we hear the baptism as described by Matthew. Next year it will be Mark. And the year after, Luke. Then repeat. Our Gospel readings in the season after Pentecost follow this same pattern, so we'll be hearing a lot from Matthew this year.

Why this focus every year on Jesus' baptism, right after celebrating his holy birth at Christmas? It must be important. Last week we heard all the stories from Jesus' childhood. The visits of the shepherds and the Magi. The angelic announcements and protection. The naming of Jesus in the temple. And the prophecies. The flight to Egypt and the return to Nazareth.

This morning we continue our journey with Jesus. Many years have passed and his time to change the world has come. His baptism in the Jordan River marks the beginning of his active ministry. And through it, Jesus demonstrates acceptance of his own humanity, even though he is without sin. He shows us that he is one of us, destined to feel pain and loss, to take joy in love and brotherhood, to forgive, to suffer and die. But he will also share the good news of the kingdom of heaven, and teach us *his* way to the father.

Our Psalm this morning proclaims, "The voice of the LORD is upon the waters; the God of glory thunders; the LORD is upon the mighty waters. The LORD shall give strength to his people; the LORD shall give his people the blessing of peace." It is through Jesus' baptism that these gifts are given to God's people. All people.

Peter's powerful speech, from the Book of Acts, is given to the Gentiles who have gathered after the conversion of Cornelius, the first Gentile to be welcomed to The Way. In it, he tells of Jesus of Nazareth anointed with the Holy Spirit, the deeds he did, and his resurrection. As he is speaking, the Holy Spirit falls upon the entire listening throng, and then afterwards, even these uncircumcised are all baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. The good news is for everyone!

In a few minutes, when we stand together to renew our baptismal vows, we will be asked a few important questions. What do we believe? And what will we do about it?

At the recent consecration of our new Bishop, Mark Stevenson, the very first thing that happened after the two-hymn processional, was the "Thanksgiving Over Water". Presiding Bishop Michael Curry blessed the water as it was poured into the fonts.

"We thank you, Almighty God, for the gift of water. Over it the Holy Spirit moved in the beginning of creation. Through it you led the children of Israel out of their bondage in Egypt into the land of promise. In it your Son Jesus received the baptism of John and was anointed by the Holy Spirit as the Messiah, the Christ, to lead us, through his death and resurrection, from the bondage of sin into everlasting life. We thank you, Father, for the water of Baptism. In it we are buried with Christ in his death. By it we share in his resurrection. Through it we are reborn by the Holy Spirit."

Then Bishop Curry, Bishop Goff, and others asperged all the gathered people, sprinkling us with the life-giving and life-restoring holy water as we sang "Wade in the Water". It was a powerful moment, overflowing with the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Just as Josette preached last week that the new year gives us an opportunity to leave our sinful ways in the past and move on to better days ahead; to say goodbye to our demons and hello to our better angels. – so we can confirm our commitment to this as we renew our baptismal vows.

I pray that we would take all the messages we have heard this morning to heart. I pray that we would feel the presence of Jesus, our friend and confidant, our teacher and protector, in our lives. And in this assurance, I pray that we would strive bravely and confidently in this season of Epiphany, to share his light in a world so in need of it.

~ Amen.