

1<sup>st</sup> Sunday after the Epiphany (Year B) – January 7, 2023

RCL: Genesis 1:1-5, Psalm 29, Acts 19:1-7, Mark 1:4-11

Water is a wonderful thing. It literally sustains us and gives us life. But it can be a scary thing, too. Consider our first lesson this morning... the very first verses of the Bible. The earth is formless, with darkness covering the face of the deep, wind whipping across the waters. Can you imagine yourself there? Lord, please don't let me fall into that darkness below from this swirling darkness above!

Dark water can be so frightening. What lies underneath it? And especially when it's blown into a frenzy by the wind.

I recently read “In the Heart of the Sea”, a non-fiction account, that reads like a novel, of the ill-fated journey of the 4-masted whaleship Essex. The 20-man crew leaves Nantucket in 1819 on a planned 2-year whaling expedition to the Pacific, meeting challenges and mishaps at every turn. And is so often the case that we see in stories like this, the violent storms with high wind and slashing waves come at night. In the darkness, against the fearsome forces of nature, the men are challenged to save their ship... and their lives. Throughout it all, even the destruction of their ship by a mighty whale, the leviathan, and their struggle for survival, their faith in God their creator remains strong.

On a lighter note, I must relate to you a recent swimming experience I had with my grandchildren during Judy's and my recent Christmas trip to Florida. We stayed in a beachfront hotel for a few days and had the grandkids over for an ocean day on Christmas Eve. The sun was bright and warm, but the water was dark and choppy. So much so that we dared not ignore the red warning flags and only waded up to our knees (or chest if you were our youngest grandson!).

We tried to make it up to them the day after Christmas by having them over to the hotel for a swim in the safer confines of the pool. One thing led to another and we didn't make it to the pool until after dark. The wind was blowing like crazy, as it had been during our whole stay, and the pool area was completely devoid of any other humans.

The water was dark and choppy and the red underwater pool lights gave the water an eerie glow. Bravely, after securing our towels and flip-flops against the wind, we ventured in, Azra and Eyup clinging to me as we tried to get used to the water. Eventually, they dared to swim away. And we soon discovered that although the water was turbulent on the surface, below it was calm, warmer and womb-like in the red glow, therapeutic and life-giving. It was above that the wild world continued.

So the world is initially dark and formless. But then God separates the light from the darkness and everything begins to change. There, with God, on that first day of creation, was Jesus too. "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." Then on the 3<sup>rd</sup> day of creation God separates the water from the land. And since then the water and the light have nourished the earth, brought forth good things to eat, and blessed us. We seek their 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."

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. To all people.

Water has great cleansing and restorative power, 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.

Equally as dramatic as these is our scene from Mark 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. This event was foreshadowed on the second Sunday of Advent, when John declares, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

Now this morning, Mark brings our Lord Jesus Christ's baptism story to its conclusion. Jesus is immersed in the Jordan by John, and as he rises out of the water, the heavens are torn apart, the clouds open, the Spirit descends like a dove, and the voice from heaven speaks.

Every year we read from Matthew, Mark, or Luke, depending on the church year, about Jesus' baptism, right after celebrating his holy birth at Christmas. 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, himself, 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.

In our reading from Acts this morning, Apollos, a Jew from Alexandria and a follower of The Way, has been proclaiming the good news of Jesus the Messiah throughout the Jewish diaspora, baptizing new followers into John's baptism. After spending time in Ephesus he has moved on to Corinth. And then Paul came to Ephesus. Paul's encounter with the disciples there is the last baptism described in the Book of Acts. It's important because it's the final transition from John's baptism of repentance to baptism of the Holy Spirit in the name of Jesus. God's gift of the Holy Spirit is for everyone!

In a few minutes, when together we renew our baptismal vows, we will be asked a few important questions. What do we believe? And what will we do about it? Recall, when Bishop Gayle Harris was with us last April. Before asperging us, that is sprinkling us with holy water, she blessed that water saying,

“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.”

I pray that we take all the messages we have heard this morning to heart; that we welcome with our whole beings the gifts of water and the Holy Spirit; that we feel the presence of Jesus, our friend and confidant, our teacher and protector, in our lives. In this assurance, I pray that we strive bravely and confidently in this season of Epiphany, to share his light in a world so in need of it, and that we cheerfully confirm our commitment to this, as we renew our baptismal vows.