

First Sunday after The Epiphany:

The Baptism of Christ

A Sermon Preached by The Rev Ian M Delinger

on January 12, 2025

Isaiah 43:1-7 / Psalm 29 / Acts 8:14-17 / Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

*Arise, shine, for your light has come.
The Glory of the Lord has risen upon you.*

This same weekend, 2yrs ago, Pacific Palisades got 1½” of rain. From December 2022 to March 2023, California experienced 13 atmospheric rivers. And while attention of the record-breaking rainfall and devastating flooding focused more on Northern California and the Sierras, it was record-breaking deluges for Southern California, also. A storm that hit Altadena exactly 2yrs ago wreaked havoc.

But today, it's a very different story. The people in LA probably don't want to hear the Gospel mention that the chaff will be consumed by an unquenchable fire. The Santa Ynez Reservoir in Pacific Palisades has been offline since February which left firefighters without one of their sources of water to battle the now-historic blaze that started on Tuesday. And many fire hydrants in higher-elevation streets of the Palisades were dry, or with low water pressure, eliminating an option to fight the flames. Perhaps an atmospheric river would be welcome to those in the LA Basin today.

Water is the most important substance to life – to both flora and fauna. Water in the Bible is both destructive and lifegiving. Water theologically and spiritually is both dangerous and restorative. And in today's Gospel, Jesus was baptized in the water of the River Jordan.

Today I want to talk about water. It is one of the simplest compounds – just 2 Hydrogen atoms and 1 Oxygen atom – yet it sustains all life. It is so significant to

life that it's the one thing NASA researchers look for when looking for life beyond our own planet.

From a practical science perspective, water is called the "*universal solvent*" because it can dissolve more substances than any other liquid. That's because the molecule has a positive end and a negative end, making it attractive – literally – to all sorts of different compounds. That property enables valuable chemicals, minerals, and nutrients to travel wherever water goes: through the air, the ground, or our bodies.

In our daily lives, water has many functions. But it is definitely restorative and refreshing. Each summer, Deacon Susan Arnold arranges for members of the SLO Deanery to welcome the riders of the AIDS LifeCycle into the Deanery as they cross the County border in San Miguel. It's hot up there, and so we welcome the riders with refreshing sprays of water, which many enthusiastically welcome.

Personally, I need to be *near* the water, but not necessarily *in* the water. I can remember the last 3 times I fully immersed myself in natural waters.

- During my sabbatical trip, I took a boat trip off the coast of Athens around the Saronic Islands. The last stop was just off an uninhabited island where we were invited to jump off the top of the boat into the refreshing water and spend some time just enjoying it. My reluctance to get into bodies of water is that I associate being wet with being cold. But I find oceans and seas very alluring. I *want* to get in, but I don't want to be cold! But I was in Athens! When would I have this opportunity again? So, I opened the video recorder on my phone and handed it to the person next to me. I climbed up to the gang plank. And I plunged into the water! It was indeed restorative and refreshing! I didn't stay in long, but I'm glad I got in.
- 2 months later, it was 110°F at 11am when my friends and I finished kayaking in San Luis Harbor. We went back to Avila Beach village and I said that I was going to do it! So, I ran as fast as I could into the water and dove under. Like in Athens, I came straight out, rinsed off, changed my clothes and drove home. It was indeed restorative and refreshing!

- And then just this past summer, a SLO resident I don't even know who was married here at St Stephen's offered to give me a boat ride on Lake Tahoe. I asked what to do if I had to go to the bathroom. He said, "Jump in!" So we did! Lake Tahoe is not as cold as you think!

While those are happy memories of humanity's relationship with water, we know that it's not always as positive. Flooding, tsunamis, debris flows, Santa Cruz and Cayucos Piers, drought: they are all part of our relationship with water.

Water in the Bible is both destructive and lifegiving. In a moment we will renew our Baptismal Vows. The Thanksgiving Over the Water recounts a couple of the biblical stories involving water:

We thank you, Almighty God, for the gift of water.

Over it the Holy Spirit moved in the beginning of creation.

In the 2nd sentence of our holy scriptures, water is just there! Then the 2nd day, the dome in the midst of the waters separated the waters from the waters – sea and sky. And the 3rd day, dry land appeared out of the waters.

The earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the water.

But flip forward a couple chapters to Genesis 7, and the earth was destroyed by flood in the story of Noah's Ark. The waters that formed the sky in Genesis 1 destroyed the earth due to the wickedness of humankind. The Thanksgiving Over the Water continues with the next biblical water story:

Through it You led the children of Israel out of their bondage in Egypt into the land of promise.

The Parting of the Red Sea in Exodus was a divine act that freed the Israelites from bondage. Somewhere between 1-to-5 million people are thought to have

been part of that crossing. Though, the death of the Egyptians was by that same water.

At dawn the sea returned to its normal depth. As the Egyptians fled before it, the Lord tossed the Egyptians into the sea. ... And Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore.

These two stories illustrate how water is used in the Bible as something both destructive and lifegiving. The Genesis 1 account of Creation, the story of Noah and the Exodus are part of what is called Salvation History which we recount during the Easter Vigil.

Water is important to our understanding of our relationship with God. We are saved by water, yet, at the same time, we would be foolish to underestimate the power of water, and to assume that humans have full power over water or any of Creation.

Water theologically and spiritually is both dangerous and restorative. The Thanksgiving Over the Water of course references the Baptism of Jesus:

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.

Theologically, water has been seen as dangerous...it has been a symbol of chaos. Putting the stories of Noah and the Exodus aside, the stories of Jonah and the Jesus Stilling the Storm are two examples of water as chaos. While water isn't the main focus in either of those stories, it provides a metaphor for Jonah's attempt to run away from God and in the lack of faith of the Disciples.

But theologically and spiritually, water is also restorative. That's why many churches, including our own keep Holy Water available to the people, either in a

stoup near the entrance or in the font. We know that denominations that practice believer's baptism do so by full immersion. Their churches will have a baptismal pool, or they will go to a local lake, river or the ocean to baptize.

The Mainline Churches more commonly pour water over the head of the catechuminate, which is not considered baptism by those who practice full immersion. Though there is one criticism of those who do not practice full immersion that I kind of sympathize with. The abandonment of full immersion distanced us from the importance of water in Salvation History and its spiritually restorative properties. We believe that, through the waters of Baptism, we are washed clean, not only physically clean, but spiritually clean: our sins are forgiven. We might know it intellectually, but some argue that the practice of full immersion is a continual reminder and connection with the spiritually restorative character of water.

And in today's Gospel, Jesus was baptized in the water of the River Jordan. You may find it interesting that scholars throughout Christian History have expressed concern that Jesus was baptized by John. John's baptism was one of repentance, as he himself states. Jesus, being divine, did not need to repent, so why would He allow Himself to be baptized by John? The vast majority of scholars who have made mention of this event see Jesus' baptism by John as an act of deep humility, showing solidarity between God and humanity. Jesus was baptized, not to be cleansed by the water, but to cleanse the water itself for all eternity, so that *we* might be cleansed by it. So, even the Baptism of Jesus has its own set of contradictions, just like Humanity's relationship with water, the use of water in scripture, and our theological and spiritual relationship with water.

The contradictory nature of water, or the full spectrum of the qualities of water are clearly spelled out in our liturgy of Baptism:

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.

Both buried and reborn. That is the cycle of life. That is our Easter faith. As you pray that Los Angeles gets the lifesaving water they need, and as you renew our Baptismal Vows, *may you keep the covenant you have made, and boldly confess Him as Lord and Savior*, and may you always remember that:

The Lord is upon the mighty waters

When you pass through the waters, the Lord will be with you.