

The Right Rev. Jeffrey Lee
The Second Sunday after the Epiphany
St. Paul's Episcopal Church
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Water

With my weekly travel back and forth to Cleveland I have been reintroduced to that Great Lakes wonder called “lake effect snow.” We have certainly received our share of precipitation in the last couple of weeks. Water — frozen or otherwise — water is a central sign for Christians. Water is the source and sustainer of life, and the great sign of our new life in Christ. Water can also wreak havoc on us. Roadways and airports are the least of it. I remember talking with a hard working farmer out west of Chicago one Sunday. We were surveying some of his acreage after a month of heavy rain. He said, “Drought can hurt you, ya know, but flooding’ll kill ya.” If there’s too much water, farmers can’t even *get* into the fields. Flooding takes lives. When I lived in Seattle it was all too clear that torrential rains and mudslides could threaten whole communities. When I had the privilege of visiting a diocese in South Sudan I remember the heart-breaking sight of life sustaining crops withering beside the Nile for lack of the basic means of getting water from that river into the fields. That bizarre juxtaposition came to mind this week as I watched dumbstruck the catastrophe in Los Angeles roaring right down into the glittering waves of the Pacific. Oh yes, water is both an agent of destruction and a potent sign of hope.

Last Monday we celebrated the great Feast of the Epiphany, a day with more ancient and venerable roots than Christmas itself. Epiphany is the original liturgical celebration of the coming of Christ among us. You may recall that beloved hymn about the three mystic magi: We three kings of orient are but they’re only one part of the way Christians have kept this Season. The word epiphany means revelation, uncovering, manifestation. This Sunday following the Epiphany has been a traditional day to celebrate the revealing of the meaning of Christ. The magi saw the star and came with their strange gifts to signify the mystery of just who this unlikely baby really is. And this day in the liturgical year has been a day to continue this revealing of the meaning of Jesus in our lives and in the life of the world. Today we remember the baptism of Jesus, when he came up out of the water and the voice declared him to be the one with whom God is well pleased. Next week we’ll hear the story about the wedding at Cana too, when the wedding feast itself was a revelation of just who this was sitting at table, eating and drinking. And from early, early times, this was one of the church’s privileged days to make new Christians, a day to celebrate the baptismal washing and anointing and feeding of new-born brothers and sisters in Christ. A day to celebrate the presence of the dying and rising Jesus in them, right in front of us.

The revealing of Jesus is what the church is for. The revelation of the one who came to be God-with-us is the whole point of the church and its life. It is the only excuse for us. And that revealing can be as troubling to the world (and perhaps to us) as it was to Jerusalem, to Herod

its psychotic king and its gossip-filled streets. (I don't need to make too many comparisons to our own time, do I?) The presence of Jesus Christ, if we take it seriously and to heart, the presence of Jesus will be infinitely more than just nostalgic comfort, it will be troubling too.

I like these Epiphany days. I like them much more than Christmas. I like them because they are more truthful than Christmas has become. The Sugar Plum Fairy has flown the coop and the sentimentality largely has been packed away for another year with the ornaments. And in their place stands our font. The water. And that water, that water is a sign full of ambiguity. Our Hebrew foreparents lived and moved and came into being as a people in and near the water. At the Sea of Reeds and on the shores of the Mediterranean. But they never became great seafarers. The sea is a place of strangeness. There are monsters there according to the psalms. It is a symbol of life – the people of Israel were brought through the parted waves to safety on the other side – but also of death – Noah and his family were the only ones saved from the flood, Pharaoh and his chariots did not escape. It was over the watery chaos of non-being that the Spirit first hovered and brought all things to birth.

It is not accidental that to be grafted on to the story of God's people, to become a member of the Body of Christ, to be a Christian means passing through water. If we are to be united with Christ, truly one with and in him, then we should not be surprised to encounter what he did. The trouble, the heartache, the terrors and tidal waves of this life did not spare him. And that is good news. What is revealed in Jesus Christ is not a solution, or a formula, or an explanation for understanding the pain and horror of this world. What Jesus reveals to us is that God is present with us in *all* of it. A favorite theologian of mine says that we crucified Jesus not because he was God, but because he claimed to be God and then failed to come up to our expectations. We wanted to be fished out of our humanity, and that is the one thing God refuses to do. Jesus is God's Word made flesh, *your* flesh and *mine*. The problem is we keep forgetting it. Instead of honoring, cherishing the flesh of one another, which God has made his own, we disfigure and blaspheme it in our endless grasping and fighting and killing. The Word became flesh, says the author Frederick Buechner, and we've been trying to turn it back into words ever since.

Dear friends at St. Paul's, do not let that happen. Remember who you are. Remember *whose* you are, washed and reborn in Jesus Christ, signed and sealed and marked as Christ's own for ever. Be those living limbs and members of the One who died for us and was raised. You and I are members of the dying and rising Body of Christ ... nothing less. We are now called by God to be the Word made flesh. This morning we stand with our baptismal candidate in recommitting ourselves to that mission and ministry, to enter the turbulent waters of our life in Christ for the sake of the world that God loves so much.

Be the church. Be the church I know you are. The future of St. Paul's? You ain't seen nothing yet.