

A sermon preached by the Reverend Michael Anderson Bullock, Rector

St. Martin's-in-the-Fields Episcopal Church, Columbia, South Carolina, on the First Sunday after the Epiphany (9 January 2005) The Baptism of our Lord Isaiah 42:1-9; Acts 10:34-38; Matthew 3L13-17

The Awesome Waters

I speak to you today with a sense of heaviness and no small amount of confusion and need. I say this because I know that in considering the tragic events in the Indian Ocean region that I am not the only one who has experienced a sense of being overwhelmed to the point of being numb. Clearly, there is something breath-taking about 150,000 souls vanishing in minutes in the raging waters of the sea. There is an element of the impossible involved in even beginning to absorb - much less fathom - the enormity of the tsunami's destruction.

Of course, all this has occurred at a time when our emotions are already rubbed raw: by the confusion of war; by the harsh divisiveness of politics both in the nation and in our church; not to mention the ongoing struggle to earn our daily bread. All these issues together are more than enough to handle, so that all it takes is for something small to happen - your car refusing to start; your shoe lace breaking, a child's refusal to cooperate, an unfamiliar hymn sung at church. Then, like the proverbial drop of water in an overfull glass, we overflow uncontrollably. Suddenly from deep within a great and powerful protest erupts.

Life is not listening to us; it is not working the way we want it to work, and the powerlessness we experience over this only adds infuriating insult to devastating injury. And lingering in the shadows of all this turmoil is a question: Where is God in all this?

I have noticed in myself that a good deal of the heaviness that I am feeling tests my faith. I cannot avoid wondering about God. How can the God I know and love allow these things to happen? How can the God, who has promised us life, seem to allow so much senseless death? How can the God, who has given us the Christ and whose birth we have just celebrated, suddenly seem so capriciously distant? How can the God who is Emmanuel: God with us, seem to make so little difference?

These questions undeniably reside within me; and while I know enough not to ignore them, I also recognize a dreadful sense of fear rising from them like putrid incense. Something very deep and fundamental and sickening rises up to my soul. At a gut-level I haltingly recognize that the earth has moved and the sea has swallowed up vast swaths of land and all that dwells therein, thus, making all claims of certitude just so much self-made gas.

And then I realize what I really want is to be assured that my life and the lives of those I love will be o.k. And recognizing this I know that I will be ok, but that none of us will stay the same. Even the earth, itself, has demonstrated this truth.

So, I wonder about these great and mysterious things, especially on this day. For today, we dare to take an infant child into our arms and make him a part of Christ's own life. And we do this, ostensibly with joy and hope. We do this because it is the best thing we can think of doing for a person, the most loving, the most real thing we can do: To make him an integral part of Christ's Body, Christ's life, Christ's reality.

Yet, in doing this baptism, I also know that there is a dynamic and awesome connection between the waters of Holy Baptism and the waters of the tsunami. And in this I realize that my question is not so much "Where is God?" as it is "Will we dare to be where God is?" And, like many of you, I know that I need a great deal of help in being as present to life - real life - as God is present.

This past Tuesday, I had intended to sit and be entertained by the Orange Bowl football game, but my disappointment in the game's lack of competition caused me to channel surf. I was looking for some news, when I came upon a panel of talking-heads, discussing the tsunami and the issue of God. Right away, I knew that this discussion was not going to be more edifying than the game because there were five guest speakers on the panel: Four theists and one scientist. Immediately, I cringed at the cartoon quality of this set-up: More science versus religion, as if to say serious belief in God ignores serious science.

But before I could switch the channel, I was intrigued by the other four panelists: two Christians (of the "born again/evangelical flavor - of course - are there any other kind of Christians worth listening to?!), a rabbi, and a Muslim. As per usual nowadays, the ensuing discussion was a matter of who could shout the loudest and the longest and capture the most air time. So, the rabbi made his bid for stardom by virtually foaming at the mouth. One of the Christians waxed on about these tragic events being a sign that the end is near. The other Christian started quoting biblical passages about our heavenly home, and the Muslim said that this tragedy occurred because of the immorality of Christians, who promote war and allow women to wear bikinis on the beach.

I turned the set off before the scientist spoke, but I did catch a camera shot of him shaking his head. I knew how he felt. If this was a reflection of religious maturity and depth, then give me geology!

So, little Maximilian: what are we getting you into? Why do we baptize you and view it as the most loving thing we can do for you? In the face of all the confusion and pain that there is in this world, what does baptism mean and what difference will it make for you, as a child of God?

I can imagine John the Baptist wrestling with these same questions. In fact, this is the second time in a month of Sundays that we have been privy to the Baptizer's wonderings and questions about Jesus. Four weeks ago, on the Third Sunday of Advent, that day's gospel told of John the Baptist, languishing in Herod's prison and wondering if he had been all wrong about Jesus. For he had boldly proclaimed Jesus as the Messiah, the One who was coming to redeem God's people. Yet, reports about Jesus, what he was saying and what he was doing, did not mesh with John's expectations of the Christ.

It would appear that the Baptizer expected a more assertive, more aggressive -John Wayne-type of Christ, someone who would blow the trumpet and swiftly charge the enemy, overwhelming them with his "terrible swift sword." But Jesus was not playing that role, and John was confused and perhaps perturbed, to the extent that he sent some of his disciples off to meet Jesus and ask a pertinent question: "Are you the one who is to come; or shall we wait for another?"(1)

You remember Jesus' response, respectful yet firm. "Go tell John what you hear and see:" the blind gain their sight; the lame walk; lepers are healed; the deaf hear; the dead are raised; the poor are given hope.(2)

Gently but firmly, it is as if Jesus knows what John is asking and implicitly says: "Do you want John Wayne repeatedly to rescue you; or do you want life as God knows it: unbroken and healthy?"

But in today's gospel, we have rolled back the story line toward its beginning to witness Jesus' baptism and another of John the Baptist's questions. According to Matthew's version of Jesus' baptism, the Baptizer, seeing Jesus enter the waters of the Jordan River, inquires something to the effect of "what gives here? You should be baptizing me."

The point being that if John is offering a baptism of repentance, a way of washing sins away in order to receive a new start with God, why is the Messiah in line for a dunking? Of what does the Christ need to repent, if he is truly the Christ?

No wonder John said what he said. But to John's protestation, Jesus simply and convincingly explains: "This is how it's got to be right now. This is the right way for us to complete God's saving plan."(3)

I believe that this answer - and its significance - speaks directly to our own questions about where God is in light of the pain of this world and what we offer Maximilian in the waters of Baptism. Moreover, the meaning of Jesus coming to John the Baptizer for baptism is a direct manifestation, a clear and present epiphany, of Emmanuel: God with us. And here is what I make of it all.

The promise of Emmanuel: God with us is realized in Jesus the Christ. This is what we marked and celebrated at Christmas. Incarnation: the Word of God becoming flesh and dwelling with us, full of grace and truth; and we have beheld his face. Now, at Jesus' baptism (which is the beginning of his public ministry) we gain an awesome insight into the consequences of Incarnation, of God's Word.

Jesus stands among the crowds on Jordan's bank, and at the right time, he steps into the water and moves toward John the Baptist. The Baptizer has it right, at least in the sense that what he knows of Jesus as the Messiah and what he, John, offers in terms of a baptism of repentance do not jive. But Jesus comes to him and says that this is what needs doing, if God's plan of redeeming "health and wholeness" is truly to be manifest, made clear. And so, Jesus receives John's baptism.

And although the text does not say it, I can imagine that the earth and all that is in it shook because what we have here in this scene is the epitome of God's mercy and love - and our hope. In the words of the Fourth gospel: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, to the end that all that believe in him should not perish, but have everlasting life."(4) Or to put it in terms of our situation today, Emmanuel: God with us is fully with us.

This is to say that Jesus enters the waters of our life, fully and without reservation. They are the waters of our birth, and they are the waters of our death. They are also the waters of our new life, as children of God and heirs of God's eternity, things fear and death cannot touch.

These baptismal waters are awesome waters, and they should give each and everyone of us great pause - not only to answer the question of what it is we are doing; but also to consider that while there is a great deal about life that we cannot fathom or even accept, it is into this life that Jesus fully entered, to be with us and for us so that "by him, and with him, and in him"(5) we may have God's life - no matter what.

The epiphany of Jesus' baptism signifies the radical reality of Incarnation. That is, God's own life-giving Word enfleshed and in our midst bespeaks of God's steadfast love: that Jesus immerses himself fully in the waters of our human existence so that in following him, in receiving him, in honoring him, we may be fully immersed in God's life.

Max, that is the reason we baptize you this day; that is the reason we will walk with you and one another in faith and in community. We do this because fear and death are real, very real, awesomely real. But God's presence and God's love and God's mercy are stronger than death, and even when the waters rage and overwhelm us, we are not lost.

The waters overcame Jesus. They swept him out to sea and hung him on the Cross, and this was and is a terrible thing. Life can be like this, and people of faith are not immune from what Hamlet has rightly called the "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune." Christ does not remove us from the chances of life. He does, however, redeem us, makes us free - free from fear and death because while fear and death are very real, they are not the end. They are not all there is. God's presence and love are.

So, I continue to be revolted by the quick and easy answers that are offered in the face of the tsunami's tragedy. Those raging waters speak of real things that we mortals hate to acknowledge, hate to confront. I think of the line in one of the prayers from the Burial Office which places true words on resistant human lips: "O God, whose days are without end, and whose mercies cannot be numbered: Make us, we pray, deeply aware of the shortness and uncertainty of human life..."(6)

Yet, as frightening as such mortality is to us, as humiliating as it is to our arrogant pretenses at self-sufficiency and being in control, as overwhelming as our vulnerability makes us, what we do also have is the vision of Jesus, entering these same awesome waters, to be with us in this life - fully and completely - so that we may be with him - fully and completely in God's life.

The best way I can close these thoughts comes in the form of a short poem, written by R. S. Thomas, who died in the year 2000. Thomas was an Anglican priest, a Welshman, serving the Church of Wales his entire adult life. He died as one of the preeminent poets of the 20th century, and I am always moved by his sense of truth expressed without easy answers.

So it is that in the face of such great mystery, both terrifying (as in the tsunami) and wondrous (as in this baptism), prose must give way to poetry, if God's constant epiphany, is to be seen and known and lived.

So, here to my mind is the clearest response to all our questions this day. The poem is called, "The Coming."

And God held in his hand
A small globe. Look he said.
The son looked. Far off,
As through water, he saw
A scorched land of fierce
Colour. The light burned
There; crusted buildings
Cast their shadows: a bright
Serpent, A river

Uncoiled itself, radiant
With slime.
On a bare
Hill a bare tree saddened
The sky. many People
Held out their thin arms
To it, as though waiting
For a vanished April
To return to its crossed
Boughs. The son watched
Them. Let me go there, he said.

(1) Matthew 11:3

(2) Matthew 11:4f

(3) Matthew 3:15, translated by N.T. Wright, Matthew for Everyone, Part One, page 20

(4) John 3:16

(5) Book of Common Prayer, Eucharistic Prayer's conclusion, page 363.

(6) Book of Common Prayer, page 504