

Isaiah 43:1-7
Luke 3:15-22
January 12, 2025

The Mighty Waters

The other day I walked on a snowy path at Highbanks Park to the bluff over the Olentangy River, and looked as the waters swiftly moved downstream on their journey towards the Scioto and later the Ohio Rivers, and on to the Mississippi and the Gulf of Mexico. Most of my life I have lived near the great rivers of North America; the Missouri and the Mississippi.

I have to admit that the great bodies of water have attracted me only as beautiful sights and sources of danger. I like to go to see the ocean and dip my feet in it, but no more. Both the oceans and the rivers have their grandeur, but I am not drawn into their depths, nor even out onto their surfaces. I am happy to look at them from the shoreline, or atop the bluff.

I don't think I could ever be a diver. I am happy to watch television documentaries about ocean life, and other bodies of water. I don't feel like I have missed anything because I have never been on a cruise, or anything more than an hour long riverboat ride, and certainly not because I have never been scuba diving or even snorkeling.

I am aware of the many dangers, from rip tides and undercurrents to whales and sharks and other teeth baring fish and snakes that bite and things that sting, not to mention the prospect of drowning, all of which and more besides keeps me happily on the land,

behind the rails, and on the paths that have been designated as safe spaces.

I am thankful for digital cameras and drones that can take them to find never-before-seen perspectives in the nooks and crannies among the high mountains or ocean depths where it is not safe for people to go, or even possible. Thank God for David Attenborough, the nonagenarian who does great documentaries about the earth for the BBC. I have always been happy with two feet on solid ground.

Others are not so land bound. I think of the Hawaiian surfing legend Eddie Aikau, who was legendary for surfing bigger waves than anyone else dared, and who saved over 500 people on Hawaii's north shore in a nearly 10 year career as a lifeguard, largely because he felt comfortable in the ocean when the waves were high.

He seemed more suited to the water than the land, and died tragically after a boating accident replicating the migration between Tahiti and Hawaii, 2,500 miles in what to us would be a large canoe. Though tragic, one wonders if he wouldn't have had it any other way. A few people are at one with the rivers and the oceans. Not I. I am definitely a land creature. Not most people.

Today is the first Sunday in the time after the Epiphany, which is associated with a couple of events at the beginning of the story of Jesus. There is a focus on the Journey of the Magi from the Gospel of

Matthew, which is both the primary emphasis in some traditions and the first appearance of Jesus to the Gentiles.

The focus also skips ahead to the beginning of his time as the leader of a movement, with the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River, and sometimes the Wedding at Cana, which then leads to his early preaching of the Kingdom of Heaven, and how it has drawn near, compelling God's people to *repentance* and *faith*.

It began with the baptism in the waters of the Jordan River. Passing through water is one of the primary themes in the bible and is often associated with danger.

In Genesis the expanse in which creation occurs is the result of a separation of the waters, those above from those below. And in the flood they come back together to destroy everything. In the Exodus it is the Red Sea that separates so the people can walk through on dry land and a similar occurrence happens when they enter into the Promised Land. The waters of the Jordan stopped completely. One can read about that in the Book of Joshua.

Water both threatens us and keeps us alive, and its association with salvation is related both to the threat and to its cleansing and life-sustaining qualities. So it is no surprise that one of the two central rituals in the Christian faith is baptism, and in our branch of the faith, the practice is one of full immersion. If we want

to get to the other side, we have to get all the way in. One can't simply dip one's feet.

It represents total involvement in the life of God, which is also the life of the world that God has made. It demands of us faith in the face of danger and willingness to place our lives completely into the care of our Creator. It speaks to us both of inner cleansing and death and resurrection, dying to one's self in order that by faith one can live towards God.

And so before Jesus came preaching the news of the Kingdom of Heaven and before he faced great temptation and began to preach, he submitted to baptism, the complete and full immersion of *his* life into the life of God, without which life is meaningless and futile. I have always emphasized cleansing and death and resurrection when explaining the meaning of baptism, but now also include immersion in that meaning, and that is the main focus today.

He did this as an act of obedience, and as an example for us of how to ground our lives from the start, in God's grace. We are assured by the other readings of the day. In the 29th psalm, the sound of rushing water is like the voice of the Lord. "The voice of the Lord is over the waters, the God of glory thunders, the Lord thunders over the mighty waters."

And in Isaiah's 43rd chapter we read,

“When you pass through the waters, I will be with you, when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you.”

In the hymn, “I am Bound for the Promised Land, even the final destination is associated with the crossing of the Jordan River;

“On Jordan’s stormy banks I stand,
And cast a wishful eye, to Canaan’s fair and happy land,
I am bound for the promised land . . .
O who will come and go with me
I am bound for the promised land.”

It is no wonder that baptism came to be such a powerful religious symbol, the passing through of the dangerous waters safely, and into the protecting care of God’s grace.

Sometimes when we speak of our faith, we say that we have accepted Christ as Lord and Savior. Sometimes it seems like we are saying it is no more than an intellectual assent to the proposition that God is real and Jesus reveals God’s love which is, of course, part of it.

Here, in baptism, we can see how deep it really is. That our faith compels us into the dangerous depths with our whole lives at stake, and our participation in the world’s life a kind of submersion that threatens not only our *lives* but more importantly our faith, or not only our faith, but more importantly our lives, and it is

by grace that we come out on the other side to, “Canaan’s fair and happy land.”

Another hymn bids us. “Shall we gather at the river?” “The beautiful river . . . gathered with the saints at the river, that flows by the throne of God?”

There is nothing in life that is not affected by this immersion into God’s life, and there is nothing that exceeds it in terms of significance.

The melodic poetry of our hymnody is silenced for a moment, as the world meets Jesus, all decked out in his first century Galilean garb. That is what Epiphany is. Who could tell that the meaning of his coming into the world is that we are all bidden into the mighty waters of life, and on into the glorious heights of the gracious kingdom on the other side.

Repentance and faith mean the willingness to be and do good in the faith that God indwells all of life, even the dangerous side. We use words like Providence to speak of divine purpose, which compels us to service and sacrifice, compassion, kindness and love; dignity, honesty, and integrity, but also to the one who guides our path throughout our lives, preparing the way through the heights and depths, to the mighty waters that carry us to heaven.

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