

*The First Sunday after the Epiphany
The Baptism of Our Lord Jesus Christ
Revised Common Lectionary, Year C*

January 7th, 2007

*Episcopal Church of Our Saviour
Mill Valley, California*

*Over the Edge
by The Rev. Richard E. Helmer, Rector*

Sometimes I head out to Ocean Beach in San Francisco, feeling called back to the edge of the Pacific, the edge of our continent. Seems strange for a guy who grew up in the Midwest, but there it is. The ocean has a hold like that on me. There's something about "edges" like the ocean and the uninterrupted horizon that brings restoration when I'm feeling worn out, tired, or I'm simply searching for direction. We are blessed to live near one such edge, being a coastal people.

So I get to Ocean Beach and begin to soak up once again the horizon, the waves, the open sky, and the setting sun. There's always a sense of infinity there, and, frankly, the awesome and measureless size of Being that we call God. It's always humbling for me – a reminder of my smallness in a vast universe and across the huge expanse of time. And last week, as often happens when I go to the ocean to reflect, I shed a few tears and realized I was tasting the ocean in me. And I reflected that the of all the sounds in the world, the sound of running water and the roar of waves lapping against the shore, these were among the oldest sounds on the planet. . .and would likely last until life was no more.

It's the water of the sea where we have our origins, where the first life began to grow and develop. Our entire planet breathes with the rhythm of water, mainly of the oceans, but also of those arteries of water that sustain our life, agriculture, and cityscapes. Rivers, oceans, lakes, and streams make up most of our bodies, and make the chemistry of life possible. Water hems us in. It marks our beginnings, and, ultimately, our endings. It breaks down the mountains, raises up the trees, and fuels the birthing of life. We swim in it from our conception and rely on it every day of our time on earth. And we return it, if not to it at some level when we move on.

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Of course, this is no new understanding. That water is the root of life is not anything other than a truth confirmed that has gone back since before recorded history. Hebrew Scriptures opens with the Spirit of God moving over the waters of chaos. The ancients believed the world, flat as many perceived it, was bounded and shaped and reshaped by water. Our spiritual ancestors constructed lives and communities around sources of water in the desert. Their stories of catastrophe and greatness, from Noah, to Abraham, to Moses, to Joshua, to the established traditions of ancient Israel, to the adventures of the early Christian community. . . in these stories, water in whatever form is a recurrent theme.

They knew, as well as we know, the death and life water represents.

It is no surprise, then, that for the earliest Christians, and in the earliest written accounts of Jesus' salvific mission begins not with the birth narrative. . .or with the youthful son of Mary conversing in the Temple in Jerusalem. . .but with his baptism, as an adult, in the River Jordan.

John the Baptist is out at the edge, calling people away from one way of life and into a new way, and foretelling the coming of one who is even greater.

And then Jesus shows up one day to be baptized.

We celebrate that day today, seeing it as the first great sign of God in Christ, the coming of the Holy One among us for our healing, transformation, and a new and unexpected journey.

Jesus begins his most important years with baptism, and so do we. The water of baptism reflects that infinite roar of the ocean in our lives, that primordial place where roots are, and also the waters of life and death that hem us in, sometimes frighten us, but forever hold us in awe and humility.

It's why we use this death and new birth language around baptism, and why we hold it as a foundational sacred event in our life as people and our life as a community. And why we commemorate it regularly.

It's hard to say if Jesus was a changed man when he rose out of the Jordan and, so says the Gospel, the sky was torn open and the Spirit descended. The change has been a touchstone of considerable discussion amongst Christians since the beginning. But what we can be sure of is that Jesus was changed, at very least, in the world's eyes. He was no longer firstborn in a carpenter's family, but was now the Child of God. . .that primordial spiritual being as well as fleshly human, a human every bit as vulnerable as we are. . .and yet a being with divinity who would cross the threshold in a hideous death and, we Christians say, return with New Life for the whole world, and the entire universe.

Jesus responds to this revealed identity by dashing out into the wilderness – perhaps beyond the Jordan – and then returning to gather together his first followers. He has gone over the edge into the water and returns utterly different. He has been touched by the waters of death and life and opened to the Spirit.

Do you remember your baptism?

Most of us don't. But you know its marks. They may seem subtle, but look closely in your heart. Isn't it possible that your baptism has a great deal to do with why you are here today? Even if you trace your spiritual journey back to before your first memories, doesn't baptism, and the cleansing, life-giving, and death-dealing effect of water still hold a little wonder for you?

It does for me.

I sometimes go to the ocean to remember my baptism, and a God who is so much greater than I can imagine who utters to me and each of us a deep love in the rhythm of the waves, the babbling brook, and the running river. A love that says we are claimed by our Maker in not only life, but also in death. And that, in all of our tiny and seeming insignificance, God comes to us and calls us "beloved" and "child of God," just as that Voice did in the Jordan with Jesus two millennia ago.