

**The First Sunday after the Epiphany
The Baptism of Our Lord Jesus Christ**

RCL Year B
January 11th, 2009

**Episcopal Church of Our Saviour
Mill Valley, California**

Primordial Signs
The Rev. Richard E. Helmer

In his classic book, *Deep River*, Shusaku Endo writes of an eclectic group of Japanese tourists who together make pilgrimage to the Ganges River in India for the primordial Hindu ritual of cleansing. Each character brings a unique story to the river, a troubled past and sometimes a desire for redemption – for renewal of life. One of them, Isobe, makes the journey to find meaning after the painful loss of his wife. While sitting on the banks of the river, Isobe reflects on the transition of this baptism he is embarking upon, and Endo writes:

*But now that [Isobe] was all alone, he had finally come to understand that there is a fundamental difference between being alive and truly living.**

The scholars who chose today's scripture readings wanted to remind us that baptism for us Christians is primordial in origin. The passage from Genesis right at the heart of our Judeo-Christian spiritual heritage points to the primordial sign of water, where the wind of God, the breath of the Spirit, moves over the waters of chaos, the waters of nothingness, and ushers light into being. While today cosmologists ponder quarks and strings and strangelets in conjunction with galactic structures, expensive supercolliders, and the Big Bang, our awe of the primordial chaos from which all of us are descended still remains an integral part of the mystery and adventure of the human family.

Daniel and I were out walking last night after a busy day, just as the full moon rose over Blithedale Canyon. It was a sight our ancestors older than the Bible saw countless times and marveled at. We still can, too, despite our greater scientific knowledge. I can look up the distance to the moon or its size, but that takes nothing away from this strange and wonderful, dangerous and beautiful universe with all of its structure, form, violence and creativity.

The waters of baptism are just as familiar, and just as mysterious and ancient. They serve us as a primordial sign. They haunt us Christians the same way as the awesome parts of our universe do when we dare to pause from our usually narrow busy-ness and gaze at them; and ponder them; for the waters of baptism are all of those things, too: life, structure, death, chaos, violence, and creativity. In the waters of baptism are found the story of our Christian family, and the shared story we have in so many ways with the rest of the human family.

Ellie Walker and Andrew Williams, our two candidates for baptism this day, both bring with them – even with all the innocence of infants – the stories of their families, of countless generations born, bred, and died in this world. They bring a shared story of galaxies, stars, and planets, and the deep, nearly inscrutable process that makes it possible for rain, soil, and air to become flowers, and for human life to

* Shusaku Endo, *Deep River*, trans. by Van C. Gessel, New Directions Publishing, 1994, p 189

struggle, flourish, and love. And now they join another story: one that began in the River Jordan all those years ago when an obscure man from Nazareth stepped into the waters and was baptized by a wild-man prophet.

The Jordan for first-century Judaism, in some ways like the Ganges serves for Hindus, represents transformation – the way it carried away the past away. It also marked a boundary between one world and another – between civilization and chaos – between the old and the new, and it was there that John was drawn to proclaim *metanoia*, transformation of life; the giving way of one way of being for another in this boundary between death and life.

Ellie and Andrew are being given away today in this community for this kind baptism. They are being offered, even, in the primordial sense, and I mean the scary sense that most of us recoil at when we think of ancient cultic rituals where children were offered to the gods. Offering a child to God is, in some ways, just as dangerous now as it was then. It's about relinquishing control and power. In talking with Sara, Mark, Rob, and Kristen, they are engaging in this primordial Christian practice of giving their children over to God in the face of a world of uncertainties: uncertainties about employment, housing, and the future. Uncertainties in a transient world where now all seems like the river passing, taking the past and even the present along with it. They are giving their children into the hands of a God who promises them no more than God promises Jesus in the Jordan: "You are my Child, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

That being pleased with Jesus, just as God was pleased with light as the universe came into being, does not forestall the sufferings and challenges that are to come. The universe remains a dangerous place. In our tradition in this day, we can fall easily into the mists of magical thinking – that baptism is like buying salvation insurance. That baptism is somehow going to protect – to insure Ellie and Andrew from the painful realities of the world into which they have recently been born. But we forget that baptism in the River Jordan didn't put an end to the pain – or to the cross that awaited the end of Jesus' movement in Jerusalem. If Jesus was offered no insurance, I don't see any reason for us to expect that from baptism.

Instead, what we and Jesus are offered in the waters of baptism is what Isobe finds at the bank of the Ganges: a remarkable new beginning; even a new creation. It's the same sort of beginning these little children have recently experienced with their families – of being drawn from the waters of the womb, of being knitted together from nothing, of experiencing the awesome nature of new life, new being; the adventures of being drawn into a future that is being birthed only as we step into it. It is as uncertain as it always has been. But what we are promised, by virtue of our baptism, is that we step into the future together not only with one another in Christ's New Community, but with a God who loves us even through the deaths and rebirths of the primordial waters. Ellie and Andrew both will leave this place, in the language of the New Testament, "born again," made anew by the resurrection of Christ. They will be indelibly Christian. They will have a claim on us, and we will have a claim on them. It is the same claim that draws all of us who are baptized together to this place week after week, to share our stories, the common cup, and the broken bread. To remember that our ties to God are now immutable – and, like Christ's, stronger even than death.

For in a wonderful way, as we pronounce these ancient words and anoint Ellie and Andrew, we, too might hear in the language of our prayers, the light of God's voice pronouncing that these two little children are now children of the divine, beloved, with whom God is well pleased. Indeed what baptism calls Ellie and Andrew and all of us to is to be more than simply alive. . . but to begin truly living. *Amen.*