

Baptism of Our Lord (B/RCL): “Endless Ocean, Always Deeper Than All of Our Need”¹

Mark 1:4-11

January 6-7, 2018

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Over Christmas vacation I sat in my reading chair by the Christmas tree with its glowing lights, safe and snug, warm and dry, reading books about sea disasters that were so riveting they became movies: *In the Heart of the Sea*², the true story of a sperm whale that sank a Nantucket whaler in the 19th century (the story that inspired Herman Melville to write *Moby Dick*), and *The Finest Hours*³ (starring Chris Pine ☺), a chronicle of how the Coast Guard valiantly saved many (but not all) crewmen of 2 tankers that split in half off of Cape Cod during a blizzard in the 1950’s. The descriptions of seas rearing up seven stories high and sea water pouring over gunwales and through portholes, flooding bunk rooms and galleys and engine rooms, conjured up scenes from *The Perfect Storm* (starring George Clooney ☺), about the Gloucester fishing boat lost in a gale off New England. The massive power of the ocean, untamable, ferocious, unforgiving, was front and center.

No wonder the people of Israel were terrified of the sea. Imagine not being able to swim, confronted with towering waves, fearful of the great sea monster Leviathan that could pull ships under and eat sailors whole, convinced that the earth was flat and one could sail off the edge of the sea into nothingness. For all these reasons, the people of Israel were the original landlubbers. The **ocean** for them was **synonymous** with **chaos**.

*In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a **wind** from God swept over the face of the waters.* (Genesis 1:1-2)

God’s **wind**, God’s **breath**, God’s **Spirit**, swept over the face of the waters –banishing chaos and bringing forth creation.

Water has a big role to play in Scripture, from Genesis on. People who live in a desert land especially know the value of water. Jacob first saw his beloved Rachel at the well as she drew water (Genesis 29:9ff). The waters of the Red Sea were parted so that the Israelites could flee slavery in Egypt. With Pharaoh’s chariots in hot pursuit, the walls of water collapsed and the Egyptians drowned; as

Miriam danced on the opposite shore she sang how “horse and rider were thrown in the sea” (Exodus 15:20-21). God provided water for the thirsty people from a rock in the desert (Exodus 17:6). The people crossed the River Jordan into the Promised Land (Joshua 3:17), the same river in which John would baptize over a thousand years later. The prophet Isaiah issues this invitation:

“Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters!”
(Isaiah 55:1)

At the end of the Book of Revelation Jesus echoes and extends that promise:

“To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.”
(Revelation 21:6c)

To the woman at the well Jesus had likewise offered “living water” (John 4:10). Fearful as the sea was, so precious was drinkable water in the arid lands of the Bible. “Living” water was flowing, moving, clean and not stagnant. Ezekiel had a vision of living, clear water flowing from the Temple, washing away everything unclean, impure. That river flows from the throne of the Lamb in the heavenly city described in the Book of Revelation.

...[T]he angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life ... and the leaves of the trees are for the healing of the nations. (Revelation 22:1-2)

And when the centurion pierces the crucified Jesus’ side with a lance, blood and water flow out.... (John 19:34)

Of all the rituals God could have conceived to bring us into the family of His Son, God chose one that requires water: Holy Baptism. By choosing to be baptized by John, who offered baptism as a sign of repentance of sin, our Lord chose to identify with us sinners. Our baptism is more powerful than John’s, because in ours the Holy Spirit is the actor, the One presiding, as we die to sin and rise to newness of life, as we come to share in the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. At the beginning of each funeral liturgy, we quote St. Paul’s words: “If we have shared in a death like His, we shall certainly share in a resurrection like His.” As the power of the ocean in our baptismal banner suggests, Holy Baptism isn’t just a cleansing – it’s a **drowning**. The old self is drowned, a new self is born.

This is what faith enables us to believe. Baptism isn't just a quaint custom, an excuse to gather the family and take some photos. It is a divine mystery, a life-changing event. You can't tell there's been a transformation, from the outside looking in, any more than you can **see** the presence of Christ's Body & Blood in bread & wine at the altar. We trust these things are true, because our Lord has told us they are, and His Word is trustworthy and true, and He fulfills His promises.

Baptism is a gift that keeps on giving; it's a daily dying and rising, the source of forgiveness for the sin we committed yesterday, the source of strength for the holy work to which God calls us today. This weekend we're dedicating a baptismal mobile that now hangs over the font. It's been created with donations given in the memory of Rosalie Caruso, our sister in Christ, our church friend, who entered the church triumphant on Sept. 24, 2016. For decades Rosalie ordered, engraved, presented baptismal medallions to all those baptized at Holy Trinity and to confirmands who were baptized elsewhere. This is the medallion she gave me when I was called to serve here at Holy Trinity. It's engraved with my name and baptismal date ☺. From the mobile hang medallions engraved with the names of those who have been baptized here in the last year. They're attached to little fish that represent Christ, our Savior, **and** the Christians who have been "caught" by His love – He did, after all, tell His first disciples, who happened to be fishermen, "Follow Me, and I will make you fish for people." (Mark 1:17) At Rosalie's funeral we heard excerpts from letters she wrote each of her grandchildren, every year, on their baptismal birthday. The rebirth Holy Baptism brings about was incredibly potent and important to Rosalie. Her husband Junie, their daughter Barbara and son-in-law Dave Lucas, and grandchildren Chris and Catherine are with us for the dedication. Their son Bruce, his wife Gayle and their children, Ashley and Steven, are with us in Spirit, long distance from Florida.

I have another show-and-tell, as well. This is a precious family photo taken by my father's father, of my mom and dad, Georgia & Lee, my maternal grandparents, Flossie & George Horton, and my big sister Sharon on her baptismal day. Sally and I wore the same christening gown, as did all the grandchildren, except Sally's youngest daughter Nicole, who was born with major cardiac problems and

was baptized in the Morristown Memorial nursery before being transported to Columbia Presbyterian for open heart surgery the day after she was born. (She is now in her 30's, alive and well!)

None of us **looks** any different after being baptized than we did before. But we **are** different, because through water and the Word and the anointing with oil we have been “sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever.” The baby in the photo, my big sister, received grace untold through that sacrament of initiation, and through the Holy Supper each time she received it, which was often. God’s grace enabled her to live a life of love and service, of faith and laughter. She wasn’t quite 16 when our mother died and she took over mothering and housekeeping. She went on to become an Air Force flight nurse and pediatric clinician, serving in the Philippines as our troops were coming home from Vietnam. She had 2 children of her own, Corey and Lance, for whose safety we often pray because they are both active duty military. Sharon became ill and died at the age of 34, when her sons were quite young. From our human perspective, her life was too short and skidded prematurely to an abrupt halt. But what did our presiding bishop recently say? “If in Holy Baptism we have already died the only death that really matters, what are we afraid of?”

From a God’s eye view, having died with Christ in Holy Baptism, Sharon will certainly be raised with Him. Because she had been baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, because she had been sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever, because she had sunk her roots in the rich soil, the refreshing water table of God’s life and God’s love, she flourished in this life, which is prelude to another and even more beautiful life. You and I have all seen loved ones and friends cope with profound loss and meet suffering with grace and faith, not because they were superhuman but because the strength of heaven and other divine resources were theirs, because of Holy Baptism, because of Holy Communion, because of the wisdom of the Word, the seeds of grace planted in their hearts.

On this weekend of the Baptism of our Lord, at this beginning of a new year, hear this promise in the Book of Revelation:

*...for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd,
and he will guide them to springs of the water of life,
and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”*
(Revelation 7:17)

Luther once wrote, “Wash your face and remember your baptism.” Do that. “Wash your face and remember your baptism.” Let the water from spigot or shower remind you that you’ve been washed with the water that banishes chaos and brings forth creation. You have a mystic share in the death and resurrection of Christ. You are a new creation, blessed with a new beginning each day, a daily dying and rising that equip you to face with grace whatever opportunities and challenges present themselves in this year of our Lord 2018.

Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham

¹From “Baptized and Set Free,” by Cathy Skogen-Soldner, #ELW 453.

²Philbrick, Nathaniel. *In the Heart of the Sea: The Tragedy of the Whaleship Essex*. NY: Penguin, 2000.

³Tougias, Michael J. and Sherman, Casey. *The Finest Hours: The True Story of the U.S. Coast Guard’s Most Daring Sea Rescue*. NY: Scribner. 2009.