

Stephen R. Shaver  
Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA  
Sunday, January 10, 2021  
1 Epiphany, Year B, Revised Common Lectionary  
[Genesis 1:1-5](#)  
[Acts 19:1-7](#)  
[Mark 1:4-11](#)  
[Psalm 29](#)

The voice of the Lord is upon the waters; the God of glory thunders; \*  
the Lord is upon the mighty waters.

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I remember when I was about ten years old, bodysurfing in the Atlantic Ocean near my grandmother's house in North Carolina. It was exhilarating. I remember feeling the power of the wave picking me up and propelling me. And I also remember sudden moments of being out of control, with water churning everywhere, unable to come up, sand in my eyes and face and hair, unable to do anything but wait until the force of the wave sent me back up, spluttering and shaken.

Water: the primeval element. Both friendly and wild. We need it to live. We are made of it. We need it to get clean. But it is also stronger than we are, and it can be deadly. Even the gentle Atlantic was wild enough to scare me. Our Pacific Ocean is more fearsome, and we have regular tragedies, another last week, when people are carried away by devastating sneaker waves.

The book of Genesis pictures the beginning of creation as a formless void, empty but for a vast dark ocean of water. Water, somehow, even before everything else is created, the only thing that exists other than God. Water as primordial chaos, with a wind from God, or the Spirit of God—for in Hebrew and Greek *wind* and *spirit* are the very same word—sweeping to and fro over the waters.

And today we hear of Jesus coming to the waters. John, himself an agent of chaos, a wild man, has appeared at the Jordan River preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. That's how it is described: the baptism of John is all about

repentance and forgiveness of sins. So surely if there is anyone who *doesn't* need this baptism, it's the sinless one, Jesus. But Jesus willingly asks to be baptized anyway, to plunge into the roiling waters of the river Jordan, to close his eyes and let his head slip beneath the waves.

And the eternal God, the changeless God, puts aside the perfect safety of Godhood to plunge into the messiness of a world that is not God.

Why is there a world in the first place? Why are we here? Why is anything here? It's one of the famous perennial questions of philosophers: why is there something, rather than nothing?

We can imagine a reality where God never chose to create anything. Consider God before the creation of the universe: timeless, changeless, eternally existing in perfect Platonic splendor. That's a pretty safe picture. Not messy. Beautiful. Perfect. But God wasn't satisfied with it. God chose to create something that wasn't God, something finite, varied, and splendid, a universe full of stars, rocks, water, life. And then came the Incarnation: God choosing not just to create that universe and to love it, but actually to become part of it as a human being. And now today on the Sunday after Epiphany we see God entering in even more deeply into the whole depths of our human condition, broken and alienated as it is, by choosing the baptism of John, as the sinless one chooses to be identified as one of us sinful humans even though he doesn't need to.

Back in the 90s when I lived in Georgia some friends introduced me to the Southern comedian Jeff Foxworthy, who was famous for his "You Might Be a Redneck" routines. I remember him saying, "People say, 'Bill is a great friend. You know, he'd get up at 3 a.m. to go bail you out of jail.' Which I never understood because if Bill was really such a great friend his butt would be in jail with you!"

Jesus decided to get in here with us. So much so that he abandons all safety and dives into our suffering, our pain, our confusion. Even, eventually, to the point of a shameful death on the cross. And after being raised from death he still shows the marks. In Luke's and John's gospels when he appears to his friends he shows them the scars in his hands and feet and side—wounds that the glory of the resurrection

has transformed, but not erased. In some way perhaps even God's own self is affected by this entry into human existence and suffering, forever identified with the deepest pain of creation in the most intimate way.

This week we saw the chaos and pain of human existence in some very clear ways: a mob in the U.S. Capitol Building, Confederate flags and even Nazi paraphernalia paraded through its hallways, a gallows erected outside it: signs of hatred, racism and domination in the symbolic heart of this country's democracy. It was a dramatic and traumatic illustration of realities that have been there for a long time, if not on such flagrant display. And in some ways I think what happened in Washington this week made such an emotional impact because it was such a departure from the predictable, the orderly, and the safe, which so many in this prosperous and powerful country have come to expect and take for granted.

Now there are many people in this country who have never experienced that sense of entitlement to orderliness and predictability, whose lives or livelihoods are always on the edge of danger. Maybe from an unpaid sick leave leading to a lost job to an unpaid rent to a life on the street. Maybe from a sudden knock on the door leading to a deportation. Maybe from a traffic stop gone bad leading to a life extinguished.

But there are also many of us who are used to at least some of the privileges that insulate us from the natural world, from discomfort, danger, and loss. We hold the messy uncontrollability of reality at arm's length. We lock our car doors and forbid our kids from playing outside and put up fences and retreat from one another. We maybe live in a particularly safety-seeking culture because we're a very prosperous one. But all humans seek safety, because we know we're finite and fragile.

Today in the baptism of Jesus we see a God who does something else: who sees danger and runs toward it, who jumps into the roiling seas with us so we might not be abandoned.

Most of us here today have been baptized in his name in our own turn. If you haven't been baptized, I invite you to seek it, to hear the call of Jesus to join him on his way. But don't think that it will be a small step or an easy journey. All of us

who have been baptized into Christ have been sucked under by those powerful waters and come up gasping for breath with our identities forever changed.

We might have gone in fully aware or we might have not even been conscious at the time. We might have been baptized in a safe clean font or a fast-flowing river or a hospital bed. But when we are baptized into the name of Jesus, we become little Jesuses ourselves—not sinless, but growing ever more like Jesus as God’s Holy Spirit works in us. Freed once and for all from the need to seek safety for ourselves, because in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead we have the only safety we can ever need from death and sin and evil itself. And commissioned to join Jesus in leaving aside our own safety and comfort to pursue the work of loving God’s messy and beautiful creation: a creation so beautiful in God’s own eyes that we were worth leaving behind every kind of safety for.

The water isn’t safe. But it’s exhilarating. It doesn’t come with a safety label. Just an invitation.