

Genesis 1:1-5  
Psalm 29  
Acts 19:1-7  
Mark 1:4-11

Epiphany 1B  
St Barnabas, Bainbridge Island  
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I am inexplicably drawn to water. I love water in all forms, but mostly big water... As a little girl growing up in Hawaii, I learned a great deal of respect for water, whether it was the water in the gently lapping canal behind our house where I sailed my tiny boat after school most days, or the big water of Oahu's north shore where we watched brave souls surf waves bigger than most of the buildings in my little town. I got in the water every chance I could, and what I loved more than anything, was diving into waves and being pulled into the gentle currents of the warm waters of the tropical Pacific Ocean.

Occasionally, the folks in our neighborhood would gather together buckets and shovels and skim boards and beach balls and wonderful picnic lunches, then travel to some distant beach where we didn't often get to play. I remember one such afternoon very clearly. It was the day my dad stopped at a little store on our way and bought an extra beach ball. "We have a beach ball" I exclaimed... "why did you get another one?" "It's a surprise" my dad said. "You'll see when we get to the beach."

As I said, children growing up in Hawaii learn a great deal of respect for the water. My dad's "surprise" that balmy afternoon was one of those lessons in respect. When we got to the beach, he gathered all the kids together, and told us to watch. Then he swam out a way and tossed the beach ball as far out into the ocean as he could. By the time he got back to the kids on the beach, the beach ball had traveled so far out into the ocean that it was little more than a dot on a vast expanse of turquoise blue water. "Don't go out over your heads" my dad told us. "There is a very strong undertow out there."

The line between the safe water and the unsafe water is pretty clear on a beach like that. The color of the water changes, the current changes and there is usually a really steep drop-off in the sand where the water curls over itself and pushes down and out toward the deep water. That steep drop-off is a very interesting place, and for this child of the water, it was, and still is, indescribably compelling. The water turns from light to dark, there are always fish that don't come in to the shallow waters, and suffice to say, I found myself mesmerized, snorkeling right over the edge of that abyss. Then all of a sudden BAM, I hit the bottom, hard, and I couldn't find the top. I distinctly remember struggling to breathe, and finally giving up the struggle, just breathing in the water. The next thing I can tell you is that I was lying on the beach, sputtering out that water I had breathed in. My dad had been on his way out to gather me in, long before I ever hit bottom.

In my mind and heart, I drowned that afternoon. For me, that was the most distinct experience imaginable, of the dying and rising we say happens in baptism. We go down into the deep waters – the sometimes dangerous waters – and die to what has been. When we surface, we

are changed. God does not promise to lift us out of the surging, thrashing waters of life. But God does promise that we will not be alone. That has been true throughout all time. All of God's people throughout all salvation history have had a deep connection with water... water that purifies, water that destroys, life-giving water in the desert, water to drown in, water to die in and water to birth us anew.

When we dive into the baptismal waters, we make the same passage the people of ancient Israel made, from slavery into freedom, from outcast to belonging, from death into life. This isn't necessarily what we're thinking of when we gingerly sprinkle water over the foreheads of beatific babies in beautiful christening gowns. When we baptize people, whether they be babies or grown-ups or anyone in-between, we are filled with hope for each precious child of God, filled with hope for the Body of Christ that is forever changed for having welcomed the newly baptized, filled with hope for the world that is made fresh and new in these life-giving waters. We are Christians. Our job is hope.

And while all that is true, we know that our baptism, or even our lived faith, does not protect us from the hurts and the heartaches of walking around in the world as actual human beings. Being incarnate is not easy. With all the dying and rising that being human entails, life can feel pretty rough. And still, when the heavens opened up and Jesus heard those beautiful words "You are my Son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased," he was hearing the same words God spoke to Israel through the prophet Isaiah, the same words God speaks to you and to me, YOU ARE MY BELOVED... It is no coincidence that these words come at Jesus' baptism.

I wonder what Jesus felt like when he heard those words. He was, after all, fully human, remember? "You are my beloved. In you I am well pleased." Jesus hadn't even done anything yet – I mean not the things he became famous for. No miracles, no healings, no preaching or teaching or besting the devil in the wilderness. Jesus stood in line with every other outcast and sinner who wished to be washed clean and born anew and insisted on being baptized. This Jesus, who is like us in every way but without sin, lined up, took his turn and got dunked in the life-giving waters of baptism. Do you wonder why he did that? John's baptism was the baptism of repentance, and Jesus had nothing to repent of. But I don't think Jesus actually cared about that. I think what he cared about was all those people who were lined up, who wanted to be a part of something beautiful and powerful and emboldened by love. I think that his dunking in the river Jordan was his first intentional act of solidarity with all of humankind. "I belong to you, I belong with you, right here, right now, in your heart's desire to repent, to be freely forgiven, to start over, to be born anew."

Just as God was well pleased with his beloved son Jesus before Jesus had gotten it all together and done everything he was supposed to do, God is well pleased with us too. We too are God's own beloved, and just like Jesus, in our intentional acts of baptism, God is well pleased. Not because we came to church and got sprinkled and not even because we made the promises. But simply because of our baptism. Because in our baptism we throw ourselves into the water with the whole lot of outcasts and sinners - the regular folks who on a good day know that we are beloved of God. Who know that having been baptized into the body of Christ we are no longer

alone, no longer doomed to life that isn't life-giving, no longer living in fear of not getting it right. Jesus is in the river with us, and the waters shall not overwhelm us.

Just like you and me, Jesus was beloved before any good got done – that is to say good beyond the unspeakable goodness and beauty of being created in God's own image and called by name. And it seems to me that's something very, very important. We worry – I know we do – because we think our failures or our inabilities or our unwillingness or our busy-ness drives us away from God. But they don't. God is present, always and everywhere calling us by name and whispering to us that we are beloved. Whether we're struggling and sputtering in waters that are up past our necks or lazing away a summer's day with our feet dipping into a babbling brook, God is there, urging, and encouraging us on.

All that blessing, all that belovedness, all that honor and preciousness that God tells us so plainly is real, is purposeful. The fact that we are honored and precious and beloved before we DO ANYTHING is purposeful. It's so we can know who and whose we are. It's so we have everything we need to go out into the world and pour out justice and peace and forgiveness and hope and love without worrying about how it's going to go or whether we'll be approved of at the end of the day. Jesus' baptism was the inauguration of his earthly ministry, just the same as our baptisms are the beginnings of our own ministries. For us, just as it was for Jesus, baptism is a beginning, not an end. Yes, we renounce things and turn away from things when we are baptized, but our baptisms – our very own baptisms- equip us for our work in the world. We are so much more baptized into, than out of. Into a loving community that promises – really promises to do all in our power to support the newly baptized life in Christ. We are baptized into the body of Christ, taking our place, offering our gifts, willing to see ourselves as a part of something that cannot possibly be whole until all are welcomed in. In baptism, we keep covenant with God, yes. But we also keep covenant with each other. And at some deep and rich and very real level, we promise to recognize that the body of Christ is forever changed for having welcomed each and every newly baptized.

In a few minutes, we will baptize Calvin, Lewis and Frannie, the newest saints on the planet. Listen carefully. Answer truthfully. Let yourself be changed by this wonderful thing God is doing right here, in this place. And know yourselves to be the beloved without whom none of it could happen in quite this beautiful and glorious way. Amen.