

First Sunday after the Epiphany: The Baptism of Jesus. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods Episcopal Church, Freeland WA. Nigel Taber-Hamilton. Genesis 1:1-5, Acts 19:1-7, Mark 1:4-11

Did you notice the focus in the fall about making your own disaster preparedness kits? We should expect to have enough to keep us for 14 days. The Seattle City government website says that putting together a kit shouldn't be difficult! Among other things they said that you should have 1 gallon of water per person, per day. For Rachel and I that would be 28 gallons - and that's not including anything for 2 dogs and 2 cats!

Other than being a wake-up call about exactly how much water I need now to stock(!), it's also a reminder of how much we depend on water for life – or, to put it another way, ***It doesn't go without saying that water is super-important for life!*** And the truth is that we don't just depend on water for life, life *is* water – we *are* water. 70% of the earth is water, and 70% of our bodies are water. A few days without water, and you're in serious trouble. A few more, and you're dead!

Around here, though, we've got a lot of it. When I look off of the deck at my house in Clinton, I see water. If you look through the parish hall windows through trees, you can see water. It comes out of the sky here with regularity. We're surrounded by it on all sides and above. It runs under the ground beneath us here 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year. So its easy to forget just how important it is.

If you read up on current military strategy you'll discover many experts believe that the next great wars will not be about land, or oil, they'll be about water, because of our human impact on the planet, and the climate change we're provoking.

If you visit the Holy Land, like some of us have done, you figure out that they don't have a lot of water! Other than the Jordan river, it's dry! Water's precious. So you're very careful with how you use it. You build cisterns to store it in, you use it sparingly – no thoughtless or lavish use. It's not hard to figure out that if you want to have some sort of ritual to mark something as precious, you're going to use something precious for it. Crowning a monarch involves using precious metals and jewels and skilled artisans to convert them into works of art used only on very special people.

For Jesus, on this day, water – used by John the Baptist – is the same thing as using precious metals and jewels with John as the skilled artisan.

And that's true for us, too. Because being incorporated into Christ is special, water gets used in baptism. This is the water that refreshes, heals, and transforms.

Water matters to us physically. Water also matters to us spiritually. Not only do we have to refresh ourselves physically every day in the waters that nourish our bodies, so also we should be refreshing ourselves daily in the waters of baptism.

The readings today celebrate the waters of grace and healing that transform our lives and the world. The Genesis story is really the “womb of creation, our of whose waters our world and all

that's in it – all creation – is birthed.

In the opening of Mark's gospel – within the first few words – there's a baptism. Jesus goes to John the Baptist to be baptized. That baptism becomes the supreme model – the paradigm – for our baptismal stories. I think what Mark's describing is what the Celtic Christians called a “thin place” - a place where the veil between earth and heaven becomes mystically permeable. That's what the language of the descending dove is all about.

And that moment says something else. God's presence in the universe is not uniform, not always in all places the same; God's presence is intimate, God's presence for us is molded into our own individual contexts – that's certainly another description for what Mark describes.

That's why it becomes so important for us to remember our baptisms – even if we were infants – because that memory becomes a portal through which, in which, the intimate, personal Spirit of God can energize and transform our lives.

And baptism is more than this personal transformative experience; it's also an act of inclusion into the community of faith – that, too, is why we renew our baptismal vows – to remind ourselves that we have been and can continue to be transformed, yes; and to remind ourselves that we have been included in the body of Christ.

And baptism is a gift, an act of grace. No one “earns” baptism – it's not a medal for meritorious service; it's a gift from God that, in Thomas Merton's words, is both a reminder of and a sign of our “original wholeness” in the midst of challenging experiences that fill us with fear and doubt. Baptism reminds us (to remember Paul's words that we heard at Wren's funeral yesterday) that if God is for us, who can be against us.

Transformation. Inclusion, unmerited gift of grace – that's what we're remembering, celebrating, and re-invoking today as we go and gather around the font.

I invite you, then, to come with me that we may rejoice in the life-giving waters of God; that we may quench our thirst; that we may refresh our spirits; and that we remember that God cleanses us from all sin.

And then(!) let us commit to each other and to God that we will be God's partners in protecting the baptismal integrity of all creation, as it has been and continues to be birthed by God.