

Deep Waters

Matt. 3:13-17

1/12/20



I love church seasons

that are easy to celebrate and mark.

And some seasons are easier than others.

Singing Christmas songs and carols;

seeing the Kairos, wooden Christmas tree

or the Crismon tree;

all the decorations - easy.

The somber laments of Lent,

the markings of Ash Wednesday,

the lilies and the soaring trumpets of Easter—easy.

The revelation of God in Christ

by star, water and wine?

Hmmm.

Thank goodness for rituals here

that involved dinner, cake

and all of us walking around with one shoe.

How do we celebrate Epiphany;

a season of our year

that celebrates the signs and revelations of God?

What songs and prayers

fill us with both anticipation for a sign

and assurance that we'd get one?

How do we celebrate

the showings of God from long ago

in a manner that doesn't leave us feeling defeated

over our limited experiences

of revelations of God today?

I have never met anyone

who feels like God talks to them

way too often

or butts into their lives too much.

Most of us are not basking in signs.<sup>1</sup>

Usually, it is completely  
the other way around.

Where we long for signs and showings  
we often see none;

where we long to hear God's voice  
and feel a divine presence,

we instead are met with silence  
and doubt the validity  
of our own "spiritual" experiences.

Rather than bombarded by revelations,  
it sometimes seems

that the divine pool of wonder  
has all but dried up.

At least I think

that is the reality for most of us.

We long for something concrete  
and are left with far-fetched expectations.



There is a new show on Netflix,  
that reveals this longing and desire  
of the Epiphany season;

the show is called, Messiah.

Anyone seen it?

Tripp and I watched some of it last night,  
for "sermon research."

The Netflix series focuses  
on the modern world's reaction  
to a man who first appears in the Middle East  
claiming to be the son of God.  
But his sudden appearance

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<sup>1</sup> Debie Thomas, Journeying with Jesus, January 2017 <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/1232-this-place-deep-water-2>

and apparent miracles spark  
a growing international following,  
casting doubts around who he really is,  
and warrant investigation by the CIA.<sup>2</sup>

Just the fact  
that the show was created  
is indicative of our long-standing hope  
for a present-day sighting  
and revelation from God.

In a world of verifiable facts  
and government investigations,  
we long for an authentic,  
certifiable appearance;  
a heavenly messenger;  
the second coming;  
the incarnation;  
anything that would show  
—the divine  
breaking into our lives.

**This is the heart of Epiphany.  
The deep waters of the expectation  
that we will continue to look for signs  
and remain faithful and accepting  
even if we don't see them.**

*To expect and accept*  
that God's revelation today  
will be different than God's revelation of the past.

I don't think we have to resign ourselves  
to not believing in the miraculous;  
and it isn't that we should reduce  
what we read in scripture to mere metaphor.  
But we can be honest  
that it's hard to be aware  
of signs and showings.  
It is hard to discern definitively

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<sup>2</sup>[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Messiah\\_\(American\\_TV\\_series\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Messiah_(American_TV_series))

where God is and if God  
is still speaking today.

Here is a part of poem, I Am Waiting, by Lawrence Fernlinghetti,  
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F2JydcbkgtY> Start at .50-1:28)

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I am waiting for the Second Coming  
and I am waiting  
for a religious revival  
to sweep thru the state of Arizona  
and I am waiting  
for the Grapes of Wrath to be stored  
and I am waiting  
for them to prove  
that God is really American  
and I am waiting  
to see God on television  
piped onto church altars  
if only they can find  
the right channel  
to tune in on  
and I am waiting  
for the Last Supper to be served again  
with a strange new appetizer  
and I am perpetually awaiting  
a rebirth of wonder...

I am perpetually awaiting  
the rebirth of wonder.  
That is good writing.



Matthew tells us  
that John was performing  
a baptism of repentance;

which is, in a way, different  
than the baptism we practice today.  
His baptism was about turning one's heart,  
turning one's mind,  
turning one's life toward God:  
that's repentance.  
John's baptism was not primarily  
about a cleansing of sin  
—or about a dying and rising in Christ.  
*But about the choice of who you would turn your life toward.*

We think, though we are not 100% sure,  
that John might have joined  
of the Essene community in Qumran;  
which is south of Jerusalem  
near the Dead Sea.

It is likely John's ministry  
was just north of Qumran,  
closer to Jerusalem,  
the religious center  
that he means to call out...  
to offer baptisms of repentance.

That is important because  
our story starts with Jesus  
coming down from Galilee  
to John at the Jordan to be baptized.

Now Galilee is not close  
to the region of where John might have been,  
near Jerusalem.

This meant that Jesus was intentional  
about going to where John was  
and getting in line with everyone else  
who showed up.

John was surprised by this.  
He resists it, <sup>14</sup>John would have prevented him, saying,  
“I need to be baptized by you,  
and do you come to me?”

For the early church,  
the miraculous in this story  
wasn't what was hard to believe;  
it was the ordinary.<sup>3</sup>  
Yes, the heavens are torn open.  
Yes, the Spirit descends on Jesus  
in the form of a dove.  
Yes, the voice of God speaks,  
identifying Jesus as the chosen one.  
But Jesus in line with everyone else?  
Jesus baptized by John?  
That's what embarrassed the church.  
They couldn't explain, the "why."  
Why is the son of God schlepping himself  
into the muddy waters  
of John's baptism of repentance?

But we know why  
—or at least we know what  
Jesus tells John.  
Jesus gets in line for the baptism,  
and says, "Let it be so now;  
for it is proper for us  
in this way  
to fulfill all righteousness."

I wonder if they argued for longer  
than the text indicates.  
Did they go back and forth,  
like the cousins they were,  
John, being a stick in the mud,  
shaking his head with a, no  
and Jesus rather insistent,  
nodding back with a, yes.  
Until he finally says to John,  
"listen, you're baptizing me  
because this is how God wants it done."

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<sup>3</sup> Debie Thomas summarizing John Dominic Crossan, *Journeying with Jesus*, January 2017  
<https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/1232-this-place-deep-water-2>

The element of human agency  
in this is surprising.

Jesus chooses to come down to the Jordan  
and be baptized.

He chooses to follow  
what he says is 'right, proper, fulfilled;'  
he follows God's leading  
to fulfill righteousness  
and Jesus receives a revelation from God.

Jesus chooses to publicly show that  
he turns his life,  
his mind, his heart, his will  
over to God.

He is baptized in the deep waters  
of expectation and acceptance.

We expect God's revelations  
to bowl us over into awe struck assurance.

We want to bump into God  
around every corner  
and believe every sign and miracle  
and silence any doubt.

But this is not how this works.  
Why?

Because of choice, human agency.

No matter how many times  
God might show up in our lives,  
we are always free to ignore the divine.  
No matter how many times  
we remember our baptisms,  
we are free to dredge out of the water  
the very sludge we first threw in.<sup>4</sup>

This is a reminder that as impossible as it is  
to believe that the heavens were torn open  
for the Spirit to descend

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<sup>4</sup> ibid

and for God to speak;  
it might be as equally impossible to believe,  
“That God appears by means  
so familiar,  
we often miss him?”  
Isn’t it just as impossible to fathom that,  
“our [own] baptisms  
bind us to all of humanity  
— not in theory, but in the flesh —  
such that you and I are kin,  
responsible for each other  
in ways we fail too often to honor?”<sup>5</sup>



Before we left for Israel  
Whit told me one of the stops  
would be going to the Jordan River  
and celebrating the reaffirmations  
of our baptisms.  
He asked if I would be willing  
to take the lead on that,  
and I said yes  
—immediately regretting my choice.

From that moment on,  
I was resolute that I would take the lead but  
did not feel the need  
to be submerged in the Jordan.  
It was a body of water  
like any other body of water,  
no less special and no less important.

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<sup>5</sup> ibid



When we arrived in Israel,  
I remained resolute.

Sure, this is where Jesus was baptized,  
and we were in the Holy Land,  
but the Lord certainly wouldn't love me less  
if I *chose* not to be dunked.

Knowing I'd be offering others  
a reaffirmation of their baptisms  
by submersion, made me anxious anyway—  
which I, of course, told no one including Whit.

My anxiety came, not because I thought  
there was anything wrong with it  
—but from the sheer mechanics of it:  
I had never dunked anyone—  
that wasn't part of the baptism class  
in preacher school and I was sure  
that I would mess it up somehow.

We got to the Jordan River  
after a long full day of travel  
and seeing various ancient sights.  
My inward anxiety had worn me down.

I was tired.

I didn't want to get off the air-conditioned bus  
and step back out in the September, Israeli heat.  
I didn't want to put on my bathing suit  
and running tights  
—the tights were so the little fish in the Jordan  
wouldn't nip at my ankles so much.

I didn't want to be in a small, smelly, hot bathroom stall  
to take off my sweaty clothes  
and put on a one piece,  
a white robe  
and water sandals.

But I did.



When our group walked down  
to the reserved spot,  
I didn't see a star.  
I didn't see the heavens beginning to open,  
or any birds waiting to come down and bless us.  
I didn't see water changed into wine.  
What I saw were lots of people.



There was absolutely nothing miraculous  
about being at this spot of the Jordan River.  
There are lots of places on the Jordan river  
where pilgrims can reaffirm their baptisms.  
But as I made my way from the bathroom  
—which had metal poles for lines and a turnstile  
like they do for amusement park rides  
I tell you what.  
Somehow, for some reason,  
all the sudden,  
that was a sign.

I never **expected** to experience  
what I experienced in the Jordan River.  
You didn't ask me for a testimony,  
but I'm going to give you one.  
Because even before I got into that water,  
my stomach was in my throat.  
We went in about waist deep.



And as Whit in his white robe stood on one side  
and I stood in my white robe stood on the other—  
there was only my voice,  
*remember your baptism and be thankful,*  
but the waters deepened.

Down went a child of God,  
under that green water,  
and out came a beloved.

Me included.



Some of the people in our group  
I have known since I was shy and quiet 7<sup>th</sup> grader  
who had just started at Grandview Middle School.  
And some of the people in our group  
were folks I'd met only 3 days before.



And one man, Henri,  
was a stranger from Paraguay.  
But every single one of them  
was a beloved of God.



Even those who stood  
in the ankle-deep Jordan  
and received a wet sign of the cross  
on their foreheads  
were plunged into my epiphany  
and marked as Beloveds of God forever.

Epiphany is quite frankly is *deep* water.

The deep waters of the expectation  
that we will continue to look for signs  
and acceptance of remaining faithful  
even if we don't see them, right away.

*I am perpetually awaiting the rebirth of wonder.*

This whole business of trusting yourself  
to something that you can't see  
or make a Netflix show about  
...deep water.

I can assure you  
that you don't all need to go to the Jordan.  
You don't need to go to the Holy Land  
to have an epiphany.

Though I will say,  
that you are ever given the choice,  
take it.

I believe the deep water is this;  
that God in Christ Jesus,  
drew me in with you  
to the deep waters of togetherness  
and kinship, a family of faith  
in this community.

God in Christ Jesus  
has decided to reveal things in ordinary

and miraculous ways  
—whether it makes sense of not.

We are welcomed into the water  
and no matter how deep  
we are willing to go,  
God in Christ plunges  
right in with us.