

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.¹

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

¹ 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.²

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

²[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)

...

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, ¹⁴John 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.³
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."

³ 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.⁴

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

⁴ 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?”⁵



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.

⁵ 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 7th 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.