

January 12, 2025  
1 Epiphany, Year C  
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Christ Church, Exeter

### Passing Through the Waters of Life

43 But now thus says the Lord,  
    he who created you, O Jacob,  
    he who formed you, O Israel:  
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;  
    I have called you by name; you are mine.  
2 When you pass through the waters, I will be with you,  
    and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;  
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,  
    and the flame shall not consume you.  
3 For I am the Lord your God,  
    the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.  
I give Egypt as your ransom,  
    Cush and Seba in exchange for you.  
4 Because you are precious in my sight  
    and honored and I love you,  
I give people in return for you,  
    nations in exchange for your life.  
5 Do not fear, for I am with you;  
    I will bring your offspring from the east,  
    and from the west I will gather you;  
6 I will say to the north, "Give them up,"  
    and to the south, "Do not withhold;  
bring my sons from far away  
    and my daughters from the end of the earth—  
7 everyone who is called by my name,  
    whom I created for my glory,  
    whom I formed and made."

Today we move from Christmas to the season of Epiphany. The movement from his birth to his later baptism by John is when the church tells the story how this Jesus was not simply a bold prophet, a gifted healer or a wise teacher. He was also divine. Fully human. Fully God. Granted, that took some time to settle into the growing Jesus movement and can challenge believers even today.

Epiphany is a time when God breaks through our ordinary lives to make known what is true and holy.

Last Sunday I confessed to our family guilty pleasure of trying to find the lamest and most predicable Christmas movies over the holidays.

On the more popular genres of movies or novels or science fiction is “time travel.” It is a tried and tested formula. From Mark Twain’s *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* to Dicken’s *A Christmas Carol*.

This past week actor Michael J. Fox received the Presidential Medal of Freedom, our nation’s highest civilian honor. The famous actor become a world-renowned advocate for Parkinson’s disease research and development.

Fox jumped from television to the movies with the “Back to the Future” franchise in the 1980’s. The premise was simple. Have a crazy but brilliant scientist invent a time machine that would allow people to travel back in time. The plot became a bit awkward when Fox’s character landed back in his hometown in the 1950’s, only to discover that his mother, then a teenager, had a crush on him. I know: it’s confusing. The point of the movie – and the reason the concept is so widely repeated – is that the past can often seem a whole lot like the future. And the future the past.

Can we apply the time travel formula to the Christian story? What if the disciples had had the benefit of a time machine? To turn back the clock to see themselves at the beginning of their journey.

Take the most well-known scene from the gospels. I would make a case for it being the Last Supper: an image that even the non-religious can picture thanks to the DaVinci’s iconic painting. Jesus gathers with his closest friends in the upper room in the final hours of his life on earth. We retell the setting every Sunday when the Communion bread and wine is consecrated. But the part of the story we only retell in Holy Week is when Jesus gets up from the table, takes off his outer robe, pours water into a basin and begins to wash his disciples’ feet. It was and is still a radically unsettling and challenging action. It makes the unmistakable point about his life and ministry: He came to live among us not be served but the serve.

With that as the opening scene, and with the benefit of the 1<sup>st</sup> century time machine, Peter, Andrew and the others find themselves transported back years before. To the side of the River Jordan, there is a lot of commotion. John the Baptist is up to his waist in the water baptizing weary souls as they wash away the sins of their former selves. And then comes Jesus himself to be baptized in those same waters. God speaks: “you are my beloved, with you I am well pleased.”

Back to the future: in that Upper Room, when Jesus took, blessed, broke and then shared the bread, traveling back through time again his friends might have found themselves on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, when Jesus told the many people on that hillside to sit down – then prayed to God -- and a few loaves of bread and some fish become enough food to feed all who were there.

The Baptism of Jesus and the Last Supper. The Feeding of the 5,000. The scenes share many of the same elements: disciples, water, washing, cleansing, bread and feeding. They spoke the essence of Jesus’ life and ministry. We say this all the time: In Christ, God meets us where we are. Not where we wish we were or where we hope to be some day. But in the moment, here and now. In the throes of life. Inviting us to see how we all pass through the waters: birth, growth, aging and dying. All under the watchful eye of a loving God.

Centuries before Jesus was born to Mary and baptized by John, the prophet Isaiah spoke clearly about God’s desire. Can we really hear God’s promise?

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;  
Do not fear, for I am with you;

I have called you by name, you are mine.  
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;  
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;  
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,  
and the flame shall not consume you.  
For I am the Lord your God,  
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.

Scripture does not get clearer and more reassuring than that.

We've all been there at one time or another. Up to our neck, running or paddling for our lives, under stress, discouraged, lost, afraid and confused. We have all passed through life events when we probably weren't sure how we held it all together. Where did we get the strength to get out of bed. To be strong. To be present for others.

Where and how did the calm and peace come over us to help us calm our racing minds all to sleep.

Hearing Isaiah's words: And if we say it and prayer it again and again, maybe on our better days we might actually believe it to be true and lasting.

Last Thursday as I watched part of President Carter's funeral in the magnificent Washington National Cathedral, the seat of our Presiding Bishop, I could not help but takeaway the recurring theme of service in his life. The liturgy for the former president was the same as we use here for our loved ones and friends.

Jason Carter, his grandson, offered a tender and inspiring eulogy that I commend to your watching. His grandfather, famously, could be a thorn in the side of the presidents who followed him, and could offer uninvited advice to many. He was in many ways an outcast to the ways of Washington. Yet, what we saw on display last Thursday was a case for a life of service and faith. Finding cures for diseases, building houses, monitoring elections. Service to family, to community, to nation, to the globe, to his church, to his God – could there be a higher goal for any one of us? Jason closed by quoting Andrew Young, who offered the homily. He said of the late president: "He may be gone, but he's not gone far."

Jimmy Carter may have been one of our most religious presidents. And still. that did not make him perfect or without ego or fault.

I recently came across of clip of the American Hasidic rabbi Shais Taub speak about one of the most common mistakes that parents make when are starts off as parents. He says that "parents have a fundamental flaw in their entire premise of what the purpose of parenting is. People think that parents become parents because they think it is somehow meant to improve their lives. That is a ridiculous notion. There are so many ways to enhance and improve your life: parenting is not one of them! Parenting is not supposed to make your life better. Parenting is something you do as act of selfless service. We're not supposed to enjoy it. It's not supposed to be meaningful or fulfilling.

We're supposed to it because God sent your sold to the world to help facilitate the next batch of souls to make their transition to this world, so the entire job of a parent is to welcome souls to the physical world and to set them up as comfortable and in secure of a way possible that they will be able to have a fruitful and productive life and experience. Parents are here to serve.”

If we are ever asked: what makes a Christian, or what do I have to do to become a Christian?: the first response should be baptism. Like Jesus himself who passed through the waters under John, our lives of faith begins by dying to our old selves and being born anew and adopted and marked as Christ's own forever. We have to pass through the waters.

Back to the future.

We can all draw a line from where we are today back to where we once were. Where has God showed up in your yesterdays.

God was present as we took our first breath. Present in the joy of our parents when they held us for the first time. When we took our first steps.

God is with us when we are lonely. In defeat. In times of crisis. God is with us as we age: growing older, wiser, softening our edges and helping us learn from the past.

One of my favorite verses from the New Testament is 1 Corinthians 12 when St. Paul writes about how interconnected we are called to be.

<sup>26</sup> If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

In a world that can feel divided, marking the baptism of Jesus and are own, reminds us that there is nothing we will experience in this life that God does not know full well what we are going through.

Our work is to reflect the boundless joy and grace that flows like a river from God, sharing these gifts and blessings with the world and people around us.