

Sermon for the Baptism of our Lord 2010

Writing about the waters of baptism, William Loader says that we begin to face ourselves when we find our way into the same waters and find ourselves involved in acts of compassion where lofty ideas of divinity would never occur to us, but where we meet Jesus and tend Jesus as well.

Standing on the beach in Perth Australia at the time of the tsunami five years ago Loader describes what it was like there: *Having placed my towel and belongings some distance from the water, I noticed a surge. In a few moments I needed to move them higher. Then just as suddenly the sea retreated far past its original line, dropping at least a meter. A curiosity on a Perth beach - a mere ripple from the disastrous Tsunami which had earlier devastated the northern coastlands of the Indian Ocean.*

There, too, some survivors report that it began as a curiosity. But that was not to be. The sea continued to rise; the enormous frontal wave crashed at great speed (as I understand about 500 miles an hour) With a wall of water that could have been at least three stories high, it crashed across the shore carrying all in its path. The action was repeated, each withdrawal dragging people and things to the ocean. In some areas all that was left was a patchwork of concrete foundations. Survivors clung for their lives to trees; others were lucky to be able to scale stable buildings. But for thousands – more than 150,000 - it meant death and for millions it means homelessness.

Insurance policies would call this "an act of God". For some this would have to be, since God is "in control". Like fate, God determines all that is. At worst, the moralizers will find fault with the victims and acclaim

an act of God's wrath. But even most whose thinking about God rests within such a frame of reference will not, however, draw such conclusions. There is a defiance by common sense and an awareness of mystery which refuses such heartlessness. True, the notion that all is planned gives comfort to some. It is a kind of fatalism. I can begin adjusting. I can let things be. I can't change them. But the ethical problems are huge. It makes as little sense to claim that God sends tsunamis as it does to claim that God sends invading cancer.

But our hearts cry out to God! Not with the arithmetic of blame. Not to sustain the precious structures of our theoretical constructions of divinity. Not because we think God sends tsunamis. We don't. But because God is our way of speaking of the very depth of being and God is compassionately engaged and knows us. Of course, this is like poetry and far from adequate or accurate. But we want to cry out to God and cry out with God. We want to believe that God is not disinterested. It is a conversation of the soul, our deep inner being. O God, hear our grief! O God, help these people!

What then moves within us and surges for fulfillment is compassion, the very being of God - an image for our co-humanity. Deep love for other people and for our world flows from within and joins us to each other and to God. God is an ocean of goodness, reaching our shore, yet far beyond our horizon and deeper than our profoundest thought. That surge moves us and we have learned to understand sin as resistance to its life. We see the tide of generosity about us and recognize the life of God."

Summoned to our common frailty we respond with human care. Such a solidarity will even set aside the preoccupations of war. When people are reduced to surviving, our common humanity asserts itself. Our

expenditure on war is many, many multiples of what we give in aid. Much of the present surge of compassion will be short lived and we will forget our vulnerability. The future effects of global warming remain a remote concern - though they are now beyond dispute. The huge problems of poverty surface in our consciousness mostly only at the level of ever less shocking scenes - as we become accustomed to them. Getting to the real underlying issues to prevent the causes is too remote to be relevant for most people.....

Moments of vulnerability give us the opportunity to reconnect to what really matters. Ultimately that is about connecting to God. To do so is to sense a surging passion for good and for change, a refusal to ignore the shores beyond our own, a willingness to be engaged for all humanity. Some of our crises are as big as that and bigger: they affect the entire planet. Meanwhile we can give and we can listen and we can imagine as our fellow human beings engage the horror and grief of losing their own, of not knowing or even never knowing what happened to them.

O God, we cry! O God, hear our grief! O God, help these people! O God, help us! O God, help humanity! O God, help us care about the world in which we live!

William's call still echoes in my mind this Epiphany Season as the world continues to face the threats of natural disasters and those manmade ones as well. The threat of terrorism in the skies continues to grow as our own home grown acts of violence do as well. What are we called to do as a response to our own baptismal covenant which we will repeat this morning.

While we cannot explain the mystery of Jesus baptism our our own, we can respond to God's call to us in this covenant for us as individuals and as a covenant community.

During this season of Epiphany, let us take time to "pause and wonder as the title of a new anthology invites us to do. The title of the book comes from a saying by Albert Einstein who describes the mysterious as the most beautiful and thrilling thing in the world. He goes on to say that the person who never feels called to "pause and wonder" is as good as dead. This is something we can all take time to do during this Epiphany season. And, as Shirley Carter Hughson, OHC, writes:

There is something great and full in the deep mysteries of life, which is utterly lost when life is explained. The lure of the mysterious is that which enable us to seek after truth, and the fact that the truth always lies beyond us would seem to be a reflection of the infinite life of God who is the fullness of truth. We can never compass the infinite, although through all time and eternity we shall be penetrating more deeply into it.

From a letter written in January 1944 by Shirley Carter Hughson, OHC, quoted in *Love's Redeeming Work: The Anglican Quest for Holiness*, compiled by Geoffrey Rowell, Kenneth Stevenson, and Rowan Williams (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).