

## **Feast day: The Baptism of Our Lord**

**Text: Isaiah 43:1-6; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22**

*Rev. Sharon Smith*

### **Introduction:**

“Human life begins in a watery womb.  
We spend our first nine months immersed in water,  
and then we emerge from the warm, dark brine into the world.  
In the creation story, the waters existed before the light.  
Creation emerges from the water”

*Christine Valters Paintner*

Water. It was present before creation.

The word **waters** in the creation story of the Christian and Jewish scriptures is not the **water** we know.

It is a poetic turn of phrase.  
Kind of like our words gurgle or hum  
Words that imitate sound.

The Hebrew word translated waters is:

### **Tehom**

Can you hear it?

Tehom, Tehom, Tehom.

Also translated in Jewish Midrash as the murmuring deep - Tehom (*Aviva Zornberg*)

Murmuring deep.  
I hear Burping gas. Bloop bloop.  
I see a frightening vastness of murky liquid.  
And there is no life.  
And it is unable to bring forth life. And it is unable to sustain life.

Wasteland. Nothingness. The Murmuring Deep.

One Rabbi says - The Tehom is shorthand for everything that scares us:

- The absence of anything good
- Fear of dementia
- The melting of the polar icecaps
- The pollution of earth's fresh water
- Not having enough money – operating from a deficit budget
- Unresolvable back pain OR
- Saying goodbye to those we have come to love.

And it is this sense of water that continues to be the picture of difficult times, of chaos, of obstacles for the people of Israel.

The waters of the Red Sea that stood in their way from freedom at the Exodus.  
The waters of Babylon into which they poured their tears during the Exile.

**And yet the Spirit in the creation story, hovers over these chaotic waters.  
And it is out of the waters that order and life is formed.  
God parts the Red Sea; And the people return from Exile.**

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Our first reading is from the prophetic works known to us as Isaiah.  
A school of prophets who wrote over many years.  
This section is known as second Isaiah – and it was probably written during the Exile – close to Israel’s return to their land.

**Here in poetic verse the prophets remind us of Creation’s chaos. Of Tahom.  
AND  
They remind us of God’s restoration. A calling back – a re-ordering.**

**In Walter Brueggemann’s Old Testament theology**

He beautifully demonstrates the parallel drama of brokenness and restoration of creation and the God’s beloved people, Israel.

Israel, beloved and chosen – scattered into exile – gathered and re-loved  
Creation, formed in generosity – relinquished to chaos – restored to blessing

In this poetic verse, we re-live creation, a second time.  
God is seen as an artist, forming a people (a community),  
Forming this community gives God a sense of delight;  
God is able to imagine and enact a form of life that has never before been in existence.  
And just like in the creation story there is a naming ceremony. And God announces that they are good. More than good – precious, honoured, beloved!

Out of the chaos of exile, Israel is restored to their identity as God’s beloved.

**In Henri Nouwen’s book, Life of the Beloved...**

He reminds us that we are in a process of becoming the beloved.  
And it is a process of letting the truth of our beloved-ness become en-fleshed in everything we think, say or do.  
Letting it sink in. A process of paying attention to the Spirit’s gentle voice that calls us the Beloved, amidst all the other voices of self-rejection that compete.

**Nouwen describes an experience of straining to hear a different voice amidst his thoughts of self-rejection.<sup>1</sup>**

As soon as someone accuses him or he felt rejected or left alone, or abandoned, he found himself thinking: well that proves once again that I am a nobody.

And as he strained to listen to a different voice at his centre, the words say:

“I have called you by name, from the very beginning. You are mine and I am yours. You are my Beloved, on you my favour rests. I have molded you in the depths of the earth and knitted you together in your mother’s womb. I have carved you in the palms of the hands and hidden you in the shadow of my embrace. I look at you with infinite tenderness and care for you with a care more intimate than that of a mother for her child. I have counted every hair on your head and guided you at every step. Where ever you go, I go with you, and wherever you rest, I keep watch... Nothing will ever separate us, we are one.” (p. 36-7)

My friends, the hard work of prayer, the discipline of silence, of repeating our common prayer and liturgy, stills our habitual thoughts of negativity and opens us up to hear:

You are Beloved. Beloved is where you begin.

You cannot do anything or say anything that will make God love you more or make God love you less. Beloved.

It is patterned in creation.

Creation, formed in generosity – relinquished to chaos – restored to blessing

It is patterned in the story of Israel.

Israel, beloved and chosen – scattered into exile – gathered and re-loved

It is offered to us. To reclaim our identity.

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It is our practice as Christians to enact our re-creation using water.

We do this in the sacrament of Baptism.

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<sup>1</sup> **Elizabeth Gilbert** describes a morning of silent meditation in a Hindu Ashram where negative voices were at war inside her head...

“When I tried this morning after an hour or so of unhappy thinking, to dip back into my meditation, I took a new idea with me, compassion...

Instead of thinking that I was a failure, could I perhaps accept that I am only a human being?...

She goes on...

“My mind tried to protest, said, “Yeah, but you’re such a failure, you’re such a loser, you’ll never amount to anything...”

And then suddenly... it was like a lion was roaring from within my chest, drowning all the claptrap out. A voice bellowed in me like nothing I had ever heard before.

It roared: “You have no idea how strong my love is”

When I was attending an Anglican Church in Vancouver.

The Bishop visited and on this occasion she Baptised two people:

- An 8 month old baby girl with a sweet smile, wearing a newly white crocheted outfit.
- And a 65 year old man, hair thinning, dressed in a worn-out suit and tie.

The contrast was stark. But it was perfect.

The baby was cooperative.  
The water was poured over her delicately.  
She was anointed with oil.  
And was now born of water and of the Spirit.

The gentleman then stepped forward leaned over the font,  
At this point – it became a little awkward.  
Because as he leaned, his comb over (that strategically covered his bald patch) flopped  
into the water, and swirled.  
There was a little uncomfortable maneuvering.  
But water was poured and words were spoken.  
And when he lifted his head – his hair was covering his face.  
The best moment was when the ArchBishop had to do a little hairdressing before she  
anointed him with oil.

And when it was over.  
The two newly baptised were crying.  
The baby because that's what's babies do.

But the man wept too.  
Perhaps because he knew other waters.  
He had known the waters of Tehom.  
The hardness of his life, the chaos, days filled with fears and sorrow.  
And now he was graced with the mystery of God at work in his reality.  
Renewal. Re-creation.

A renewed sense of his beloved-ness.

**Let us remember that our re-creation begins with chaos.**

**Let us remember our Baptism.  
That God speaks us back to life, by calling us beloved.**

**And the One who called us by name then,  
Still calls now.**

Amen.