

## When You Pass Through the Waters

Texts on Sunday, January 9, 2005

Reading: Isaiah 43: 1-11; Matthew 3: 1-2, 13-17

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POG: When You Pass Through the Waters: pdf, print version

"When through the deep waters I call thee to go  
The rivers of sorrow shall not overflow;  
For I will be near thee, thy troubles to bless,  
And sanctify to thee they deepest distress."

"When we were baptized into Christ Jesus," writes the Apostle, "we were baptized into his death." When there's a baby in the house awaiting baptism, we don't usually dwell on the symbol of death in baptism. The mothers and the fathers might find it contrary to their new experience. They'd have just come from the breakfast table, from wiping applesauce from the tiny lips, from fussing at the white gown. That seems not the time to talk of death; life abounds--strange, mundane, awesome, detailed, wonderful, busy.

But today there are no babies here, just you grownups. Yes, fourteen years old is enough for the label "grownup." The main difference between little ones and grownups is knowledge of death. Adult life is like a bath--a baptism, if you will--in the pool of mortality. The pool is of a certain size, its far wall is your dying day. Every movement you make, every change, every significant decision sets waves through the water that strike the far side of the pool and rebound. Every day, you feel waves of your decisions returning from that fixed wall. A young adult notices that the wall seems far away, but she notices. An aged person feels the disturbance in the waters right away, with every decision. It's not a morbid or sad thought; it's awareness. The main difference between shallow or repressed people and anchored, trustworthy souls is acknowledging this awareness of death in life. The main difference between religion for show and religion for real is this knowledge of death, for death is the salient fact of precious life. The main difference between a life of pleasure and a life of joy is knowledge of death. There is no point putting it off. Look square at what is, without averting your gaze, and in a minute, you grow up.

We had been preparing this service of baptismal renewal for some weeks when death of incomprehensible caliber descended on South Asia a fortnight ago as a strangling deluge from the sea. What can religion say to this? Oh, some let off rockets of theories about the divine plan in these disasters. "Nuts" to their cheap talk! They are only firming up the foundation under a feeble faith that supposes a god controlling and calculating everything, joystick in hand, playing out history in a cosmic video arcade. How small a god! Think big. If disaster has any design in it, the design is that from the beginning, the material world has been left wide open and free to respond to its laws. Nothing is decided. Anything can happen within the frame of the physical laws, which are never fully understood. No single meaning is crouching inside the events, waiting to be sprung to light by God's special insiders. The thing is wide open. God's gift is that no despotic command center exists for mere

things, but rather power to affect and power to be affected is spread throughout the universe. We will not cheat those who pass through disastrous death, whether natural or murderously man-made, with little theories. Their deaths have a dignity before which only silence can speak and which faith beholds with mystery and courage.

Now faith comes with its scriptures. Is it an affront to read these now?

When the rainbow is seen in the clouds, says the Lord, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. Genesis 9:15

The waters returned and covered the chariots and the chariot drivers, the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea; not one of them remained. But the Israelites walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. Exodus 14: 28-29

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; for I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. Isaiah 43:2-3

For most of the peoples overwhelmed by the house-high waves on the second day of Christmas, these are not their holy scriptures; they weren't going to read them today. But we were; and we are their sisters and their brothers. What can be our meaning in such words of confidence against the floods when the world is shrouded in grief? You know, some people leave church forever over dissonance like this. They shovel God out of their minds like too much snow when the big protector god they were taught to pray to as children fails to deliver and disaster drops down too near. So let us be careful, both for our own souls and for those who are watching ours. If we sing our songs of safety while the world is weeping, what do we mean? Are we blind, deaf, dumb to disaster? No, no, not at all.

Serious religion is for grownups who are dipped in death, the fact of life. But when you were baptized into Christ Jesus, you were dipped into his death, which is not like just any death. "We have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life." (Rom 6.4) We sing the song, and pray the prayer of confidence, and wait upon the Lord, not imagining magical protection from the damage life does, not supposing ourselves any better, or any different from any griever now wandering the beaches of the Indian Ocean for a sign of the loves lost. No, we make our song for the sake of the world, because in Christ our eye has grown used to the dark, and we can see now.

What is death? Really, what is it? With our natural seeing, you and I see well enough what death isn't. It isn't the lively eye, the tasting tongue, the heart pounding after things, the air to breathe and smell, the water to wash and drink, the beloved to hear and embrace. In the astounding stillness of the dead, we see what death isn't: it isn't what we know! But what is it? We do not know. The mediums do not know; they press their theories. The Bible writers do not know; they sing their songs. No one knows. It is a veil, a wall with a door in it, closed.

But you, O baptized, have passed through walls before. Wasn't your marriage a wall and a door? I mean, didn't your wedding day, for all its joyful celebration, also hide the life you have actually now lived? And have there not been walls within the mansion of marriage--passages that seemed too

dark to go down. My father said to me when I was twenty-something that there is only one way to know what thirty years of marriage is like, and it takes thirty years to find out.

Divorce was a wall for some of us. What lay beyond? Some are caught in a crime, and punished by the public. It was a wall. Was there a door besides the ones the wardens watched? For some of you, your child died. It was a wall. You could tell us where, in the dark, you found a door. For some, you have lost the use of your eyes by day. Such a wall, so thick. Yet what have you seen if not a door in the darkness? For some of you, the seizure of pain that tore at your chest one sudden day brought the wall of life right to your nose. Some remember their days and their nights as a soldier in war, plastered with sights and acts unspeakable. Some remember a loved one, or a lover, dead from the wars. Some are visited by memory of long life with your beloved. His passing was a wall. Some have an infidelity, endured; some an affair hidden, or not, or some other crime against a human which the world will never see, or forgive.

They were walls, all of them. The limbo of retirement, especially those first few months. The collapse of this fair city over decades, or this fair church. You have been through this. You do not know what death in the body is, but you have been hard up against a moveless wall before. Sometimes you found no way through, and something in you that thought it needed the other side died, and did not rise. This happens. There is no grand plan. But sometimes you died there at the wall and a new eye rose from the dead, seeing differently. A power is at hand that you did not know. It is not from you, but it is in you, yours to know, yours to guard and give thanks for. "Aslan has landed," cry the glad creatures of the Narnia stories. Christ is risen! cry the lovers of the Lord. The harshest sign of our weakness; the rudest alarm on our short, loved lives; the coldest wall opposing all we'd planned can become --oh, sweet, strange gift of God--the symbol of life absolute, the solid rock, the rock that is higher than I, the firm foundation, the holy way, the only way to cross from death to life, the holy cross. Teilhard de Chardin called this gift of pure attention "the divinisation of our diminishments."

Baptism in Christ is a decision to go straight to this work. You do not pass GO, do not collect \$200, or try, try, try to leap out of earth's grave orbit with ambition and accomplishment--no, but to go straight into the heart of things, as soon as you see where the heart of things is, trusting in God's holy name. When you renew your baptism today, it is just this promise and this confidence, to be awake, fully awake now. As if you were at the bedside of your favorite, favorite one, who was letting go, and ready to let go, and you were ready too--that awake! That abounding with joy and thanksgiving at the unmakeable mystery of a minute of life, so aware with the outward eye that life affords no protection whatsoever from the assaults of disease and destruction before which all fall in this realm--but so sure that no harm comes, no, none whatsoever in the realm we see with the eye of Spirit. To see like this, you were baptized in Christ.

Renewal of your baptism is a decision to go down deeper again, to get back with the world on these terms; to spill no more time wishing our life were sweeter than it is. Just go down, following Christ, and like him, by God's grace, find out what you are made of, and what you are made for. Joyful, passionate, compassionate, confident that grace is everywhere, to do a new thing. Do you not perceive it?

