

## Wind over Water

**The Baptism of Christ. First Sunday after Epiphany, Year B 2021** *Alison Kershaw*  
*10<sup>th</sup> January, 2021*

*Genesis 1.1-5, Psalm 29, Acts 19.1-7, Mark 1.4-11*

***Through the written word and the spoken word may we know your Living Word,  
Jesus Christ our Saviour, Amen***

To begin with a frivolous story - Friday was a very hot day, but the only day that various members of our extended family were able to get together before dispersing again. So we decided to picnic under a shady tree by the river and to hire those paddle boats they have at the Rivermouth Caravan Park. We set off with two little paddlers and one larger one with a water slide. It's quite hard work, all that paddling! One by one, everyone from the 3-year-old up to the 60-year-old had a go on the slide – again! again! said the youngest after hurtling off and scrabbling to get back on. I debated with myself – being a bit timid with ladders and murky water – and almost did it, then decided against it several times, until a little voice piped up – ‘Nanna – you going on slide?’ Then the chorus – Go on Nanna!. So I did. A big splash to much hilarity – but it was so wonderful after being hot (and a bit grumpy) all day, to plunge into the cool water and then float around enjoying our beautiful karri lined river. As I say, a frivolous introduction to our theme of the waters of baptism, but it will hopefully seem more relevant towards the end of this reflection!

So to begin at the beginning: In our creation story, before the coming of light, *darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.*

In other translations the Spirit of God hovers or moves over the surface of the waters. But as someone who loves winter on our south coast, I am particularly drawn to the NRSV translation of a wind from God that *sweeps* over the waters. The original Hebrew word, *ruach*, and Greek *pneuma* are associated with wind and breath as well as spirit – no gentle breeze or quiet breath, but as we hear in Psalm 29, a mighty voice that thunders upon the waters, divides the lightning flash, and whirls the desert sands. We might think of the full blast of a southerly direct from the Antarctic flattening the coastal heath.

One of my favourite commentators on the weekly readings is Debie Thomas on the *Journey with Jesus* website. She describes the language of this week's texts as “feral ... the language of the untamed and the unpredictable ... brimming with promise and risk.” This captures the sense of powerful potential in the *formless void and darkness [covering] the face of the deep* – and the terrifying yet thrilling sense any of us might experience looking towards the unknown.

After the stormy passages of Genesis and Psalm 29, St Paul baptises his Ephesian followers with the Holy Spirit and their tongues “break loose into languages of prophecy they never knew they could speak”<sup>1</sup> - and which few others could understand. In Mark's gospel, this sense of wildness is introduced by the figure of John “the baptizer who appeared in the wilderness ... clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist,” eating “locusts and wild honey.” – likewise a figure few could understand.

Then Jesus also appears at this wilderness site. There is no prequel to this scene in Mark or John – compared to the genealogy, birth and childhood stories of Mathew and Luke. We are immediately

immersed in the action of Jesus' ministry, which begins with his submersion in the river Jordan, emerging to see "the heaven's torn apart" as the Spirit descends like a dove and God's voice names him "my Son, the Beloved." Straight after this, the Spirit, the wily wind, leads him deeper into the wilderness to experience a time of trial in the desert.

And so, From the primordial waters and cosmic beginning of Genesis, we have come to the beginning of Mark's gospel which opens (just before today's passage) with the words: *The beginning of the good news (or gospel) of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.* The echo of Genesis is not only heard in the reference to *the beginning* but is magnified by the elemental presence of water in the Jordan River, and the descent – the *sweeping* down, of the Holy Spirit. As in Genesis, something is stirring, something is getting underway, something is brewing. Just as the earth and the cycles of day and night break forth from the formless void, so Jesus – the incarnate creative force and Word of God – arises from the river waters.

Matthew's John queries whether it is appropriate for him, who offers the baptism of repentance, to baptise this holy one, whose sandle he believes he is unworthy even to carry or untie. But Mark's gospel, typically, sticks to the essentials: Jesus has come *exactly* for this – to participate, alongside all others who come to the river, in this ritual of new beginning, to be with us, to be one of us. This is not a merely symbolic ritual, but a powerful ritual, one that signifies an actual beginning in a particular place and time.

Jesus, like John, has come to this wild margin – this place outside of the city walls, and a long way from the temple – this place where anything might get underway, anything might take shape. Jesus has come to this wild place where all manner of people – whatever their sins – are invited to simply turn up. We are all invited to this muddy riverbank - to know ourselves beloved of God, to be swept up and whirled about by the wind that blows where it pleases<sup>ii</sup> - to discover our own part in the unfolding of creation.

So, where will the wind sweeping over the waters take you this year?

Is it time to go feral, is it time to explore what might come into being beyond the walls of containment – for yourself and for your community?

Is it time to wash away the dust and shake off the heat exhaustion – is it time to experience the exhilaration of cooling air currents over wet skin - is it time to take the plunge?

***May the thoughts of our hearts bring us closer to you, O Christ, Amen***

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<sup>i</sup> Debie Thomas, "Wild Water". *Journey with Jesus*, <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=2874>. Posted 3<sup>rd</sup> January 2021.

<sup>ii</sup> The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." John 3.8