



The Rev. Emily Williams Guffey

Sunday, January 9, 2022

First Sunday after the Epiphany: The Baptism of Our Lord - Year C

Readings: Isaiah 43:1-7; Psalm 29; Acts 8:14-17; Luke 3:15-17,21-22

These past several nights, I've been reading a book at bedtime with my sons called *A Whale of the Wild* by Rosanne Parry. It chronicles a family of orcas, or killer whales, living in the bays and coves off the Pacific coast of Seattle and Tacoma, Washington. Now, my sons are quick to point out that orcas are not whales but members of the dolphin family, so the title of the book, to them, is an unsettling misnomer—but if you picture perhaps Shamu from Sea World, you are picturing the gorgeous, smooth, smart, caring, black-and-white creatures of which this story tells.

I learned through the book that orcas are matrilineal; that is, the females are the natural leaders, who navigate their families through the waters, familiar and unknown, and who educate their young carefully and poignantly to notice both nourishment and detriment in the waters, and most importantly, that everything in the waters relates to everything else. The terrible “bleeding” of boats’ oil into the waters, the scraps of confusing plastic, the shaking of the sea, and the utter disruption of normalcy and familiarity. The mother admonishes her young: “Look at the water. Everything that touches the water, touches us all.”

The plot develops as a series of disruptions from daily pollution to, we infer, a tsunami, causes salmon to vanish from the waters. I learned through the book that although all orcas are, like us, at the top of the food chain, there are tribes and families of orcas who eat different creatures: some feast upon sharks, some upon seals, and the orcas in this story eat only salmon. So when the nature of their world is disrupted and the salmon cannot thrive (when the salmon cannot find the river to the mountain to lay their young), neither can the orcas find the salmon and thrive. The orcas in this story travel untold lengths, from their safe bays to interminable, dangerous stretches of ocean, searching relentlessly for

nourishment, comfort, safety, and life, often to the detriment of their own physical condition.

At one point, the narrator, one of the orcas, says she is so tired, she cannot keep swimming, yet she is so tired, she cannot *stop* swimming. As she relayed that, I recognized both that overwhelming exhaustion in the face of disruption and also, in those same conditions, that relentless perseverance. In the midst of disruption these days, how can we keep swimming? In the midst of disruption—*layers* of disruption—these days, how can we *not* keep swimming, how can we not keep singing? For to stop these would also be, we fear, to lose who we are. To stop would be to give up upon the outrageously Holy and Life-Giving in our midst. To stop would be to cut ourselves off from, to step away from, our sources of nourishment, renewal, and abundant, eternal life.

“Everything that touches the waters, touches us all.” As we must keep swimming, we remember who and whose we are, and therefore who all creatures are: belonging to and utterly, relentlessly beloved of God. Even Jesus steps into those waters to show us then and today who he is, whose he is: that he relentlessly and eternally belongs to us, to you and me, right here in these dark and disrupted and muddy, torrential waters, when we might not know or see the way; when we, like those poor orcas, might be so devoid of nourishment and sustained comfort that we both want to give up and also *can't* give up, because we belong to one another, we need one another, and we are here for and will relentlessly and always show up for one another.

Today we celebrate and mark the feast of Jesus' baptism. If there is one who did not need to be baptized into the family of God, it would be Jesus, for, one thinks, as the Son of God he might already have known he is a member of that family. Yet today, on his first public act as an adult (and I know, only two weeks ago he was a baby, but time is fluid and is moving fast), the first choice he makes is to step into the dark, stormy, muddy, uncomfortable, opaque waters with us: then and now. He steps into the River Jordan and says, “No, John, baptize me! For I belong to you today and always. I love you today and always. God's love pours out for you today and always, like the rivers in our midst, and there is nowhere that God's love cannot touch, for what touches the water, touches us all, and God loves you eternally, always, and totally. You are precious in God's sight.”

And for that, today, we give great thanks. Amen.