

**Mount Hollywood United Church of Christ – Los Angeles**

**First Sunday after Epiphany – January 10, 2016**

**Rev. Anne G. Cohen, Minister**

**Luke 3:15-17, 21-22**

**REFLECTION**

**Deep, unspeakable suffering may well be called a baptism,  
a regeneration, the initiation into a new state.**

- Ira Gershwin, American Musician (1896-1983)

**Wounded by Water**

This week I was attending a clergywomen's retreat – aboard the Crown Princess cruise ship – destinations Catalina Island and Ensenada, Mexico. Our long-awaited El Nino delivered storm made a Catalina visit untenable. So we spent the day at sea – sailing below Ensenada to avoid the storm. We were taken to San Diego for a day to make up for missing Avalon – then headed back to Ensenada. But rough seas kept us from the less than adequate pier – so we spent another day at sea before heading back to L.A.

It would have been disappointing – except the whole point of the journey was spending time with other clergywomen, sharing best practices, having “down time” after the busy Holy Day Season, refueling spiritually and physically. We were together at least 3 times a day and our goals were met with laughter, tears, notes taken, new colleagues and friends woven into the fabric of ministry. And the food was great. And the staff was hilarious. And the one massage I managed to squeak in was fabulous – even if my gal did comment that I was “crunchy” – especially around the neck and shoulders.

Surrounded and buoyed (shall we say “rocked and thrown about”) by water (and multiple rainbows) for four days had me reflecting a lot on the properties of this substance that has been lacking in California for a few years. It is ironic that Climate Change is causing glaciers to melt and storms to increase and islands to drown – while leaving some areas bone dry, begging for rain and snow. It seems to be an increase of extremes – which feels random but is somewhat predictable by those in the know. An encroaching future of ongoing extremes is what we are facing down – hoping to avert – or ignoring, depending on your political party. We, especially we Californians, are used to middle ground, paradise year ‘round, mild temperatures and a variety of foliage – and we don't “do” extremes well.

Extremes are often what turn a good thing into a hazard, a tool into a weapon. We need water to survive – but in excess – it will kill us.

Last week I was listening to NPR reports about the storms and flooding in South Carolina. They not only had the initial storms to contend with – but that was followed by dams breaking, rivers that crested days after the storms, drinking water contamination, property loss and looting, structural damage to bridges, caskets washed out of cemeteries, dangerous water rescues along with drownings and accidents.

Meteorologist Chad Myers described it this way:

The situation is the result of a weather system that funneled tropical moisture into South Carolina last week and refused to move on...

"It was a garden hose that just kept pouring ashore in one spot, and that spot was South Carolina." <http://www.cnn.com/2015/10/06/us/south-carolina-flooding/>

One man being interviewed about the losses said,

"We have been wounded by water. But we will come back and rebuild."

And there it was – the phrase that sums up so much of life and summarizes various tragedies throughout human history and mythology: "Wounded by Water."

Some enormous ancient flood led to the story of Noah and his Ark – a planet "wounded by water" – but somehow redeemed – and marked by light shattered through airborne water droplets into a bow of hope.

The River Nile has led to some amazing stories as it has flooded and receded throughout history. One story tells of waters pulling apart to let the Hebrew slaves escape – while closing in on the Egyptian military much to their dismay and destruction – the life/death power of the element in extremes.

More recently we see news reports of Syrian refugees heading for new lives across the Mediterranean Sea – too many drowning as boats capsize or go down overloaded – wounded by the very water that could save them.

And we have seen and even experienced the raw power and relentless violence of tsunamis – in the Indian Ocean in 2004 (estimated to have released the energy of 23,000 Hiroshima-type atomic bombs [http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2004/12/1227\\_041226\\_tsunami\\_2.html](http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2004/12/1227_041226_tsunami_2.html)) – and again in Japan in 2011 – most notably taking out a nuclear power plant and sending radioactive waste across land and sea.

And then – I make the leap to the ancient ritual of baptism – not the smearing of a few drops on a baby’s head – but the immersion of an adult in a large body of water – the metaphorical “drowning” of the old soul and the rebirth of a new soul – gasping for air as it rises from the depths – a spiritual tsunami, if you will. Which leads me to a phone call I received 20 years ago from a dear college friend, J.

J. is Jewish, his wife C. is Christian, and C. wanted to have their two young children baptized. J. was distraught – which I learned stemmed from his awareness of the history of forced baptisms of Jews throughout history. And the history is disturbing, to say the least. I offer you a few excerpts from **Encyclopedia Judaica**:

**There is evidence that when Christianity established itself as the dominant religion in the Roman Empire, from the fourth century, large numbers of Jews were forcibly baptized:** a detailed account is extant of the process in the island of Minorca in 418...From the time of Pope Gregory I, it was generally agreed that by its very nature baptism should be accepted willingly and not imposed by force. Various problems however still remained. **It was difficult to define what baptism by force actually implied, apart from sheer physical immersion: did it cover also "willing" acceptance of conversion under menace of death, or under a remoter anticipation of violence, or with the alternative of expulsion? Moreover, when baptism was illegally imposed, did it remain valid, or was the victim at liberty to return to his former faith unmolested? This last was a peculiarly complicated problem in the context of medieval Christianity, for if baptism was valid however conferred, the backsliding was an act of heresy, punishable by death according to the code later elaborated by the Inquisition.** In any case, the conception of forcible baptism did not apply in the case of the children or grandchildren of the unwilling converts, who were frequently taken by their parents to church for baptism as a matter of routine when they were born... **Another problem presented itself in the case of infants: at what age could they be presumed to have minds of their own and to accept baptism "willingly" and not passively, or in return for some trivial temptation?...**

**In the seventh century a wave of forced conversions spread over Europe, sparked off when in 614 Emperor Heraclius forbade the practice of Judaism in the Byzantine Empire...** it is debatable how far baptism with the alternative of exile can be strictly considered in the category of "forced conversion." ... the mob sometimes took matters into its own hands and imposed baptism on the steadfast believers who had prepared themselves for the heroic alternative. This is what seems to have happened for example at the time of the campaign of the

Byzantine emperor \*Romanus I Lecapenus in 932–36 to suppress Judaism in his dominions, when a number of Jewish leaders died rather than submit.

**... Many Jews, especially in the Rhineland, were baptized literally by force during the first and subsequent Crusades,** and the antipope Clement III protested violently against their being permitted subsequently to revert to Judaism. On the other hand, after Benedict, the leader of the Jews of York was forcibly baptized on the day of Richard I's coronation (Sept. 3, 1189), the archbishop of Canterbury declared that if he desired to return to worship the devil he should be given free choice...

**Pope Martin V categorically forbade (c. 1419) the baptism of Jewish infants below the age of 12 without the parents' permission,** to counteract an abuse which was at this time becoming widespread. But a new chapter in the history of forcible baptism began with the institution in Rome in 1543 of the House of Catechumens (Casa dei Catecumeni), speedily followed in other cities. **To justify their existence these institutions had to elaborate a system of propagating the faith, in which ultimately it became difficult to differentiate force from persuasion...**

After the Napoleonic wars, the abuse in its worst form was restricted to those areas in Italy where the popes, now driven by circumstances into reaction, still wielded temporal power. The best-known instance was the \*Mortara Case (1858) in Bologna; but it was neither the worst nor the last. **In the Russian Empire in the second quarter of the 19th century** the institution of the Cantonists – involving the virtual kidnapping for military service of Jewish male children from the age of 12, or even 8 – was introduced in the expressed hope of compelling them to abandon Judaism. **The number of forced or virtually forced baptisms which resulted probably exceeded all similar cases in other lands throughout history.** During the Nazi persecutions in Central and Eastern Europe in 1940–45, many Jewish children were baptized by well-meaning Christians in order to help in saving their lives, or when contact with their parents was lost.

[http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/judaica/ejud\\_0002\\_0003\\_0\\_01984.html](http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/judaica/ejud_0002_0003_0_01984.html)

So J's distress was understandable. Jews have been wounded by water throughout modern history in horrific and unforgivable ways. Luckily J. was married to C. and not under her rule. So a negotiation ensued – and although the kids were baptized, they also attended Hebrew school – and are flourishing young adults now with a varied spiritual/cultural background.

As Progressive Christians in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century practicing ancient rituals we need to remain aware of these historical transgressions – and continue to redefine our rituals in ways that strengthen their healing and positive power – and actively refute the abuse and damage done in the name of Jesus and G-d. We are doing this with marriage – finally. And we must do this with the rite of baptism – so that the phrase “wounded by water” is not the definition of its outcome.

And as our state struggles to restore water and snow reservoirs – to keep property damage and loss of life to a minimum in a season of storms – my prayer is that all of us can keep our heads above water – that our losses and woundings will be few – and that our care for one another may increase and spread across the land – in the knowledge that G-d wraps us in soft, dry, warm towels with loving hands and quiet murmurings in this moment and in all others – come hell or high water.

Scripture Reading for Sunday January 10, 2016 – Epiphany 1 – Year C

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### **Luke 3:15-17, 21-22**

15 As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah,

16 John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 17 His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

21 Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, 22 and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

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## Encyclopedia Judaica: Forced Baptism The Inquisition: Overview | Auto da Fé | Marrano Diaspora

The nature of the Christian sacrament of baptism created special problems when it was carried out compulsorily, which differentiated it sharply from forced conversion to Islam (see \*Anusim ; \*Jadid al-Islam ). There is evidence that when Christianity established itself as the dominant religion in the Roman Empire, from the fourth century, large numbers of Jews were forcibly baptized: a detailed account is extant of the process in the island of \*Minorca in 418. In due course, the church doctrine regarding this matter crystallized. From the time of Pope \*Gregory I, it was generally agreed that by its very nature baptism should be accepted willingly and not imposed by force. Various problems however still remained. It was difficult to define what baptism by force actually implied, apart from sheer physical immersion: did it cover also "willing" acceptance of conversion under menace of death, or under a remoter anticipation of violence, or with the alternative of expulsion? Moreover, when baptism was illegally imposed, did it remain valid, or was the victim at liberty to return to his former faith unmolested? This last was a peculiarly complicated problem in the context of medieval Christianity, for if baptism was valid however conferred, the backsliding was an act of heresy, punishable by death according to the code later elaborated by the Inquisition. In any case, the conception of forcible baptism did not apply in the case of the children or grandchildren of the unwilling converts, who were frequently taken by their parents to church for baptism as a matter of routine when they were born (see \*Conversos , \*Marranos ). Another problem presented itself in the case of infants: at what age could they be presumed to have minds of their own and to accept baptism "willingly" and not passively, or in return for some trivial temptation? On the whole, it may be said that whereas the church doctrine on the matter of forced baptism, which it theoretically condemned, remained unchanged, its attitude as regards ex post facto problems hardened through the centuries.

In the seventh century a wave of forced conversions spread over Europe, sparked off when in 614 Emperor \*Heraclius forbade the practice of Judaism in the Byzantine Empire. He is said to have summoned his fellow sovereigns to follow his example; and similar steps were taken in Gaul in 626 by King Dagobert; in Italy in 661 by the Lombard sovereign Perctarit; and in Spain from 616 under successive Visigothic rulers. In the Byzantine possessions, including southern Italy, Heraclius' example was imitated in 873–4 under \*Basil I . It is difficult however in most such cases to determine how effectively, and for how long a period, the edicts were put into execution; while on the other hand it is debatable how far baptism with the alternative of exile can be strictly considered in the category of "forced conversion." Moreover, the mob sometimes took matters into its own hands and imposed baptism on the steadfast believers who had prepared themselves for the heroic alternative. This is what seems to have happened for example at the time of the campaign of the Byzantine emperor \*Romanus I Lecapenus in 932–36 to suppress Judaism in his dominions, when a number of Jewish leaders died rather than submit.

Apart from such cases of mass baptism to escape expulsion as mentioned above, the earliest recorded instance of forced baptism in the more restricted sense seems to have been shortly after 820 in Lyons, where as part of his campaign to convert the Jews (described in his *Epistola de baptismo Judaicorum*), Archbishop \*Agobard of Lyons assembled the children who had not been sent into safety by their parents and baptized all those who to his mind appeared to show some desire for conversion. When about 938 the archbishop of Mainz asked Leo VII whether he should force the Jews of his diocese to be baptized or expel them, the pope advised on the latter course. Many Jews, especially in the Rhineland, were baptized literally by force during the first and subsequent \*Crusades, and the antipope \*Clement III protested violently against their being permitted subsequently to revert to Judaism. On the other hand, after Benedict, the leader of the Jews of York was forcibly baptized on the day of Richard I's coronation (Sept. 3, 1189), the archbishop of Canterbury declared that if he desired to return to worship the devil he should be given free choice. One of the clauses in the *Constitutio pro Judaeis* issued by successive popes (including some of those least favorable to Jews) from the beginning of the 12th down to the close of the 15th century (see \*Popes) declared categorically that no Christian should use violence to force Jews to be baptized so long as they were unwilling – though without specifying what was to happen if the illegal process actually took place. Indeed, Pope \*Innocent III, in a letter of 1201 to the archbishop of Arles, considered that a Jew who submitted to baptism under threat of force expressed a conditional willingness to accept the sacrament, with the corollary that he was not at liberty to renounce it. On the other hand, Innocent IV in 1246 categorically forbade the forced baptism of children, the same presumably applying a fortiori to adults. However, in the last decades of the 13th century the strength of the Jewish communities of the Kingdom of Naples was broken by a wave of forced baptisms, sparked off

by an apostate from Trani named Manuforte: the descendants of the victims, known as neofiti (see \*Crypto-Jews), long remained a recognizable group, suspected of secret fidelity to their ancestral religion.

The events in the Kingdom of Naples in a way set the example for the wholesale wave of compulsory baptisms which swept Spain in and after 1391. This left in its train the phenomenon of the Marranos, which continued to be a problem in the Iberian Peninsula for centuries to come. It may be noted that a very large number, perhaps the majority, of these insincere conversions, especially after the initial episodes, were not the immediate result of actual violence, but were ostensibly quasi-spontaneous in anticipation of it or as the result of moral rather than physical pressure. This did not however apply to the large-scale happenings in Portugal in 1496/97, when practically the whole of the considerable Jewish community of that country were hounded into Christianity by actual violence or were baptized forcibly notwithstanding their protests. This explains the greater tenacity of Marranism in that country in subsequent generations, and down to the present day.

Pope \*Martin V categorically forbade (c. 1419) the baptism of Jewish infants below the age of 12 without the parents' permission, to counteract an abuse which was at this time becoming widespread. But a new chapter in the history of forcible baptism began with the institution in Rome in 1543 of the House of \*Catechumens (Casa dei Catecumeni), speedily followed in other cities. To justify their existence these institutions had to elaborate a system of propagating the faith, in which ultimately it became difficult to differentiate force from persuasion. Any person who could be imagined by whatever casuistry as having shown an inclination toward Christianity, or who could be considered to be under the authority of a person already converted, could be immured in the House of Catechumens in order to "explore his intention," meanwhile being submitted to unremitting pressure. In 1635 it was decided that the baptism of the head of a household could entail, if he expressed the desire, that of all those members of his family who were under age or dependent upon him, and this was subsequently extended to cover even more remote cases. There had moreover grown up a popular superstition that any person who secured the baptism of an unbeliever was assured of paradise, this leading to a spate of such ceremonies, verging on parody in execution though not in their tragic outcome, throughout the Catholic world.

At Reggio Emilia, during the plague of 1630, a barber summarily christened after his own style 17 or 18 Jewish children in the pest-house that had been set up – the survivors being thereafter brought up as Christians. In 1747 Pope \*Benedict XIV decided that once baptized, even against the prescriptions of canon law, a child was to be considered a Christian and educated under church influence. In 1762, the son of the rabbi of Carpentras was pounced on and baptized in ditch water by a callous ruffian and thereafter lost to his family. The kidnapping for baptism of Terracina children in 1783, at the request of a remote relative, caused a veritable revolt in the Roman ghetto. Similar abuses took place in the Catholic lands of Central Europe and in Poland, where the \*Jesuits were said to be the principal culprits in the mid-18th century. After the Napoleonic wars, the abuse in its worst form was restricted to those areas in Italy where the popes, now driven by circumstances into reaction, still wielded temporal power. The best-known instance was the \*Mortara Case (1858) in Bologna; but it was neither the worst nor the last. In the Russian Empire in the second quarter of the 19th century the institution of the \*Cantonists – involving the virtual kidnapping for military service of Jewish male children from the age of 12, or even 8 – was introduced in the expressed hope of compelling them to abandon Judaism. The number of forced or virtually forced baptisms which resulted probably exceeded all similar cases in other lands throughout history. During the Nazi persecutions in Central and Eastern Europe in 1940–45, many Jewish children were baptized by well-meaning Christians in order to help in saving their lives, or when contact with their parents was lost.

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(CNN)The rain may have stopped, but South Carolina is grappling with a host of new concerns. Dam breaks. Billions of dollars in damage. And rivers that still haven't crested.

"We still have to be cautious," Gov. Nikki Haley told reporters on Tuesday afternoon. "The next 36 to 48 hours are going to be a time that we need to continue to be careful."

Haley declined to provide an estimated cost of the damage -- which she called "disturbing" -- but said state and Federal Emergency Management Agency officials were making assessments.

"It's hard to look at the loss we're going to have," she said. "This could be any amount of dollars."

More than 400,000 state residents were under a "boil water advisory" affecting about 16 water systems, said Jim Beasley, a spokesman for the S.C. Emergency Response Team.

South Carolina flooding: 'We have lost everything'

Here's the latest on the mammoth flooding in the region:

#### Dam breaks

At least 11 dams have failed in South Carolina since Saturday, the state's Emergency Management Division said. Another 35 dams were being monitored.

One failure, of the Overcreek Bridge dam in Richland County's Forest Acres, sent a torrent of floodwater raging downstream and forced evacuations near Columbia.

Officials allowed water to breach at least one other dam, also in Richland County. Officials conduct these controlled breaches "to prevent a much larger incident and a much larger amount of water escaping from the dam," emergency management spokesman Derrec Becker said.

Haley said National Guard members were helping with sandbagging operations and other mitigation efforts.

#### Death toll rises

So far, at least 17 people have died in weather-related incidents: 15 in South Carolina and two in North Carolina.

At least nine people drowned and six died in traffic accidents, South Carolina's Department of Public Safety said.

North Carolina reported two deaths from traffic accidents, in Cumberland and Jackson counties, a state emergency management spokeswoman said.

Haley said there had been 175 water rescues so far in South Carolina, and more than 800 people were temporarily housed in shelters.

More than 70 miles of Interstate 95 in the state remained closed, with five to eight bridges still awaiting structural checks, she said.

#### Caskets float away

Of all the scenes of items drifting away in the flooding, perhaps none appeared as dramatic as a casket unearthed from a cemetery.

Wayne Reeves, pastor of New Life Ministries in Summerville, was in the middle of an interview when he saw the casket float away.

So he headed into the waist-deep floodwater to retrieve it.

"That's somebody's family out there," he told CNN affiliate WCBD-TV. "That's (a) family suffering. That's their family there that popped up from under the ground. And I think it's the human thing to do."

The casket, still adorned with white and pink flowers, carried the remains of a woman buried in May, WCBD said. Another casket, that of the woman's husband, also drifted away, but Dorchester County sheriff's officials later recovered it.

As it turned out, the woman's family was watching nearby as Reeves went into the water.

"This family don't want to sit on the edge of this road all night long watching their family members bob in the water like that," the pastor told WCBD. "If that was my mom or my dad, I'd walk through hell and high water. And today it happened to be high water."

#### Apartments looted

Some Columbia residents left their homes as victims of flooding. They returned to find their homes looted.

On Sunday, an apparent dam breach led to the flooding of the Willow Creek Apartments, property manager Heather Lovell told CNN affiliate WACH-TV.

So rescue crews in boats came to the complex and helped residents to safety.

On Monday, Pamela Courts returned to her apartment and found not just flood damage but signs of theft.

"Overnight, we had a break-in, so whatever was upstairs they came and took: TVs, jewelry, everything," she told WACH.

Resident Juamaame Evins told the affiliate he was trying to stay positive despite the back-to-back hardships.

"Even though we lost everything and stuff got stolen, we can rebuild together and help each other and be each other's backbones and carry each other through this time because we need each other," he said.

#### Rivers still rising

The flooding is far from over. Rivers might not crest for another two weeks, CNN **meteorologist Chad Myers** said.

And the mayor of Columbia, who has said he believes damage "will probably be in the billions of dollars," is bracing for more trouble.

"We aren't close to being out of the woods," Mayor Steve Benjamin said Tuesday, adding that even more dams could be in danger of breaking or being topped by water. "We still expect the water to start coming down from the Upstate, coming downhill to the Midlands."

**The situation is the result of a weather system that funneled tropical moisture into South Carolina last week and refused to move on, Myers said.**

**"It was a garden hose that just kept pouring ashore in one spot, and that spot was South Carolina," he said.**

Flooding conditions could force the South Carolina Gamecocks to move Saturday's game against Louisiana State University to Baton Rouge, University of South Carolina Athletics Director Ray Tanner said. The school hopes to make a decision in the next day or two.

The University of South Carolina has canceled classes through Friday, saying that resuming normal operations for its 34,000 students and 6,000 faculty would "place an undue burden on a recovering infrastructure in the city."

CNN's Tina Burnside, Michael Pearson, Dave Alsup, Jeremy Grisham, Sam Stringer, Tony Marco and Shawn Nottingham contributed to this report.

<http://www.cnn.com/2015/10/06/us/south-carolina-flooding/>