

WINTER 2021

# EPISCOPAL



## THE DESERT

*Sermon given by The Very Rev. Randolph Marshall Hollerith, Dean of the National Cathedral, on March 5, 2017, the First Sunday in Lent*

Have you ever noticed how many *Bible* stories take place in the desert or the wilderness? Here are just a few.

- Jacob wrestles with an angel in the desert.
- Moses, in the wilderness, encounters God as a voice from a burning bush.
- Elijah is driven into the desert where he meets God and confronts his own insignificance.
- Moses and the Israelites wander around the desert for forty years where they forge a covenant with God and receive the Ten Commandments.
- John the Baptist emerges from the wilderness full of God's prophetic power heralding the coming of the messiah.
- And, in today's Gospel [Matthew 4:1-11], Jesus is driven out into the desert

*continued on page 4*

## WILD WATER

*From Journey With Jesus, an essay by Debie Thomas on the Revised Common Lectionary for Sunday, January 10, 2021 [Mark 1:4-11]*

If I asked you to describe the sacrament of baptism, what adjectives would you choose? Beautiful? Solemn? Ancient? Holy? Maybe you'd describe sculpted marble fonts, lacy christening gowns, wiggly babies, and delighted godparents. But would my question prompt you to use the word "wild?" As in: baptism is one of the wildest things Christians do? Has it ever occurred to you that this watery, two-thousand-year-old ritual of the Church is wild?

On this first Sunday after the Epiphany, the lectionary invites us to witness Jesus's baptism, and reflect on our own. But the language the Scriptures give us is not the language of churchy decorum. It is feral language. The language of the untamed and the unpredictable.

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*The Episcopal Church is blessed with an abundance of well-educated, thoughtful, spiritual and caring clergy at all levels of ministry and in all parts of the world. NAGA appreciates the opportunity to share topical messages from clergy and laity from throughout the church.*

- "The Desert" by **The Rt. Rev. Randy Hollerith**, Dean of the National Cathedral, is a sermon originally preached on the first Sunday of Lent in 2017 (March 5, 2017). His comments on the deserts in which we often find ourselves rings true today, as we enter into the season of Lent in a time of pandemic and uncertainty.
- "Wild Water" by **Debie Thomas**, a staff writer for the Journey With Jesus webzine ([www.journeywithjesus.net](http://www.journeywithjesus.net)), gives an insightful perspective on the baptism of Jesus. It will certainly give altar guild members something to meditate on as they set up for a baptism.

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## PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Dianne Walters

I wanted to tell you how much your presence and dedication to serve at the altar means to me — but especially to your churches and altar guilds. How much it means that you are there and a part of this beautiful, blessed group of holy workers. How much your friendship, prayers, hope, and kindness have meant to all of us during this difficult last year

Thank you for being the hands of Jesus to me and to each other and to your parishes.

May we always, first and foremost, remember how beloved we are by our God, each moment of every day. Let us give Him all the glory and praise, now and forever.

While Advent is a celebration and a time of great anticipation, Lent is frequently seen as a time of solemn observance and preparation for the celebration of the death and resurrection of Jesus at Easter. The Holy babe we recently celebrated now becomes the Savior of the world through his death.

“Every year on the First Sunday of Lent, rotating between the three Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the Gospel reading describes the Lord’s retreat to the desert. After his baptism in the Jordan River, the Lord goes to a place of solitude to prepare



NAGA president  
Dianne Walters

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for his public ministry. He spends time in prayer and fasting. The Lord allows himself to be tempted and for the darkness of wayward pleasure, vanity, and raw power to be exposed.”

In these ways, the Lord’s forty days in the desert is the spiritual outline for Lent. By reflecting on this sacred time in Jesus’ life, we are given a direction for our own Lenten observance. As the Lord’s human nature was prepared for his service to the Father, so a good Lent purifies and strengthens us to live out our mission more faithfully and zealously...the work that God has called us to do in our Altar Guilds.

“It is in our own private time with the Lord that He Nourishes our soul and equips us for His work.” (Kelly Brown)

As we continue to serve in our churches, take the time to recognize that the *only* thing that can quench our hunger, thirst, and desire is Jesus Christ. Then, when Easter comes, our hearts are ready to rejoice. We do have and will always have a relationship with our Lord.

You will read in other areas of this *Epistle* about how NAGA is planning for our Triennial meeting. I hope you will make a commitment to participate in our virtual presentations. It will be a wonderful opportunity to share with each other the work God has given us to do.

Blessed be. †

Order your *Epistle* in living color! Send your e-mail address to Donna Anderson at [Anglican312@msn.com](mailto:Anglican312@msn.com)

## EPISTLE OF THE NATIONAL ALTAR GUILD ASSOCIATION

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[www.nationalaltarguildassociation.org](http://www.nationalaltarguildassociation.org)

## TRIENNIAL UPDATE

### 80TH GENERAL CONVENTION POSTPONED; NAGA TO HOLD VIRTUAL 2021 BUSINESS MEETING

Albe Larsen, First Vice President



As I'm sure most of you are now aware, on November 20 the Office of the General Convention announced that the 80<sup>th</sup> General Convention of the Episcopal Church, scheduled for June 30–July 9, 2021, has been postponed to July 7–14, 2022, in Balti-

more, Maryland, allowing time for bishops to attend the Lambeth Conference of the Anglican Communion, now scheduled for July 27–August 8, 2022.

### NAGA MEETING PLANS

NAGA has already announced that it has canceled its in-person 2021 meeting. We will, however, hold a virtual meeting on July 7, 2021, from 2:00 to 5:30 pm Pacific time. We will have a short program and also conduct the essential business required by our Constitution and Bylaws.

More information will be in the next *Epistle* as on our website, so be sure to check it out: <https://www.nationalaltarguildassociation.org/>. At that time you will also find registration information. It will be necessary to register in order to participate in the program and the elections. Those who have registered will be sent a Zoom meeting link.

In 2022, NAGA will be led by a new team of officers and it will be up to the new first vice president to plan the program for a 2022 in-person meeting should the NAGA board decide to hold such a meeting. What is certain is that NAGA will provide the altar guild for the 2022 General Convention, even if that means asking local altar guild members and members of the board to be in attendance.

I certainly hope that we will see you on-line for our brief summer meeting and ask you to be patient and supportive of new officers as they look ahead to 2022.

With New Year blessings. †

## THE DESERT

*continued from page 1*

for 40 days to undergo a series of temptations.

Throughout the *Bible* the desert is always a place of apparent contradictions. It is, most of the time, a dry and arid place. It is bare and forbidding and hostile. It is a place where people go hungry; where bandits wait; where demons and wild animals are encountered. It is a place where people are often left exposed and unprotected. Yet, at the same time, the wilderness is also a place where God's people go to find refuge and, more importantly, where God can be encountered. Throughout the *Bible* the desert is understood as a strange place where people face the very worst and sometimes find the very best; where they encounter demons, confront themselves, and often discover God.

Frederick Buechner once said, "The *Bible* is not first of all a book of moral truth.... It (is) instead a book of truth about the way life is." I think he is right. The *Bible* tells us about who God is and how life is. In this sense, the desert plays such a prominent role in scripture because, let's face it, life is full of deserts.

Your life, my life, all our lives, are punctuated by our own times in the wilderness, our own desert experiences. These are the times when we feel lost and alone, when life feels barren and dry and we cannot seem to find our way. These are the times when we struggle with loss, sickness, heartbreak and worry. If the mountain-top experiences in the *Bible* are metaphors for all that goes right in our lives, then the desert stories are metaphors for all those times when life goes bust, when we are at our lowest, when we wonder how we will ever make it through.

I know there are those of you out there who are, at this very moment, right smack in the middle of your own desert experi-

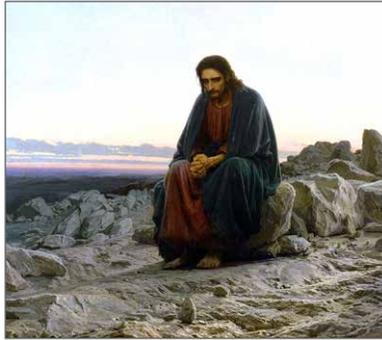
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## THE DESERT

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ence. You have a child who is ill, you are in the midst of a long battle with an illness, your job is coming to an end and you don't know where the next job will come from, your marriage is unhappy in spite of how much you love each other, you are struggling with depression that won't loosen its grip, you find yourself alone at a point in your life you never imagined possible, you are watching your spouse fade away and you feel trapped by the realities of ageing. Life is never a question of "if" we will find ourselves in the desert. It is only a question of "when" will we find ourselves there.

But if scripture tells us how life is, then we can take comfort in the fact that even in



*Throughout the Bible the desert is understood as a strange place where people face the very worst and sometimes find the very best*

the wilderness God is with us.

- In the wilderness, Jacob wrestled with his own ego, his own selfishness, his own destructive pride, but God stayed with him and at the end of that experience he emerged as a new man, a man named Israel who would become the father of a great people.
- The Israelites wandered in the desert for four decades fighting among themselves, falling prey to false idols, distrusting the God who rescued them from Egypt, and pretty much driving Moses crazy. But God cared for them every step of the way — providing water from a rock when they were thirsty and manna from heaven when they were starving. God never left them and when the desert came to an end, they came into their own as a people and as a nation.
- In our lesson for today, no sooner does

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# ST. STEPHEN'S: MOTHER CHURCH IN THE SAN LUIS OBISPO DEANERY, DIOCESE OF EL CAMINO REAL

*Researched and written by Kathleen Pennington  
Edited by The Rev. Ian Delinger, Rector of Saint Stephen's*

In July 1849 Trinity Church, San Francisco, was organized as a parish; thus becoming the first Episcopal church in California. A little later, Grace Church, also in San Francisco, became the second Episcopal church in California. In 1853 the General Convention appointed California a missionary district, with Dr. William Ingraham Kip as bishop. In 1861 construction began on a third church in San Francisco, a \$70,000 Gothic-style structure which became known as Grace Cathedral. In 1867 Bishop Kip gave canonical consent to the organization of the Parish of St. Stephen's Episcopal Church in San Luis Obispo, in the Diocese of California.

As California continued to grow, more Episcopal churches were established throughout the state and The Diocese of California became too large. In 1874 the missionary District of Northern California was established, which later became the Diocese of Northern California. In 1895 the Diocese of Los Angeles was formed. In 1910 the Missionary District of San Joaquin was established. In 1980 the Diocese of El Camino Real was established. The San Luis Obispo

The oldest church in continuous operation in a Diocese or Province is considered to be the "Mother Church" for that geographical region. This issue features an article about St. Stephen's, San Luis Obispo, California (Province VIII, Diocese of California). Thanks to Sarah Chesebro for obtaining this article.

*A challenge to our readers:* Who will be next to submit an article and pictures of a "mother church" in their diocese or province? If you know of a church that should be featured but are not sure how to write an article, contact your Province Representative (see page 2) for assistance. *Epistle* deadlines and instructions for submitting articles are found on page 3.



Deanery, within the Diocese of El Camino Real, encompasses the cities of San Luis Obispo, Arroyo Grande, Cambria, Los Osos, Morro Bay, Nipomo and Paso Robles. St. Stephen's is the oldest and central church of the deanery and was the mother church for four of the others. It is only 18 years younger than the oldest Episcopal church in the entire state of California.

In the 1860's St. Stephen's services were held in homes and at the Odd Fellows Hall until a church building could be constructed. The "Carpenter Gothic" building was finished in 1873 at a cost of \$3,000 on a site purchased for \$10 in gold coins. The pine beams were obtained from Cambria trees and the frame was covered with native redwood. Although the building has been revised and added to over the years, it retains the lines and feel of the original.

California was rough territory when St. Stephen's started, and clergymen sometimes didn't stay long. In its first 100 years St. Stephen's was served by over thirty clergymen, a third of whom stayed less than one year. In spite of these handicaps, St. Stephen's did establish off-spring — the churches of Arroyo Grande, Morro Bay and Atascadero. St. Stephen's also "mothered" a mission church, Christ Episcopal Church in Parkfield.

Unfortunately that church was so badly damaged in the 1966 earthquake that it was

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## MOTHER CHURCH

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condemned for public use. The altar wasn't damaged; the congregation gave it to St. Stephen's and it is still in use in the Parish hall.

In the early dark morning hours of January 25, 1970, when the church was 96-years old, St. Stephen's was gutted by fire. The walls remained standing and most of the stained glass windows were intact. Although the building was condemned, the church survived. It took two years to rebuild and repair at a cost of \$83,123, which was twenty-four times the original cost of the church in 1873.

St. Stephen's continues to serve God and the San Luis Obispo community. While we are proud of our history as the second oldest Christian community in this mission town, we minister in what is now a thriving and bustling cosmopolitan oasis on the Central Coast, endeavoring to live out our mission to open our hearts to God and to share Christ's unconditional love with the world. We do this by following three pathways — Welcoming, Worshiping and Working — for, among, and with the Good People of San Luis Obispo. †



## THE DESERT

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Jesus receive his baptism from John and hear God proclaim: "This is my Son, the Beloved," then he too is driven out into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan. It is his time of trial. It is his time to see if he can actually be the Beloved or if he will fall prey to temptations of comfort and power. But throughout those long days and nights, Jesus is never alone. When the forty days are over the angels are there, waiting for him, and he emerges from the desert ready to begin his ministry.

When life leads us into the wilderness there are a couple of things we need to remember.

- First, when you are in the wilderness it is easy to stand there and look out to the horizon and see only an endless wasteland of dry and parched ground. When you are in the desert it is easy to think that the desert never ends, that this hard time in your life will never end. But scripture teaches us that every desert has a beginning and an ending. It does not, it will not, go on forever. The desert always gives way to something new and something better. That is a truth deeply ingrained in the Judeo-Christian experience — the desert always ends.
- Second, when you find yourself in the wilderness, the trick is not to look too far ahead, but to keep your heart and your eyes focused on moving forward one step at a time. Just keep going. The temptation is to give up hope or to place your hope in something that can never really save you. That was Satan's trick with Jesus. All three temptations were the Devil's attempts to get Jesus to abandon his faith in God at a time when Jesus could have easily believed

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## LITURGICAL RESOURCES PART III

# CHIPMUNK ATTACKS FRONTAL

*Jane Mercer, Church of St. John on the Mountain, Bernardsville, New Jersey*

After the 8 a.m. service on November 21, 2020, the Eucharistic Minister noticed a hole in the corner of the green frontal. It was later determined that a chipmunk had chewed the silk at the edge of the altar. Since the frontal was to be switched to white for Christ the King the following Sunday, the green frontal was put aside and photos taken of the damage.

What to do? First call was to Bryan Marshall of J. Wippell & Co. Ltd. to see if it was possible to get a swatch of the green Tudor Rose silk to use in a repair. This green set had been purchased in 1965 when the church was built. Fortunately, he located a piece — “the last of that fabric.”

The next contact was to Donna Anderson (NAGA Board Member) who put us in touch with Sherry Garman (Diocese of Olympia). The emailed photo and explanation of our issue brought a quick reply with a detailed approach how to tackle a repair. It sounded just right, but very complicated for the average needle-plier.



*(Top) Barbara Nichols takes frontal home  
(Bottom) Detail of Repair, showing how well the pattern was marched*

We called Barbara Nichols, the Directress of the Ecclesiastical Vestment & Embroidery Guild (EV&EG) in the Diocese of New Jersey. She was an attendee at the Austin Triennial. Her small team in the Diocese meets monthly at St. Paul’s Church in Westfield, New Jersey, to teach and learn ecclesiastical embroidery and create new or repair existing vestments and paraments as requested by individuals or parishes. To contact Barbara about a vestment or parament need, call 908-420-9679.

Barbara immediately agreed to come to St. John on the Mountain to look at the damage and see what might be done. After a short meeting to figure out an approach, she offered to do the work for us. Barbara took the frontal with her that day to work the repair on her dining room table. Within a week she had skillfully repaired the hole with a perfect pattern match and reinforced backing needed at the corner position.

On the Second Sunday after Epiphany (January 17, 2021) our newly repaired green frontal returned to the altar. With thanks and amazement at the responsiveness and knowledge of embroiderers. Help is indeed out there! †

## ANTI-VIOLENCE STOLES

*Barbara Nichols*

Orange stoles were first seen at the General Convention in Austin in support of anti-violent behavior. Bishop Stokes of the Diocese of New Jersey bought many to give to priests within the Diocese. Others, including deacons who did not receive one, asked the Ecclesiastical Vestment & Embroidery Guild (EV&EG) to make them.

The Guild had intended to sell them at their Diocesan Convention but, thanks to COVID-19, the meeting went virtual. The Guild made various sizes for priests and permanent deacons. Their stock of stoles is currently housed in the Guild’s closet at St. Paul’s in Westfield, New Jersey. †



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# ALTAR GUILD NEWS

## PROVINCE IV

Judy Henderson, Holy Trinity, Melbourne

Last year we had a major renovation of our historic chapel that includes a wide porch, perfect for Christmas decorating. We decorated the porch last year, and we plan to continue that tradition this year with a tree and other decorations. We use outdoor-friendly decorations — pinecones, shells, ribbons, etc. — on the chapel tree, plus lights, poinsettias, and greenery.

This year, for our drive-through Eucharist on Christmas Eve, we directed the drive-through line in front of the chapel so all who participate can see the beautiful decorations, including a manger scene. We also decorated our memorial garden, adjacent to the chapel.

## WAFERS WITH INTINCTED WINE

Holy Trinity, Melbourne continues to provide wafers with an intinction of wine on each wafer. Using rubber gloves and wearing masks, altar guild members carefully spread out the wafers, add the wine, allow them to dry about an hour, and bag each wafer individually in sealable bags.

The bags with wafers are blessed during in-person worship, and the bagged wafers are used for all who come forward for Eucharist at each in-person service and all who drive up in the drive-through Eucharist line.

## DRESSING THE ALTAR

Every church has an altar, the most sacred object of the church. Altars may be wooden or stone and may be free-standing or attached to a wall, though the preference today is that the altar be free-standing so the priest may stand behind the altar and face the congregation.

1. The altar is dressed, beginning with a cerecloth (waxed linen) or a plain heavy linen that protects the altar from moisture.

2. Next, the frontal is added. The frontal consists of a silk or linen material that hangs over the front of the altar and reflects the color of the season. A linen piece is generally attached to the frontal to be positioned on the top of the cerecloth.

3. A superfrontal may be used over the frontal or in place of a frontal; the superfrontal is a short frontal, hanging down 10 to 16 inches from the top of the altar.

*Order of altar coverings:  
Cerecloth or plain heavy linen  
Frontal (or superfrontal)  
Plastic and undercover  
Fair linen  
Dust cover (between services  
or when altar is not in use*

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### Life's Journey.

For each of us life is a journey.  
Birth is the beginning of the journey,  
And death is not the end but the destination.  
It is a journey that takes you from youth to age,  
From innocence to awareness,  
From foolishness to wisdom,  
From weakness to strength and often back again,  
From loneliness to friendship,  
From pain to compassion  
From fear to faith,  
From defeat to victory and victory to defeat,  
Until, looking backward or ahead,  
We see that victory does not lie  
at some high point along the way,  
But in having made the journey,  
stage by stage.

*Adapted from an old Hebrew Prayer.*

"What lies behind us  
and what lies before  
us are tiny matters  
compared to what  
lies within us."  
Ralph Waldo Emerson



## A NEW YEAR'S POEM

*Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809-1892)*

Ring out, wild bells, to the wild sky,  
The flying cloud, the frosty light;  
The year is dying in the night;  
Ring out, wild bells, and let him die.  
Ring out the old, ring in the new,  
Ring, happy bells, across the snow;  
The year is going, let him go;  
Ring out the false, ring in the true.  
Ring out the grief that saps the mind,  
For those that here we see no more;  
Ring out the feud of rich and poor,  
Ring in redress to all mankind.  
Ring out a slowly dying cause,  
And ancient forms of party strife;  
Ring in the nobler modes of life,  
With sweeter manners, purer laws.  
Ring out the want, the care, the sin,  
The faithless coldness of the times;  
Ring out, ring out my mournful rimes  
But ring the fuller minstrel in.  
Ring out false pride in place and blood,  
The civic slander and the spite;  
Ring in the love of truth and right,  
Ring in the common love of good.  
Ring out old shapes of foul disease;  
Ring out the narrowing lust of gold;  
Ring out the thousand wars of old,  
Ring in the thousand years of peace.  
Ring in the valiant man and free,  
The larger heart, the kindlier hand;  
Ring out the darkness of the land,  
Ring in the Christ that is to be.

*Featured in [journeywithjesus.net](http://journeywithjesus.net) webzine on 12/27/2020*

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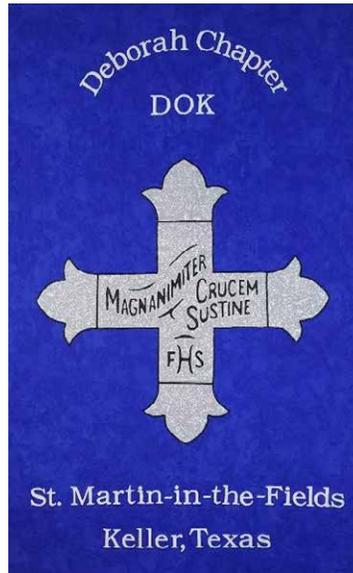
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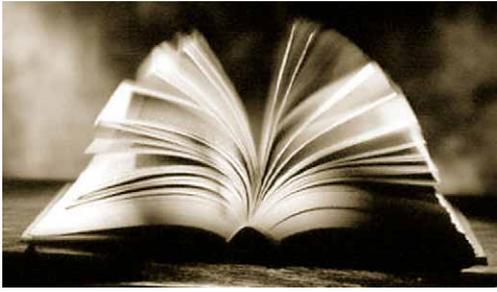


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### AG NEWS

*continued from page 10*

4. On top of the frontal (or superfrontal), a lightweight piece of plastic may be used with a cloth undercover on top of the plastic to help protect the linen portion of the frontal.
5. Finally, the white fair linen cloth is placed on top of the undercover.
6. Between services or when the altar is not in use, a dust cover should be used to protect the fair linen. †



## THE BOOK SHELF

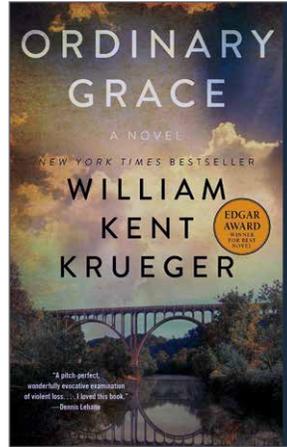
Reviewed by Sally Sartain Jane, St. Hilary's Episcopal Church, Fort Myers, Florida

### ORDINARY GRACE

William Kent Krueger

Remember Scout in *To Kill a Mockingbird*? Remember all the wise young people in *Stand By Me*? Mr. Krueger has created another award-winning thought-provoking mystery that introduces Frank (13) and Jake (11) and their small town that grapples with secrets and deaths one long summer.

The Drum family is complicated. Nathan and Ruth were changed by World War II. Instead of finishing law school, Nathan



came home to attend seminary and become a minister. Ruth and her family somewhat adapted, but uncomfortably. Musically talented Ruth and daughter Ariel provided wonderful music on Sundays and at ceremonies, but Ruth smoked and occasionally drank.

The summer of 1961 shattered the town and several families. Five people died mysteriously. Frank and Jake figured it out, matured quickly, and paid the price of wisdom.

The story is gripping, but Krueger's writing alone makes this a worthy read.

"I watched the storm as I might have watched the approach and passing of a fierce and beautiful animal," is one example. Another: "There are some things you cannot run from...You can leave everything behind except who you are." Finally: "The dead are never far from us. They're in our hearts and on our minds and in the end all that separates us from them is a single breath, and final puff of air."

Spoiler alert: *Ordinary Grace* includes a miracle. †

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Marcia Himes, Treasurer

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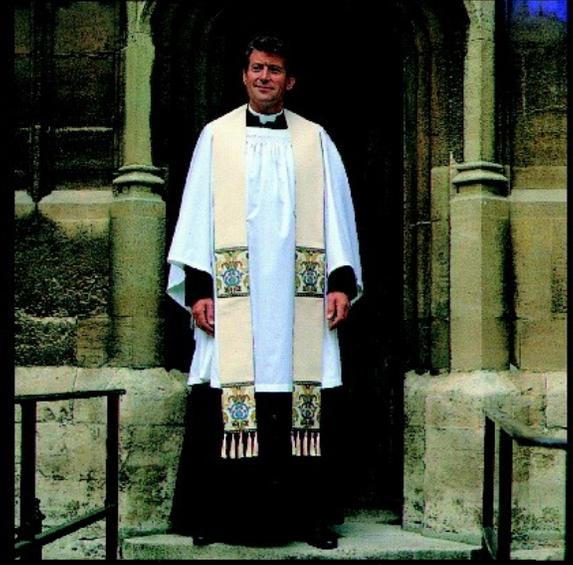
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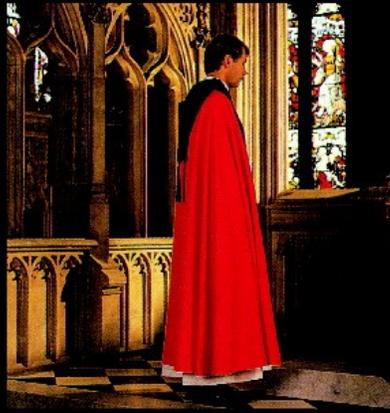
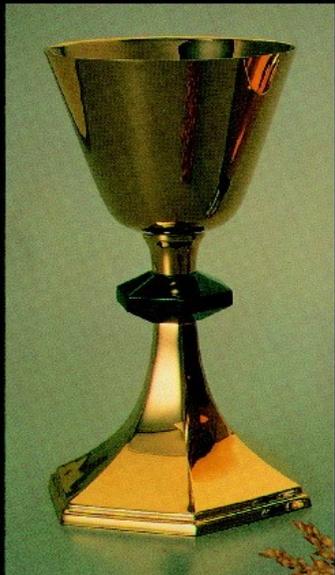


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# WIPPELL'S

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## WILD WATER

*continued from page 1*

Our reading from Genesis describes a formless void and a deep, impenetrable darkness. It is not a polished basin of warm water the Spirit hovers over; it is an elemental, undifferentiated “face,” brimming with promise and risk. Our Psalm, meanwhile, conjures a God of storms, flames, and “mighty waters.” This God “thunders,” “causes the oaks to whirl,” and “shakes the wilderness.” In our reading from the New Testament, St. Paul baptizes a group of Ephesian disciples, causing their tongues to break loose into languages of prophecy they never knew they could speak. And in our Gospel from St. Mark, we read that when John baptized Jesus, the heavens were visibly “torn apart,” the Spirit dove-bombed out of the skies, and the very voice of God filled the desert air.

What does this mean? Why frame Jesus’s baptism — and, by extension, our own — in the language of wildness? Here are a few reasons:

There is wildness at the margins. Mark’s Gospel makes a point of telling us that John the Baptizer appeared “in the wilderness.” That is to say, he did not conduct his ministry in Jerusalem, at the temple, in the center of his people’s religious life. Instead, he drew the crowds away from the center, asking them to repent and receive baptism in the wilderness. Astonishingly, the crowds responded to his irreverent invitation: “People from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem” went out to meet John at the Jordan River. Think about this for a moment. John the camel-wearing, locust-eating prophet emptied the city.

Removed as we are from the cultural context of first century Palestine, it is easy for us to miss the significance of the mass exodus St. Mark describes. Jerusalem was the beating heart of Israel’s spiritual life. The temple was

*I am not suggesting that genuine faith always necessitates a movement away from the institutions we cherish. But isn't it often the case that the most compelling and daring calls for justice, truth-telling, peacemaking, and healing come to us, not from the institutionalized “inside,” but from the outside? Not from the official places, but from the marginal ones?*

the place to go to meet God, and rituals of purification by water were already a feature of Jewish devotional life. But something in John’s message compelled a whole population to leave their religious epicenter for spiritual nourishment and rebirth. Something authentic and fresh resonated for them in the movement away from the center of institutionalized dogma and authority. Whatever God was about to do necessitated a decentering. A disruption. A shift away from business as usual.

Does that “something” resonate for us as well? I am not suggesting that genuine faith always necessitates a movement away from the institutions we cherish. But isn’t it often the case that the most compelling and daring calls for justice, truth-telling, peacemaking, and healing come to us, not from the institutionalized “inside,” but from the outside? Not from the official places, but from the marginal ones? Haven’t we seen countless “centers” in our cultural, political, and religious lives lose their prophetic edges to complacency, corruption, stodginess, or fear? Haven’t we heard new voices speaking to us from wild and unexpected places, calling us to repentance and renewal?

Jesus was baptized in a wild place. Far away from the safe, the routine, and the familiar. If we want to follow him in our own baptisms, we, too, need to listen to voices crying out in the desert. We, too, need to leave the “cities” that make up our comfort zones. We, too, need to allow a good but wild God to disrupt us.

There is wildness in solidarity: According to Christian historian John Dominic Crossan, Jesus’s baptism was an “acute embarrassment” for the early Church. This is evident in the unease we detect in all four Gospel accounts. Mark keeps his version of the story as spare as possible. Matthew insists that John tried hard to dissuade Jesus from receiving the rite he offered the crowds. Luke

*continued on page 15*

## WILD WATER

*continued from page 14*

skips the identity of the Baptizer altogether. And the fourth Gospel doesn't even mention Jesus' baptism.

Apparently, what scandalized the Gospel writers was Jesus' decision to receive a baptism of repentance. Repentance for what? Wasn't the Son of God perfect? Sinless? Holy? What was the Messiah doing in the murky water of the Jordan River, aligning himself with the great unwashed? And why did God choose that sordid moment to tear the cosmos apart and call Jesus "beloved?"

Why, indeed? Why did the Son of the Most High get in line for baptism behind the tax collectors and sinners — the very folks who could sully his reputation? Why didn't he care about appearances? About disgrace? About guilt by association? Aren't God's children supposed to care about such things?

Apparently not, because Jesus' first public act was an act of radical solidarity. An act of stepping into intimate, inextricable, "shameful" relationship with sinful humanity. Instead of holding himself apart, instead of protecting his own purity, Jesus stepped into the same water we stand in, and wedded his reputation and his destiny to ours.

In his baptism, Jesus entered into the full, unwieldy messiness of the human family. In one watery act, he stepped into the whole Story of God's work on earth, and allowed that story to resonate, deepen, and find completion. In our baptisms, we vow to do the same. In the wild waters of our immersion, we join our beings to all beings, and throw our lot in with theirs. If this doesn't startle you, you need to pay closer attention.

To embrace Christ's baptism story is to embrace the wild truth that we are united, interdependent, connected, one. Whether we like it or not, the bond God seals by water and by the Spirit is truer and deeper than

## WE CHOOSE WHAT WE'LL RISK

THERE IS NO PROTECTION AGAINST ADVERSITY

THERE ARE NO GUARANTEES

WHAT YOU HAVE IS YOUR SELF, MADE

IN THE IMAGE OF SOMETHING VERY GREAT.

YOU HAVE YOUR SELF, AND THE PARTICULAR

CIRCUMSTANCES OF YOUR LIFE.

WHAT YOU CREATE

IS YOUR MEASURE OF LOVE.

WHAT YOU CREATE

IS UP TO YOU.

WE CHOOSE WHAT WE'LL RISK.

BUT ONLY THE FREEDOM THAT DRIVES THE RISK

MATTERS.

*Paula D'Arcy, A New Set of Eyes, Crossroad Publishing (2002)*

all others. It makes a stronger claim on our lives and loyalties than all prior claims of race, gender, tribe, nationality, politics, preference, or affinity. It asks that we bear all the risks of belonging. The risk that others might hurt us. The risk that others will change. The risk that they will change us.

Is it easy to honor such a staggering claim? No. Do we have a choice? No. Are we (the Church) known for doing this well? No. But that is not because God's claim is optional; it is because we have tamed baptism, turning it into something merely ritualistic and decorative. But the truth is, we can't have the water without the kinship. We can't receive the sacrament without surrendering our separateness. It doesn't matter one bit if we're "non-joiners" by temperament. Our baptism is our belonging.

*continued on page 16*

## WILD WATER

*continued from page 15*

There is wildness in God's geography: In a beautiful essay entitled, "Holy Water Everywhere," Christian Century editor, Steve Thorngate, describes baptism as a sacrament that straddles the "locative" and the "liberative." We are baptized locally, in a specific time and place, into the spiritual life of a particular parish or faith community. This aspect of baptism pushes against all attempts to treat Christianity as a cerebral, otherworldly abstraction. Baptism insists that "this place, here — this ground, this water — is holy."

At the same time, baptism liberates us into the global, the universal, and the timeless. The water we step into at baptism is connected to all bodies of water, everywhere, which means we cannot contain or constrict the sacred within any walls of denomination, dogma, liturgy, or practice.

Baptism, Thorngate writes, creates its own map: "It is not a local map that stresses boundaries and the dangerous unknown that lies beyond them; nor is it a globe that erases everything particular, small, and nearby."

This is why our lectionary this week juxtaposes the Creation story, a Psalm of God's overwhelming power over nature, and a story of the early church, with Jesus' baptism. When Jesus consents to the waters of the Jordan River, he consents to both the locative and the liberative, to both the particular and the universal. He enters into a holy geography that includes the unformed waters of Creation; the storied landscapes of his poet-ancestor, David; and every font, pool, lake, river, and ocean his followers — from St. Paul onwards — immerse themselves in after Jesus' time on earth is over. The Spirit who hovered over the unformed earth at the dawn of Creation is the same Spirit who hovers over us today. The Lord who thundered over the mighty waters during King David's

reign is the same God who "sits enthroned" now. The God who loosened the tongues of first-century believers to speak truth to power is the same God who raises up prophets today. In other words, the geography of baptism is vast. It spans all times and all worlds. It is far too large and wild a thing for us to tame or control.

During this brief liturgical season between Christmas and Lent, we are invited to leave miraculous births and angel choirs behind, and seek the love, majesty, and power of God in seemingly mundane things. Rivers. Voices. Doves. Clouds. Holy hands covering ours, lowering us into the water of repentance and new life. In the Gospel stories we will read during this season, God will part the curtain for brief, shimmering moments, allowing us to look beneath and beyond the ordinary surfaces of our lives, and catch glimpses of the wild and the extraordinary. This, of course, is another way of describing the sacrament of baptism itself: it is a place and a moment where the "extraordinary" of God's grace blesses the ordinary water we stand in.

May we, during this season and always, join Jesus as he stands in line at the water's edge, willing to immerse himself in shame and scandal so that all the wild wonder of God might be ours to cherish. May we, too, hear the delighted Voice that tells us who we are and whose we are in the sacrament of baptism. Even in the wild, untameable water we stand in, may we know ourselves as God's Beloved. †



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*Her essays have appeared in the Kenyon Review, River Teeth: A Journal of Nonfiction Narrative, and Slate Magazine.*

*She lives in the San Francisco Bay Area with her family. You can reach her at [debie.thomas1@gmail.com](mailto:debie.thomas1@gmail.com)*

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## THE DESERT

*continued from page 7*

that God had abandoned him.

- Third, look for God there with you in the desert. God is present in the grace that surrounds you even when life is at its most difficult. Now, what is grace? Grace is the free, unearned, unasked for Love of God that surrounds you in this life and which most of us often fail to see or take for granted. God is with you in the grace of the caring friend, the doctor who goes the extra mile, the coworker who offers you support, the neighbor who brings the casserole, the spouse who stands by you through thick and thin, the community that prays for you and welcomes you as one of their own. Remember, no matter what happens in this life there is always grace. If you can focus on the grace, like bread crumbs on a poorly marked trail, then you will find your way through the desert.

Life's deserts are never easy, they are never where we want to be. But they come to us all and they can be times of rich growth and insight. They can be the times when we encounter God's love and presence most profoundly in our lives.

This Lent, I invite you to look back at the desert journeys in your own life and ask yourself — where was God during this time for me? Where did I experience God's grace? What did I learn in the desert and where did I most often stray away from God? When life is dry and barren what are the temptations to which I am most vulnerable? Then, during these forty days as we travel with Jesus through his own desert experience, remember that you too are God's beloved and come what may, God will never let you go.

Amen. †

## LENT

*Christina Georgina Rossetti*

IT IS GOOD TO BE LAST NOT FIRST,  
PENDING THE PRESENT DISTRESS;  
IT IS GOOD TO HUNGER AND THIRST,  
SO IT BE FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS.  
IT IS GOOD TO SPEND AND BE SPENT,  
IT IS GOOD TO WATCH AND TO PRAY:  
LIFE AND DEATH MAKE A GOODLY LENT  
SO IT LEADS US TO EASTER DAY.



*The Very Rev. Randolph "Randy" Marshall Hollerith was named the 11th Dean of Washington National Cathedral in 2016 after serving as rector of St. James's Episcopal Church in Richmond, Va., for 16 years. He holds degrees from Denison University and Yale Divinity School.*

*In his tenure at the Cathedral, Dean Hollerith has led the creation of a five-year strategic plan, raised \$23 million for the renovation of the Cathedral College, overseen budget growth from \$14 million to \$18 million, and reoriented the institution toward radical welcome and hospitality, with a particular focus on racial reconciliation and outreach to the nation's veterans. He is also overseeing the renovation of the old College of Preachers as the new Virginia Mae Center, which will be the primary venue for the Cathedral College of Faith & Culture, the Cathedral's public programming arm.*

*Under his leadership, the Cathedral has seen growing attendance at worship, three years of budget surpluses and significant progress in ongoing repairs from the 2011 earthquake. In 2018, Dean Hollerith was named one of 21 Washingtonians to watch in the Washington City Paper's annual People Issue.*

*Dean Hollerith is married to the Rev. Melissa Hollerith and is the proud father of two adult children. The Holleriths live on the Cathedral Close.*

*Hollerith, who grew up in nearby Alexandria, Va., often visited the Cathedral as a boy during its construction and his family has long-standing ties to the institution. His great grandmother was present in 1907 when the foundation stone was laid by President Theodore Roosevelt, and also in 1932 for the first worship service in the fully completed Great Choir.*

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INTO A STATUE THAT WILL BE CONSIDERED A MASTERPIECE, BUT  
THE CARVER SEES WHAT CAN BE DONE WITH IT.

SO MANY ... DO NOT UNDERSTAND THAT GOD CAN MOLD THEM  
INTO SAINTS, UNTIL THEY PUT THEMSELVES INTO THE HANDS OF  
THAT ALMIGHTY ARTISAN.

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