

## 246 Atmospheric River

*(Note: This blog entry is based on the text "Atmospheric River", originally shared on January 4, 2022. It was the 246<sup>th</sup> video for our YouTube Channel, Streams of Living Water (<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCB7KnYS1bpHKaL2OseQWCnw>), co-produced with my wife, Rev. Sally Welch.)*

Rain has come to Southern California. How? The answer gives us insight into the reason for the Baptism of Jesus as well as for the gift of our own. Today, we're going to see how.

Southern California is getting some much-needed rain after years of drought and the water rationing that resulted.

It's a welcome change.

Our lawn became a field of my garden's most successful edible crop: dandelions. We put water pails in our shower to collect the side streams for use outside. We have every available container turned towards the skies to collect their liquid bounty.

But not everything about the rain is positive.

I saw a short video once that began in an airy office space bustling-full of busy people. A monitor hung high on a wall streaming with the daily news. Suddenly the screen went red. The words "Storm Watch" appeared! A new announcer came on air and breathlessly warned that a half-inch of rain was coming to Southern California!

Workers began to panic, running around aimlessly, hoarding food from the office snack cupboard, screaming and cowering in fear. Soon, however, the announcer held his hand to his ear and said, "Wait! No. It's going to miss us. The storm is going to miss us!"

Everyone sighed and nervously went back to their desks, looking around relieved and getting back to work when a violent earthquake shook the building. Stuff went flying and people typed with one hand and held their computers down with the other. But they went on working. Then the shaking stopped, and people looked around at each other, shrugged, laughed, and turned their faces back to their computers.

That's life in Southern California.

It also tells us something about Baptism.

This coming Sunday is the first Sunday after the day of the Epiphany. The Day of the Epiphany of our Lord is fixed at January 6<sup>th</sup> every year. In some places around the world, it is just as big a holiday as Christmas. In some places it is Christmas. It marks the event when the wisemen from the East came to worship Jesus. It is the first manifestation of Jesus to the gentiles, the non-Jews.

Epiphany means "manifestation". The season of Epiphany is a season of reflection on what the birth of Jesus means, and the first Sunday after the day of the Epiphany of Our Lord marks the day at the beginning of Jesus manifestation to the world, at the start of his public ministry when Jesus was baptized. It is the Sunday of the Baptism of Our Lord.

Here's how Matthew describes it in **Matthew 3:13-17**,

*13 Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. 14 John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" 15 But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. 16 And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. 17 And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."*

Have you ever watched or read a cartoon where a character is facing some dilemma? They think about it. Hard. Then what happens? A burning light bulb appears over their head! What was not clear is now seen clearly. Light has shined in the darkness. They have had an epiphany!

Something longed-for has become real, it has become manifest. How does that manifestation happen here?

The answer to that question can come from the "atmospheric river."

The recent rain we have had, the rain we are having now, and the rain we are expected to receive over the next week, at least, is unexpected.

We were supposed to have a third year of a La Nina weather system based on rotating ocean temperatures, bringing another year of drought. But, though we're not out of the woods yet (we had a ton of rain in December of 2021 and then nothing), we have been experiencing an atmospheric river.

An atmospheric river is where piles of clouds move up from the tropics and bring rain. In our case it has been a blessing.

The people of God had been waiting for the promised Messiah (the anointed one, the chosen) for 1,000 years and received nothing but some encouragement from the prophets for the first 700 years. Then, there was no word from God to the prophets for the final 300 years.

Then John the Baptist shows up with a word from the Lord. The Messiah was close by!

And then, the Messiah shows up where John was baptizing people **in the river** Jordan and requests baptism.

What? Why does Jesus need to be baptized? What is he doing there? John says that he is the one who should be seeking baptism, from Jesus!

Jesus says that John should baptize him, "for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness."

John immediately consents.

What is Jesus talking about? He is the Messiah, the Son of God, fully God and fully human being? He lived a sinless life. Why does he need to be baptized?

The answer is, "He doesn't." At all.

Jesus seeks to be baptized as an example, as a great unnecessary. Like dying on the cross, it is a gift of grace.

Jesus is baptized to show us who He is. He is doing something physical to show us the lengths he will go to make a way for us to be reconciled to God.

And then God is present in all three persons, One God, in the atmosphere of heavenly glory.

Jesus is being baptized, the Holy Spirit is "descending like a dove and alighting on him," and the Father speaks from heaven, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

It's the atmospheric river at Jesus' baptism, coming unexpectedly and bringing the blessing of the manifestation of God. God with us.

What is this baptism that Jesus extravagantly models for us?

Martin Luther, the 16<sup>th</sup> century Church reformer, describes it in his short manual with the basics of the Christian faith, "The Small Catechism", from which come these **FAQ's** (Frequently Asked Questions):

### **What gifts or benefits does Baptism grant?**

It brings about forgiveness of sins, redeems from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe it, as the Word and promise of God declare.

### **What is this Word and promise of God?**

Where our Lord Jesus Christ says in Mark 16:16, "The one who believes and is baptized will be saved; but the one who does not believe will be condemned."

## **How can water do such great things?**

Clearly the water does not do it, but the Word of God, which is with, in, and alongside the water, and faith, which trusts this Word of God in the water.

## **What then is the significance of such a baptism with water?**

It signifies that the old person in us with all sins and evil desires is to be drowned through daily sorrow for sin and repentance, and that daily a new person is to come forth and rise up to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.

## **Where is this written?**

St. Paul says in Romans 6:3-4, "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore 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."

I read a little book once on the psychology of swimming called, [You Only Feel Wet When You're Out of the Water](#). The most memorable part of it, for me, was the title.

It's true, isn't it? You don't feel wet when you're in the water. It's your environment, it's everything, it's your atmosphere. You only feel wet when you are out of the water.

In the same way, we receive everything important in life, forgiveness of sins, redemption from death and the devil, and eternal salvation given to all who believe it through our baptism. It isn't the most important thing, it's the only thing that makes a real life real. It is a gift from God. It's the atmosphere in which we live!

God was manifest in the baptism of Jesus Christ in the river.

Seek your baptism if you haven't yet received this sacred event.

You can't earn it, you will never fully understand it, you don't deserve it. It's a one-time, non-repeatable action of God. It can happen at any age.

Walk wet if you have been baptized. Live in its atmosphere every day.

Your baptism makes you whose you are, in an atmospheric river of the one true living God.

Live in response to its blessing.