

**Sermon for the First Sunday after the Epiphany:  
The Baptism of Our Lord Jesus Christ, January 12, 2020  
Solemn Evensong & Benediction**

**By the Reverend Stephen Gerth**

*Year 2: Isaiah 40:1–11; Ephesians 1:1–14\*; Romans 6:3–11*

Some of you share with me fond memories of George Blackmore Handy, to use his full name. He was born in 1918. He died on May 9, 2012. He was ninety-three years old; in less than a month, he would have been ninety-four.

George was the last member of the parish who had been born in this neighborhood and who had grown up in the parish. He carried in his wallet a picture of himself in knickers, in front of the church, taken on the day of his confirmation when he was nine years old. The original sidewalk vaults for deliveries by the doorways of the Parish House and the Mission House were in the picture. By the time I arrived at Saint Mary's, George was very much at the heart of the community, the parish family.

The Sunday before George died was the Fourth Sunday of Easter, Good Shepherd Sunday. When Father Smith and I met with the-then parish musician James Kennerley to discuss the George's funeral, it was James who suggested that we use the Anglican chant version

of Psalm 23 that we use at baptisms for the sprinkling of the congregation as we return from the font to the chancel as the psalm between the lessons. With it, the choir sings the verses to Anglican Chant; the congregation sings the refrain, “You anoint my head with oil, and my cup is running over.” Brilliant. We’ve continued to use it at parish funerals ever since.

Let me read four short sentences from the Thanksgiving over the Water at Holy Baptism:

*We thank you, Father, for the water of Baptism.  
In it we are buried with Christ in his death.  
By it we share in his resurrection.  
Through it we are reborn by the Holy Spirit.<sup>1</sup>*

In the background of tonight’s first lesson is another exodus, an exodus from the temptations of the exile. The water of baptism is, as it were, a Red Sea, a Jordan River.

The first lesson is the beginning of what is generally called “Second Isaiah.” Its content dates it from the period when the exile of the Jewish people in Babylon is coming to an end. So-called “First Isaiah” is from the period before the fall of Jerusalem and the exile. First

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<sup>1</sup> *The Book of Common Prayer* (1979), 306.

Isaiah begins with these words, “The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzzi'ah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezeki'ah, kings of Judah.”<sup>2</sup> We don't know the name of the prophet of Second Isaiah. There's a “Third Isaiah,” the last eleven chapters of the book, written by various authors in the early part of the restoration of Jerusalem under King Cyrus of Persia in the sixth century before the Christian Era.<sup>3</sup>

As Second Isaiah begins, God seems to be addressing a group of angels or of prophets, directing them to speak to his people, the people in exile.<sup>4</sup>

The words are about the one true God, the true ruler of all. The messengers are told to proclaim, “Behold, the nations are like a drop from a bucket, and are accounted as the dust on the scales; behold, he takes up the isles like fine dust . . . All the nations are as nothing before him, they are accounted by him as less than nothing and emptiness.”<sup>5</sup> Here is a proclamation of a new exodus

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<sup>2</sup> Isaiah 1:1.

<sup>3</sup> Martin A. Sweeney, “Isaiah,” *New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha, An Ecumenical Study Bible*, ed. Michael D. Coogan, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 965.

<sup>4</sup> Carroll Stuhlmueller, “Deutero-Isaiah,” *The Jerome Biblical Commentary: Volume I: The Old Testament*, Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy, eds. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc.), 368.

<sup>5</sup> Isaiah 40:15, 17.

that is coming, an exodus from exile in Babylon. It comes with the temptation to stay instead to return to a land few had seen.

This first chapter of Second Isaiah also includes the passage quoted in the movie script of *Chariots of Fire* by Eric Liddell, “They who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.”<sup>6</sup>

Finally, in the background of God’s rule is the challenge for humans to trust their lives to their creator—to be different, to believe in the God of Israel and, for us, to believe in the God the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit.

Finally, our lives may seem to be to others and even to ourselves as a drop in the bucket. But we are known by God and loved by God from our beginning, and by God’s gift, world without end.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,  
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> Isaiah 40:31.