

Baptism as a mighty act of water

2nd Sunday after Christmas, January 6, 2015, Yr B: Genesis 1:1-5; Psalm 29; Acts 19:1-7; Mark 1:4-11

A wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Gen. 1:2

The Lord's voice is over the waters;
the God of glory thunders;
the Lord is over the mighty waters. Psalm 29: 3 (R. Alter trans)

As a sort of preamble, I want to say that, as abstract as my homilies may sometimes sound, preparing this homily has been an intensely personal experience.

In my mother recorded in her neat hand: "When he was 7 weeks old, he was baptized by the Rev. Watson Groen." My baptism took place, 73 years ago this next February 1, at the Second Christian Reformed Church in Lyndon, with my parents, three living grandparents, and my five living uncles, present.

They are all gone now. But, even though I remember nothing of the event, I don't need them as witnesses. God's faithfulness, the life and teachings of Jesus, and the Spirit's leading in my life, leave me no doubt. And I give God thanks and praise for it.

In this week of extraordinary rain, we are reminded of water, water in our raging rivers and flooding across farm fields, waterfalls in surprising places, water in small streams racing in the ditches along our roads. Water that is powerful, chaotic, and dark. A perfect week to be mindful of the waters of Baptism.

The opening words of Genesis, and Psalm 29, combine voice, breath and water, to create images of God's power and majesty, words that call for our response of worship of the God who created all things and has formed us.

Provocatively, some biblical scholars believe the Psalmist copied Psalm 29, almost verbatim, from a Canaanite hymn to the storm god Baal. Whether true or not, this possibility should serve as reminder that human minds do not have a corner on all of God's truth, which may be found in places as surprising as a hymn to the god Baal.

Water is an important symbol in the Bible:

- the water in the creation story;
- the waters of the flood;
- the many accounts of encounters with women at a well;
- the story of Moses floated in a basket the Nile river;
- the waters of the Red Sea crossed in the Exodus;
- the water from a rock miraculously provided to the Children of Israel in the Wilderness;

- the waters of the Jordan River the Israelites crossed to enter the Promised Land;
- water poured over the altar to God in the contest with the priests of Baal;
- Numerous Psalms with images of water such as “he leadeth me beside the still waters”;
- Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan River;
- the baptisms of Cornelius, his family,
- the baptism of the twelve new followers of Jesus in Ephesus in our Acts reading.

But why do our readings on this day we that especially remember the Baptism of our Lord, begin with the first words of the Bible: “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters”?

This account of creation was most likely written during the exile in Babylon, a time when there was no hope, no future, a time when all of God’s promises seemed to be for naught. The opening words of Genesis are a bold assertion that Israel’s God is the God who formed the earth from chaos and breathed God’s spirit into what was created. They proclaim our dependence on God for everything that exists; that every other question, whether philosophical, ethical or political, is subordinate to the relationship between the Creator and the created; and that the ultimate meaning of creation is to be found in the heart and purposes of the Creator who values creation for its own sake. Bold, in your face, proclamations of faith by a people in exile. But also a profoundly pastoral assertion that undercuts and renders meaningless the Babylon exile experience of Israel, words that enabled the Children of Israel to say:

*I was daily his delight
rejoicing before him always,
rejoicing in his inhabited world
and delighting in the sons of men.*

Proverbs 8:30-31

God’s first act of redemption occurs as God’s spirit swept over the face of the waters, turning the chaos of darkness and formless watery floods into our marvelous creation. This image forms one understanding of baptism: baptism is a redemptive act of God as we submit ourselves, or our children, to the primordial waters and a figurative death. A second image that shapes our understanding of this act of redemption is that of the waters of birth. As the baptized adult or child is raised out of the waters of baptism (or dried off by the Priest), God calls the newly baptized by name in a powerfully personal experience of a second birth. As we enter or leave church, we recall our second birth as we dip our fingers in the baptismal font.

A year ago Diane and I stood on the western side of the Jordan River, watching baptisms take place, and imagining Jesus being baptized there by a man clothed with camel’s hair.

All three of the synoptic Gospels, Mark, Matthew and Luke, refer to Jesus's baptism by John, who proclaimed a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Thus, Jesus' Baptism was recognized as an important event. But we wonder why Jesus would submit to a baptism for the forgiveness of sins? I cannot answer that question except to say that for me it shows Jesus' identification with human kind. In the words of an obscure but profound movie, *Whistle Down the Wind*, he was just an ordinary fellow.

Jesus entered the Jordan that day as a private person, an ordinary fellow, but all three synoptic Gospels report that when Jesus came up from the water of the Jordan river, the spirit of God descended on him in the form of a dove and a voice was heard saying, "you are my son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased." Jesus emerged from the waters of baptism as a public servant.

Our Book of Common Prayer book says that baptism is full initiation, by water and the Holy Spirit, into Christ's Body the Church, and that the bond God establishes with the newly baptized in Baptism is indissoluble. Ethereal concepts for sure. Yet baptism is something very physical, occurring at a particular time and place, with emersion or sprinkling three times in the ordinary water from a particular place, and leading to incorporation into the life of a particular community of faith.

Equally concrete are the baptismal covenants made by the person being baptized, or by those acting on an infant's behalf. These promises include proclaiming by word and example the Good News of God in Christ, seeking and serving Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself, striving for justice and peace among all people, and respecting the dignity of every human being.

We also emerge from the waters of baptism as a public servant.

So as we approach our annual meeting, and a review of our involvement in our community and the world, it is time to take stock. How in the past week, or year, have I proclaimed the good news of Christ? How, exactly have I served Christ, not just once and a while, but in every person? And how have I striven for justice and peace, and respected the dignity of every human being?

And how is our community of faith living out these promises? Do each of our many activities at Christ Church, either directly proclaim, or support us in proclaiming, the Good News of Christ? Do we serve Christ in all people? Do we continually strive for justice and peace. How do we respect the dignity of every human being?

Each year we must report to our National Church our attendance, membership and financial receipts and expenditures, and we prepare an annual report. Perhaps instead we should be asked exactly how this community of faith has fulfilled our

baptismal covenant, including examples from the lives of individual members.

Hard questions that make us squirm in our seat, clear our throat, shuffle our feet. But, thanks be to God: empowered by the Holy Spirit that descended on each of us at our baptism, we are inspired and empowered, individually and collectively as a community of faith, to live our lives in service to our God and neighbor.

In this life of service, we work for the promised Kingdom of God, that kingdom we pray for every Sunday in the liturgy of the Table, when we say “your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth.”

Amen

Dale Ramerman
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