

“Baptism”

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Baptism of the Lord C

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Luke 3:15-17, 21-22 (NRSV)

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

Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, 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.’

Prayer.

Water.

Created at the same moment
“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.”¹

“A river flows out of Eden
to water the garden,
and from there it divides
and becomes four branches,”
the Yahwehist author records,
“Pishon, Gihon, Tigris, and Euphrates;”²
Each a source of life

1Genesis 1:1-2 NRSV

2Genesis 2:10-14 NRSV

for every tree that is
pleasant to the sight
and good for food;
including
the tree of life
and the tree of good and evil.³

Water;
so connected to good and evil,
that the Lord saw fit
to wield it as judgment;
a means for a flood,
to cleanse the earth
of the corruption and violence
that caused it to stink
like a sewer.

So God called out to his servant
Noah
and told him to build an ark.
Water would destroy

3Genesis 2:9 NRSV

all flesh;
except for Noah and his family;
the sole righteous seed
of the Divine's perfect creation.
For them,
water
would become the means of
salvation
deliverance
from the flood.⁴

After the flood subsided
and the water receded
water became the language
of something new;
the Lord spoke to Noah,
“I establish
my covenant with you,
that never again
shall all flesh be cut off
by the waters of a flood,”
and “this is a sign of the covenant
that I make between
Me and you,
... I have set my bow in the clouds,
and it shall be a sign
of the covenant between
Me and the earth.”⁵
Water
had become the language
of covenant.

Canaan
was a land defined by water.
Mediterranean waves to the west
and Jordan's southward flow in the east
defined the land
of Abram's promise.
Jordan's ice gushed forth

⁴See Genesis 6 and 7

⁵Genesis 9:11-13

to flow and fill Galilee's sea
to bring life and prosperity
- green and fertile lands -
in the north,
serpentine twists
and hairpin turns
through Jordan's
long descent,
leading to the world's
deepest, salt filled scar
- the desert's gateway -
known as death's brine,
the Dead Sea.

Each point of Canaan's population density
was defined by
proximity to water,
villages built around
a central well
- Jacob's well at Sychar -
or spring
- Elisha's spring at Jericho -
or freshwater beach
- Tiberious, Capernaum, or Bethsaida
on Galilee's fair shore.

Water's trickle and flow
had also become
the language of life.

Water.
Whether a metaphor of creation
the judgment of flood
the salvation of the righteous
the covenant of God
or the source of all life
remained a language often used
but incomplete
whose imperfection was
only known
by an omnipotent God.

God so loved
this world
that he sent his Son,
Jesus,
to be the complementary solution
to water's incomplete language.
Instead of simply appearing
like a stunt in a magician's side show,
Jesus was birthed
through the womb's waters
of a divinely conceived virgin
named Mary.
Jesus was led by John
to Jordan's icy,
spring fed water
for yet another birth,
a new birth,
a new beginning,
anchored with repentance
and forgiveness of sins,
and sealed with the Spirit's
heavenly descent.
'You are my Son,
the Beloved;
with you I am well pleased.'⁶

God's Pleasure
turned water into wine,
drowned a herd of demon possessed pigs,
was ladled out
as "living water"
to Jacob's divorced visitor,
was mixed with spit and dirt
to give sight to the blind,
was calmed with a word
and walked upon
until faith was lost.

The whisper of water
even trickled out from
his bruised, wounded side.

⁶Luke 3:22 NRSV

Resurrection
and new birth,
repentance
and forgiveness of sins,
complete God's liquid gift of grace,
fulfilling the language of life
lived in complete love
of a Savior
and Friend.

Baptism
is the name
of water's complete language
for the Christian;
for those of us
whose every fiber
is woven to Christ.
The same baptismal waters
that sealed Christ
to the Father
has claimed us
as daughters and sons
of a compassionate God,
whose continual influence
and interest
remains
in saving the world.

Unlike a pointless Quixote charge
towards a lifeless windmill,
God's work
is continuously building
to an ultimate cosmic climax,
when the earthly realms
will become as the heavenly Kingdom,
and by our Baptismal waters,
we will be as one
with the source;
the wellspring,
the font
of life.

“Eventually,
all things merge into one,
and a river runs through it,”
concludes an elderly Norman Maclean
fishing the trout stream of his youth.⁷
Timeless raindrops fall
upon rocks from the basement of time.
And under these rocks
are words
spoken in a language known
as baptism.
Water.
Creation.
Covenant.
Redemption.
Salvation.
Kingdom.
Completion.
These are the words
of God's language
that is merging
all things
into
one.

Amen.

⁷(Maclean, N., A River Runs Through It, The
University of Chicago Press, 1976, pg. 161)