

As the Rain Comes Down from Heaven

- the Story of Our Baptism

Sermon for Jan 12, 2020
The Feast of the Baptism of Jesus
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*For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven
and do not return there but water the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
11 so shall be the word which goes out from God's mouth;
it shall not return to God empty,
but it shall accomplish God's purpose,
and shall succeed in the thing for which God sent it.*

Isaiah 55:10-11

Grace to you and peace from the one who is and the one who was and the one who is to come.

Today the church observes the festival of the Baptism of Jesus. In many places there is a tradition to use this festival as an occasion to remember our own baptism and to give thanks for it.

I really like this tradition. After all, our baptism is an important part of our faith. In the Lutheran faith we have two sacraments: the sacrament of Holy Communion and the sacrament of Holy Baptism. Here at St. Francis the sacrament of Holy Communion is well integrated in our worship life - we celebrate it every Sunday! But the other sacrament, the sacrament of Holy Baptism is sometimes a bit neglected. Today we have an opportunity to make up for it.

So, let me tell you a story, the story of your baptism. This story began a very long time ago. It began in the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth:

*The earth was without form and void,
and darkness was over the face of the deep.
And the Spirit of God moved over the waters.*
(Gen 1:1-2)

The spirit moved over the waters and the spirit and the water moved together and became

friends. The spirit and the water are always on the move. Rain falls, rivulets gather and run into creeks, into streams, into rivers, into lakes, and finally into the ocean.

From the ocean the droplets rise up and form clouds, and the clouds travel on the wind. The clouds release the droplets as rain, as snow, as hail, as mist. The droplets fall to the earth, and sink into the ground. Deep in the ground they feed aquifers, and gush forth in springs and wells. Water is always on the move: in the air, on land, underground, and in the ocean.

For billions of years water has been on the move. It formed riverbeds, and carved valleys, it hollowed stones, and scooped out caves. It shaped, and molded, and washed mountains into the sea.

Water is always on the move. It even moves through us: with the food we ingest with the drinks we drink, with the sweat we sweat with the tears we cry.

Water is life. It nourishes all living things; it is home to the fish and the foundation of everything that grows.

Water covers more than 70 percent of the earth. Viewed from space our planet looks blue, it looks blue because of all the water.

Water also moves through our sacred stories.

There is the ancient story of the flood, which brought both destruction and salvation. There is the story of the rainbow, thousands of colorful droplets of water glittering in the sky as a sacred promise that God will provide.

There is the story of baby Moses: He was supposed to be killed as an infant along with all the other Hebrew boys. This was an order of the Pharaoh, an attempt to reduce the Hebrew population in Egypt. Ethnic cleansing is what we call it nowadays.

Jochebed, the mother of Moses kept her baby hidden for three months. When she could hide she put him in a reed basket coated with tar so it would not leak, and then she set the basket afloat on the river Nile. Miriam, the older sister of Moses, stood on the bank of the river and watched what happened.

And what happened was this: The daughter of the Pharaoh and her maids arrived. She saw the basket and looked inside. She realized that the baby was one of the Hebrew children and she decided to rescue him. At this moment the baby's older sister presented herself and asked: "Shall I go and find a woman to nurse to the child for you?"

What a clever sister! "Yes," said the princess. "Go and find a nurse for me." In this way Moses was returned to his mother for a few more years. When he was older, his mother brought him to the palace and the Princess adopted him. She named him "Moses," which means "drawn out," because

he was drawn out of the water.

The story of Moses is a wonderful story to remember in connection with baptism. Why? Because baptism is about water, but it is also about faith. In fact, faith is the heart of baptism. But what does that mean when we baptize babies? How can we baptize a baby who doesn't even understand what faith means?

And yet, is there ever a time when we really “understand” the mystery of faith? I am all grown now. I am sixty years old. I have been a pastor for most of my adult life, and I still cannot say what faith means, except it is this: faith is like the basket in which we are placed, it carries us, it catches us it keeps us afloat on the river.

The basket in the water saved the life of Moses, but it saved more than just his life. The basket was the beginning of a much larger story. When the boy Moses was older, he spent many years in the desert. Eventually, in the middle of the desert, God spoke to him from a burning bush, and asked him to return to Egypt and lead the Israelites out of slavery into the promised land.

Which bring us to another water story: the escape from Egypt, also known as the Exodus. When the Israelites finally escaped from Egypt, they were pursued by the Egyptians who did not want to lose their slaves so easily. The Egyptians came after them with horses and chariots. The Israelites were slow: there were women and children and old people and all their belongings, and the Egyptians were closing in on them quickly. And suddenly, in front of the Israelites was the Red Sea. Now they were trapped: The vast sea before them and the Egyptians quickly coming close.

At this point, the story tells of a strong east wind which caused the sea to go back all night long and made the bed of the sea dry. The Israelites crossed over on the dry bed of the sea. The Egyptians followed: all of Pharaoh's horses, his chariots, and his horsemen went after them into the sea.

At this moment the sea returned to its normal level and covered the chariots and the horsemen, and all of them drowned. Miriam, the sister of Moses, took a tambourine in her hand; and all the women followed her with tambourines and with dancing, and she sang with them: “Sing to the LORD, For He has triumphed gloriously! The horse and its rider. He has thrown into the sea!”

After the escape the Israelites spent 40 years in the desert, which gives us more miraculous water stories. At one point there was no water to drink, and the people were very thirsty and discouraged. God commanded Moses to strike a rock, and when he struck the rock, water gushed forth and the people were saved.

The images go on and on. Water is always on the move, it flows, it gushes forth, it circulates between heaven and earth.

The prophet Isaiah says:

*For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven
and do not return there but water the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,*

*giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
11 so shall be the word which goes out from God's mouth;
it shall not return to God empty,
but it shall accomplish God's purpose,
and shall succeed in the thing for which God sent it. Isaiah 55:10-11*

Even in the very last chapter of the Bible we encounter an image of water: The closing chapter of the Bible tells of the heavenly city of Jerusalem, which descends on the earth like a beautiful bride and through this city flows the river of the water of life, bright as a crystal, it flows from the throne of God through the middle of the street of the city and on either side of the river there is the tree of life with twelve kinds of fruit and with leaves for the healing of the nations. Revelation 22:1-2

Water is always on the move: from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven, from the beginning of time to the end of time. In this way water also traveled in the river Jordan on the day when Jesus was baptized. Then the heavens opened, and the spirit descended, and the water and the spirit who had first kissed at the creation of the world embraced each other once more and then embraced Jesus. And a voice from heaven declared Jesus the beloved child of God.

And from this dazzling moment, the water kept moving, from earth to heaven, from heaven to earth until finally it made its way into a baptismal font, and from the font onto your forehead! Or perhaps it flowed all over you as you were immersed in it.

Think about it: The water which we touch today, the water which we drink today, the water in which we bathe today, is the same water which has existed from the beginning of time! And because of this we can remember our baptism in all kinds of places,
we can remember our baptism when we take a sip of water,
we can remember our baptism when we take a shower,
we can remember our baptism when we see a rainbow,
we can remember our baptism when we see a puddle on the sidewalk,
we can remember or baptism when we hike along a creek.

Communion is best celebrated in community, but the remembrance of baptism can be both communal and an act of individual devotion. Martin Luther recommended that the first thing we do each morning when we wake up is to remember our baptism.

When we prepare for the rite of baptism we pour water in the font, and then we bless the water. And the way we bless the water, is by reciting a long prayer that refers to the various ways in which water has been means of God's saving grace. When I was younger, I dreaded this prayer because it seemed to go on and on. But now I find it a beautiful reminder of how much we are connected with all of creation around us, above us, beneath us and before us.

I find it remarkable that the same water which was touched by the spirit at the moment of creation has been circulating through clouds and glaciers ever since. This same water washed over Jesus in the river Jordan and now it has at long last arrived in our own life!

And still the water is on the move, it moves from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven, from river to ocean from person to person. The same water which touched you in baptism will touch another person, and who knows what stories that person can tell.

As a pastor I get to witness so many stories when children are placed in my arms for baptism. There was the child who had survived a difficult birth; there was the child who was born long after her parents had given up hope for parenthood; there was a boy who arrived through adoption; there was a girl whose father returned from military service and got to hold her for the first time; there was a girl whose uncle traveled half-way around the globe to hold her at the moment of their baptism.

The baptismal stories of adults are equally astounding. I have seen tears of joy running down the face along with water. I have baptized refugees who had no home and who made their home in the water of their baptism.

In these moments we get a glimpse of how God's grace and mercy are poured out over us like water, how God' love flows and flows and flows like a never-ending stream, and how the heavens are wide open - open over us! And we are called beloved.

Amen.