

Just add water

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Psalms 29

Matthew 3:13-17

Acts 10:34-43

In Old Testament poetry and metaphor, water has a very specific character. From the beginning of Genesis, water is a symbol of chaos, of mystery, of disorder and of terror. (Let me add a disclaimer here to curtail potential sermon responses: water is not all bad. This is a metaphor.)

In the second verse of Genesis, the earth is a “formless void, and darkness covered the face of the deep.” God’s first creative works were breaking the darkness and separating the waters. For a desert-dwelling people, great expanses of water were dangerous and powerful. The word for “seas” in Hebrew is Yom, which came from the name of a fearsome Canaanite god of the seas.

Many of the Psalms depict water, or Yom, as an enemy of God. Today’s Psalm, which we used as a call to worship, sings of the power of God over the mighty waters. In Psalm 93, the seas lift up their voice and their pounding waves, but God is mightier than the breakers of the sea. In Psalm 66, the poet celebrates the deliverance of Israel when God “turned the sea into dry land” and the people “passed through the waters on foot.”

In Psalm 65, God stills “the roaring of the seas, the roaring of their waves and the turmoil of the nations.” And in contrast to the chaotic waters of the sea, God brings order to the waters. God’s canals are filled with water to provide the people with grain. God takes care of the land and irrigates it. God drenches its furrows and levels its ridges; softens the field with showers and blesses its crops. God transforms a source of terror into a source of life. The voice of God has authority over the waters.

This same element, this life-giving and terrifying force, forms our identity as Christians. Churches that baptize by immersion physically act out both the death and life that comes through the water. Early Christian art closely ties the story of Jonah with baptism — Jonah was swallowed up for three days under the water, and God delivered him. We die and are buried with Christ in the water, and we rise with Christ into new life. This participation in the cycle of death and re-birth initiates us into participation in God’s work.

It was in baptism that Jesus’ identity and authority was revealed, when God spoke and the Holy Spirit descended. It is in this act that we claim our identity as sisters and brothers of Christ and as children of God. In baptism, God gives us the authority to live out what God is doing in the world. This is authority

granted not just to those who are licensed or ordained, or to those put into power. In the Matthew passage, as in Genesis, we hear God naming a new creation over the chaos of the waters.

Today's scripture from Acts cites Jesus' baptism as the beginning of his ministry. It was there, at the Jordan, that people began to see the authority that God had vested in Jesus. This passage in Acts follows an extended story of transformation.

At the beginning of chapter 10 we meet Cornelius, a Roman centurion. He should be the antagonist here: the very definition of terror and oppression; but from the outset of the story it is clear that he is something unusual. He is a "devout and God-fearing man." When Peter has his famous dream and God instructs him to eat unclean food, Peter wakes up to immediately encounter messengers sent by Cornelius. Peter goes to Cornelius, and we heard in the passage read a bit ago what he had to say. Following that passage we find that the Holy Spirit fell upon Cornelius and the people with him. Then Peter says, "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" And so they became the first Gentiles to be baptized.

After Cindy's sermon last week, I approached this story asking, "Who am I and who is Hyattsville in this story?"

My first reaction is that we are Cornelius. We are outsiders, marginalized by the authorities. We worship God in our own way, and we are hoping for a Peter to come and give us a place at the table. We may even be a threatening presence to the authorities, like the centurion was to Peter. We know God loves us, but we wonder if we really belong.

But then, there's this thing about baptism. If we are baptized, and if we have the authority that God gives us through the waters of Baptism and through the Holy Spirit, then we cannot be on the margins. We cannot be outsiders. We cannot wait for the people in power to come to us.

In fact, we can't be Cornelius.

We are already a part of the body of Christ, and God has given us a voice and a vision. In this story, we are Peter. We have spiritual authority. By virtue of our baptism, we have the power to live out what God has taught us. Like Peter, we preach that "God shows no partiality," and that "what God has made clean, we must not call profane."

Within our congregation, I see this type of baptismal authority at work. The church does not rely upon its credentialed leaders to make important decisions. The active and lively body of Christ works together to agree and disagree.

Members take on leadership roles and serve on committees. In fact, this type of authority structure is part of what attracted me to serving here, and it is something that we can offer to the wider church.

The next chapter in Acts details the fallout from Peter's experience. Peter reports to the other apostles in Jerusalem, explaining step-by-step what had happened. He says of the gentiles, "If, then, God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that could hinder God?" When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, "Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life."

Isn't that a great response? It really makes me wonder, though: what would have happened if the other apostles didn't catch the same vision? What if they had told Peter he was in error and silenced him? What would Peter have done? Where would the world church be now? Would Peter have returned to the new gentile believers and un-baptized them? Would he have shooed away the Holy Spirit? "Sorry God, apparently You were wrong about these guys!"

How would Peter have continued to relate to the larger body of believers? Again, by virtue of baptism, I don't think he really had a choice but to continue relating. Most of the baptisms we witness in the New Testament are not really individual experiences — they are communal. Groups and families encounter the transformation of Christ and they are baptized into the body of believers. The power of the Holy Spirit is envisioned as falling on whole crowds. These crowds are then integrated into the larger church. The apostles didn't each go their own way after Pentecost, but they maintained their accountability and connections. Baptism binds us, whether we like it or not, to the church, past and present, scattered and gathered, local and long-distance, creative and destructive, progressive and conservative.

I can't claim that I see a clear path forward for our body, nor should I make such a claim. I haven't been here long enough, I haven't been through what many of you have, and I don't claim that sort of individual authority. I don't know how to hold in tension our integrity and our vision of God's kingdom with our call to unity with the wider body of believers. I do know this, though, and Cindy alluded to it last Sunday. Whatever we do, or even if we do nothing, trouble will find us. And I know that the Holy Spirit is at work here.

We are a body of baptized believers. God has adopted us as children and given us authority to work for Christ's kingdom. We are called to discern God's direction together, with humility. Each of us has a voice of authority, and as a congregation we have a message for the wider church.

There is a nice double meaning in the Spiritual "Wade in the water." "God's a gonna trouble the water" gives us a way of picturing the effects of God's voice upon the waters. It also gives us a warning about the side-effects of

baptism. Baptism doesn't mean smooth-sailing — it means rough waters. Claiming our baptismal authority will inevitably mean conflict. Our imaginations are often too limited to see the potential for resolution. We have a very hard time accepting that the person whom we disagree with has the same baptismal authority that we do. But just as God spoke over the waters and gave form to creation, in baptism God forms us into a new creation. God turns these chaotic waters into a source of life and birth.