

# **Over the Waters**

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Genesis 1:1-5  
Psalm 29  
Acts 19:1-7  
Mark 1:4-11

Today, communities around the world that follow the church calendar celebrate the baptism of Jesus. You heard the familiar story this morning in the reading from Mark. There is John, the eccentric Baptizer; the heavens opening up; the lovely Trinitarian picture of the voice from heaven, the descending dove; and Jesus, coming up out of the water.

And of course the other scriptures for the day tie into the same themes: in Genesis and the Psalms we have the voice of God over the waters. And then we have this short story in Acts where Paul critiques John's baptism and invites some new disciples to be baptized into the name of Jesus.

What was the difference between John's baptism and baptism in the name of Jesus? John's couldn't have been all bad; after all, Jesus himself took the plunge.

Let me propose a theory: John's baptism was about life before the event. Jesus' baptism is about life after the event. They are complementary parts of the same picture.

John "proclaimed a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." Repentance entails a giving up or a turning away from something. In John's baptism, the prior life is washed clean. The focus is on who the baptized person was prior to the baptism. Symbolically, this is the first part of the physical

baptismal process — the kneeling, the going down into water. The church has traditionally viewed this as a death. The former sins or burdens are wiped away in the cleansing waters.

In Jesus' baptism, on the other hand, the really interesting stuff happens upon coming up out of the water. In the physical enactment of rising again, or resurrection, Jesus sees the veil between heaven and earth torn open and the Holy Spirit descends on him. The voice of God blesses him. In the language of Paul, when a person is baptized, there is new creation.

In Mark's gospel, the word translated "torn" only appears twice; here at the baptism of Jesus, where the heavens are "torn apart," and again at his crucifixion, where the veil of the temple is torn in two. Both moments invoke death and resurrection; and in both cases, the tearing is a visceral unification of heaven and earth. What we re-enact when we are baptized is the dying and rising of Christ. He initiated the New Creation, and we become living sacraments of that New Creation as we rise from the waters of baptism.

Mennonites have, I think, historically traditionally placed a heavier emphasis on the repentance part of baptism — more like John's baptism. We have focused on the life before, the life we are turning away from. We've fixated on the dying. Jesus reorients things to focus on the New Life — the rising up, the turning towards. For Jesus, Baptism was a creative act — the waters give birth to new creation, not simply of the individual, but of the universe as a whole.

If we look to the other lectionary passages for today, we see elements similar to those in the Gospel passage. In both Genesis 1 and Psalm 29, water is

used as a symbol of emptiness and chaos. But the voice of God is over the waters; it thunders with more power than the mighty sea. God speaks, and out of the waters emerges a new creation.

On Friday morning when my alarm clock went off, I sat up in bed very nearly ready to wake up. But then I remembered how nice bed was. I put head to pillow again and enjoyed my sleep awhile; that process repeated itself a few more times. In both the waking and the dreaming bits, I began thinking, "Yes, this is what baptism is like." At first, I wasn't quite sure what I meant, but I think I convinced myself. Sometimes, as with getting out of bed, the laying down part of baptism is actually easier than the rising up. It is, perhaps, more comfortable to look back at what has come before than to look forward to what comes next; it is more comprehensible to know what I have been than to wonder what I will be. But the baptized life is not simply about "what I am not anymore," it is about "what I am becoming." How many times have you heard conversion stories that focus exclusively on the former self? A miraculous turning from immorality? Recovery from addiction? But being a follower of Christ isn't simply about not sinning; it is a reorientation of life. It is seeing everything through the lenses of new creation. It is about acting as a connection point between heaven and earth, and doing God's work in the world. Baptism is about rising again. Baptism is about creation. It is about leaving behind death and embracing life.

I would guess that the feeling of new birth, constant awareness of new creation, and a sense of being cleansed lasts an average of about a week for newly baptized people. (And in the case of infant baptism I would suppose it is

even shorter.) It is a classic 'mountaintop' experience. There is inevitably a valley afterwards. In fact, in the case of Jesus' baptism, we see that the same Spirit that hovered over the waters immediately takes off again, leading Jesus into the desert to face temptation.

The tricky thing is that though we are reborn in baptism as creatures of the new creation, we still reside at the intersection between old and new. We may have a renewed sense of the work of God in the world, but that sense may also heighten our perception of the groaning of the world around us. In essence, we are commissioned to be ambassadors of the new creation.

When we see tragedy and injustice like what is happening in Gaza, we cannot help to yearn for the Shalom that God is bringing to the world. And if we believe that God is truly at work in the world, and if we believe that through God all things are possible, then we must also believe that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not irreconcilable. If we believe that what Jesus taught of the New Creation is true, then peace can come even to the most conflicted parts of the world.

And if we believe this, then we must not hesitate to act. In the case of the Gaza crisis, I feel almost numb because I simply don't know what to do. Perhaps we can't all be Christian Peacemaker Team members. But we can support those that are, like our own Jenny Dillon, who has served in Colombia. Another option available to us is to support the ongoing work of Mennonite Central Committee. Their website, [mcc.org](http://mcc.org), lists several ways to get involved — from donating to

their ongoing work in Gaza, to assembling relief kits. Perhaps small groups could brainstorm additional ideas.

God's voice resounds, even over these troubled waters. The voice of God is full of majesty. God sits enthroned over the flood. And out of this chaos is emerging a new creation. In our baptism we join this new creation by experiencing our own resurrection. As we sing the hymn of response, I invite you to come forward and remember your baptism by touching the water in this basin. You may wash your hands, or perhaps let a few drops run down your face — though I suggest that those of us who were immersed not try to recreate that experience. As you feel the water, recall the commitments you made that day, and ask God what New Creation you are being prepared for now. If you have not yet been baptized, you are welcome to come forward as well — consider what God might be calling you to, and perhaps anticipate your own future.