

Through Troubled Waters

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Epiphany I, the Baptism of Our Lord - January 12, 2025

Isaiah 43:1-7; Psalm 29; Romans 6:1-11; Luke 3:15-22

Water is necessary for life. NASA's search for life on Mars begins with the search for water, because it would be essential for life of any kind. On our planet, areas with low rainfall or poor water resources are sparsely populated because people need water. In fact, the human body contains more than 50% water, by weight.

But water is also dangerous. Too much water in the wrong place at the wrong time can bring destruction and loss of life. The Johnstown flood in Pennsylvania in 1889 is famous, but many other devastating floods have occurred before and since. The tsunami of 2011 spread destruction across the western Pacific. Of course the Bible tells of the flood of Noah, which inundated the world leaving only a few survivors.

Then, we all remember those who perished in shipwrecks whether caused by weather or by warfare: the *Lusitania*, torpedoed by a German submarine; the *Titanic*, which struck an iceberg; the countless servicemen who perished at sea during World War II; the loss of the *Edmund Fitzgerald* ore freighter in a Lake Superior storm; and even the recent sinking of the *Titan* submersible which captured world attention and took five lives.

It's no wonder, then, that in the Bible water is symbolic of both life and death, of both blessing in God's presence and abandonment by God. The Psalmist cries out, "As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God" (Psalm 42:1). Jesus offers the woman of Samaria the water of eternal life (John 4:10). In contrast the prophet Jonah, cast off his ship, cries out to God, "I am driven away from your sight . . . The waters closed in over me to take my life; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped about my head . . ." (Jonah 2:4-5). Being submerged in water is a great fear in Scripture, for it is symbolic of godlessness and death.

Today our Gospel reading directs us to the account of the baptism of Jesus, and the reading from Romans explores the meaning of baptism for believers in Jesus. The risen Jesus told his apostles to "make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19). So Christians "follow the Lord in baptism," to use the expression one often hears in those churches that practice baptism of adult believers only. (That, by the way, is not an issue I care to get into, since Scripture gives ample warrant for different viewpoints on that question.)

So what does our baptism mean? The apostle Paul explores that question in our reading from Romans, and in essence he says this: When we are baptized we participate in the death of Jesus, so that we may also be raised with him into a new kind of life. You see, don't you, how baptism puts us into the same situation as Jonah, overwhelmed by the treacherous and stormy waters of the sea but then delivered from death in the same way that Jesus was raised up. In fact, Paul says, we actually share in the death and life of Jesus through our baptism. Christian faith is not "belief in Jesus"; *Christian faith is Jesus* and we are Christians because we are *members of his body*. Baptism puts us into that body so that Jesus' death becomes our death, and Jesus' life becomes our life, too. The New Testament speaks both of *Jesus being in us* and *our being in Jesus*, and baptism expresses that reality.

So baptism is a kind of death, reflecting Scripture's picture of the life-threatening waters of the raging sea. Paul is explicit about baptism as death; he says that "our old self was crucified with [Jesus] in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin" (Romans 6:6). What does that really mean? "Sin" is whatever separates us from God and leads us astray from his ways. And it's human culture with its corrupt and false values that does that to us, imposing on us a worldview that refuses to take God into account. That's why we have to die, setting us free from the clutches of that godless environment. As Paul states, "one who has died has been set free from sin" (Romans 6:7).

As adults, having been baptized as infants, we are set free by repentance or *metanoia*, change of mind (to use the Greek term). In other words, our freedom comes when we begin to *think differently* about our world and our place in it. And that can be a kind of death, because we all know how traumatic it is to discover we've been wrong about our values, what we've considered important or normal or customary. Rethinking our world with God, and the Lord Jesus, at the center is a big part of what it means to be a Christian. Baptism initiates that process in us, and it can be an ongoing process as long as we live.

Is baptism just something *we* do, or does the Lord do something when we're baptized? Different Christian groups have contrasting views on this question — and, in fact, in many cases it's because of these different “takes” on baptism that we have all these different denominations! As I said, I'm not going to take on that question here. But obviously, if we're baptized in our infancy the Lord has to do *something* because we're not in a position to do much for ourselves. Luther taught that baptism is regeneration, or renewal of our life. As one commentator states, “Lutheranism affirms baptismal regeneration, believing that baptism is a means of grace, instead of human works, through which God creates and strengthens faith. Lutherans believe that the Bible shows how Christians are connected through baptism with Christ and the new life Christ's work gives us” (LCMS).

In any case baptism, for people of any age, is incorporation into the community of faith. For infants or small children it's incorporation into the body to which the parents or sponsors belong. Some say it corresponds to the Jewish rite of circumcision as the sign of belonging to the covenant, the agreement between God and his people. We can get too individualized in our understanding and expression of the faith. In the New Testament the Christian faith is a community affair; it's a group or family identity. When the jailer in Philippi believed in Jesus, Paul and Silas baptized him together with his entire family (Acts 16:31-33). Nobody in the New Testament is a “Lone Ranger” Christian, connected to God and nobody else. All Christians are part of a larger body, a community, and it's within the life of that community that the meaning of our faith is worked out.

But when we consider the baptism of Jesus, we recognize that his baptism is different. Our baptism is into Jesus' death and resurrection, but when Jesus submits to John's baptism in the Jordan he has not yet undergone death and resurrection. Instead, Jesus' baptism is a declaration of his Messiahship, his divine Sonship. For the voice declares, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased” (Luke 3:22).

When we “follow the Lord in baptism” we do so because Jesus commanded it, and as he told John, “it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness” (Matthew 3:15). But the meaning is different; *we're not baptized into Messiahship, but into the Messiah*. We don't take on a “Messiah complex,” for that's the epitome of sin: making ourselves into our own god and worshiping ourselves. It's exactly that from which we need to be delivered through death to all that's false and destructive in human relationships. We “follow the Lord in baptism,” but it doesn't mean exactly the same thing for us.

In fact, baptism in the New Testament has several meanings. The word “baptize” simply means to dip, as in dipping cloth into a vat when dyeing it. To be baptized is to be “dipped” into an environment or an experience — even a difficult environment or a trying experience. Therefore we can also speak of the “baptism of fire” or the baptism of suffering. Jesus spoke of it that way. He asked his disciples, “Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized? . . . The cup that I drink you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized” (Mark 10:38-39). Of course he was speaking of the opposition he would encounter, leading ultimately to his suffering on the cross. So sometimes when we “follow the Lord in baptism” we might find ourselves passing through difficult circumstances, just as Jesus did. The “waters” we get cast into may be the troubled and dangerous and deadly waters of the sea, from which the prophet Jonah cried out to the Lord.

This is reflected in the other readings for today, from Isaiah 43 and Psalm 29. Isaiah, first of all, reminds us that even if we have to undergo such a “baptism of fire,” or the waters of hardship or suffering, the Lord is still with us. In God's name he declares, “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy

One of Israel, your Savior” (Isaiah 43:2-3). These words are addressed to the nation of Israel, which was going through a difficult time of oppression by foreign enemies. But as children of Abraham through Jesus we can take these words for ourselves. By going through some difficult experiences we learn to trust our life to the mercies of the Lord.

Although water, in the Bible, can be a symbol of great danger and even death, it’s also a life-giving endowment from the Creator, who gathered the waters together from under heaven. The treacherous, ominous waters of the raging sea are still God’s creation, and under his administration and authority. As the Psalm for today puts it, “The Lord is upon the mighty waters . . . The Lord sits enthroned over the flood; the Lord sits enthroned as king forever” (Psalm 29:3c,10). Because of this we can endure difficult circumstances, our “baptism of fire,” in the knowledge that God is faithful to bring us through.

Peter, in his First Letter, mentions how “God’s patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water. Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ . . .” (1 Peter 3:20-21). Because through baptism we have been raised with Jesus into the life of the community of faith, made members of his body, we have that “good conscience” Peter speaks about. We have that conscience, or consciousness, that the Lord will carry us through those deep and stormy waters that are so threatening to a person who has no knowledge of the Lord. However treacherous those waters may be, we know the Lord is faithful to His people and remembers his covenant, his agreement with us in Jesus — the agreement we made, or that was made on our behalf, at our baptism.