

Title: The Living Gift of Water

Let us pray.

Most holy, Lord God, you gave us the gift of water, without which, we cannot live. Through the gift of living water, your son began his ministry and, we too, began our ministries, strengthened by the Holy Spirit. Strengthen us always that we may do your will, in love, to a troubled world, through Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

On January 1, 1997, we lived in Yuba City. We went to a friend's house on the north Sutter Buttes during a mandatory evacuation. There were massive releases of water from the Oroville Dam into the Feather River. The fear was that the levees separating Yuba City and Marysville would not hold all the water or there would be a levee break. Later, there was a break downstream in Olivehurst. Two weeks after we were allowed back home, we drove over the Feather River and the water was still at the top of levees. Water can be dangerous.

That is why we also need to respect water. Whenever there is flooding, it is almost automatic that there is a story of someone who attempts to go through a flooded road to find themselves stranded or worse. If there is a sign that says, "Road closed due to flooding," we need to consider another route instead of going through the blockade.

Today is about water. There is water outside and a lot of it. There is water inside, in the pipes and in a font. We live on a water planet. And it turns out there is water all over the solar system, even on far off Pluto. I suppose we will discover many water worlds circling other stars. In fact, we already have.

Water is necessary for life, as far as we know. It was in the primordial oceans that life began on this planet. Even though we don't live in an ocean, we need water to live.

A very long time ago, life emerged from the oceans and came on land, breathing oxygen out of the air instead of out of the water. That transformation also made water dangerous. We cannot breathe water and if we try, we will drown and die. So, water is a source of life and death.

St. Paul uses the example of water and death to describe baptism. We enter the baptismal water with our sins. We die in the water with Christ. We emerge from the water sinless, at least for a few minutes or seconds. St. Paul knows that we sin. I think the point Paul is trying to make is that we emerge from the baptismal water in a state of permanent grace. We do sin, but our sins are forgiven. So in a sense, we are sinless because our sins are forever forgiven by God, through the mercy of Christ. When we do the confession in church, it is for our benefit, not for God's.

Another use of water is for cleaning. To get something clean, we need soap and water. We can use a sanitizer to kill germs on our hands, but to do a good job, we need soap and water. We need water to clean our bodies. Water became important for Judaism and other religions for ritual washing. So, it was more than just getting clean on the outside. Water became important to get clean on the inside. It was in the Jewish ritual bathing tradition that John the Baptist comes into the world with a baptism for the forgiveness of sins. The Greek word, *βαπτίζω*, literally means to bathe.

John promised that one is coming who is stronger than he is. Under John's ministry, Israel is gathered and waiting at the Jordan River. Who appears? Jesus traveled from his home in the Galilee to be baptized by John in the Jordan River. In Matthew, this is the second return to his own country, "the land of Israel." This is Jesus' second coming. Like other Jews, Jesus wishes to participate in this eschatological act of repentance in baptism.

The likely place where Jesus' baptism took place is several miles above the place where the Jordan River enters the Dead Sea. It is a desolate place. In all that desolation, the River Jordan provides a long strip of green. Jesus' baptism site is now a developed national park of the country Jordan.

Jesus desired baptism. He may have felt a need for a ritual cleansing that only John could provide. Or Jesus was guided to be baptized because there was an important spiritual event that was needed before he began his ministry. Or there could be another reason, I can't think of.

In any case, Jesus goes. Now I am certain that this actually happened. For one, all four gospels agree that this happened. That is rare. The main reason I

think this really happened is that every gospel, except Mark, tries to explain it away.

Mark tells the story plainly and briefly. Mark makes no attempt at a theological explanation. For Mark, it just happened. End of story. Luke tries an explanation. John avoids that whole thing by implying Jesus baptized himself.

So why is Jesus' baptism a problem? The problem occurs because of two things. One, the church very early on decided that since Jesus was God, then Jesus could have no sin. And since Jesus had no sin, Jesus could then take our sins and have them die on the cross with him. Two, John the Baptist baptized people for a forgiveness of sins. Since that it was John did, then how could Jesus, the sinless one, be baptized for a forgiveness of sins?

Matthew solves that problem by having John and Jesus get into an argument. Jesus shows up and says, "Baptize me." John says, "No way. You should be baptizing me!" Matthew has John acknowledge that John's baptizing Jesus was unnecessary for a forgiveness of sins. Jesus' authority is greater than John's.

Jesus' argument for his baptism is to convince John that this is the proper action. All righteousness, not just some righteousness, all righteousness can only be fulfilled by John baptizing Jesus. Well, who is John to stand in the way of *all* righteousness? John didn't want that pinned on him. So, John consented.

I pointed out some assumptions as to why Jesus felt compelled to be baptized by John. I believe that this baptism was the turning point in Jesus' life. Jesus went from being a carpenter's son to the son of God. It was only after Jesus rose from the waters of baptism that the Holy Spirit comes down from heaven and alights on Jesus. Jesus receives the Holy Spirit at his baptism. Then there is a voice from heaven, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." (NRSV) We will hear that voice and that phrase again at the Transfiguration.

The wording of what happened that day is important. Jesus is baptized and suddenly the heavens open up. It is too easy to gloss over the "suddenly." It may be best to think of the heavens opening immediately as Jesus rises from

the water. The symbolism is elaborated by St. Paul in Romans 6. Jesus, like us at our baptisms, rises from the death of submersion in the water to new life.

This new life is marked by a break into this world from heaven. From heaven, the Holy Spirit descends on Jesus, like a dove. Notice the Holy Spirit is not a dove. It is the descent that is *like* the way a dove descends. The curious thing here is that it is Jesus who sees this. Matthew makes no claim that anyone else saw it.

Matthew makes no attempt to identify the speaker of the heavenly voice. I think Matthew assumed that his readers would know it was God the Father. God makes a declaration. "This is my son, the Beloved." God's voice provides the Epiphany of who Jesus is.

Many claim to speak for God. Certainly, the Pharisees of Jesus' time did so. They said that they were the experts in the Law of Moses and since God gave Moses the law, then they claimed to speak for God. Jesus pointed out how their teachings were antithetical to God's teachings. The Pharisees didn't like that and they sought ways to get rid of Jesus.

Today, many people claim to speak for God. You might say that that is exactly what I am doing right now. I hope you do not think that. I can only elaborate on the holy texts that we all have access to.

Usually, when I hear of someone who thinks they know what God will do or say, it is in condemnation. That condemnation usually goes like this, "You are going to hell for that." This is someone who thinks that they know how another person will be judged by God. Only God can judge. Or if a belief is not agreeable, "You are going to hell for believing that." This is from someone who believes that they possess all of God's knowledge. Our brains are way too puny to understand God.

All we know is what Jesus told us. God's declaration is basically saying that Jesus speaks for me. And what did Jesus say? In a nutshell, Jesus taught and preached love. Jesus said that love means forgiveness. Love means reconciliation. Love means peace. Love brings joy. And when we are baptized, we enter that love.

Text: **Matthew 3:13–17** (NRSV)

¹³ Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. ¹⁴ John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” ¹⁵ But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he consented. ¹⁶ And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. ¹⁷ And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved,^d with whom I am well pleased.”

^d Or *my beloved Son*

¹ *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. (1989). (Mt 3:13–17). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.