

“Water and Grace”

Genesis 1:1 – 5 , Mark 1: 4 – 11

The Baptism of Jesus

Prairie Waters by Night by Carl Sandburg

CHATTER of birds two by two raises a night song joining a litany of running water—sheer waters showing the russet of old stones remembering many rains.

And the long willows drowse on the shoulders of the running water, and sleep from much music; joined songs of day-end, feathery throats and stony waters, in a choir chanting new psalms.

It is too much for the long willows when low laughter of a red moon comes down; and the willows drowse and sleep on the shoulders of the running water.

Water. We are made of water. We are made of water. We are part of water.

At this time in history, 1 billion of the world’s people – today – do not have access to clean water, for drinking, for bathing, for cooking. We cannot live without water.

At this time in history, 2.5 billion of the world’s people – today – do not have access to sanitation, provided by water. What greater reminder than to wake up each morning, and instead of fretting about the details of the day, to give thanks?

Even here in CA, we have an abundance of water, when we compare ourselves to the dust bowl, and to those 1 billion, nameless, faceless people.

Water is present in most of the world’s creation stories, ours included. From time before time, people have imagined how this world came into being. “God’s Spirit brooded like a bird above the watery abyss.” There is something very hopeful about God’s Spirit creating out of the abyss, out of what we would call “emptiness,” or “nothing.” Out of emptiness, out of nothing, God created All That Is.

“God’s Spirit brooded like a bird above the watery abyss.”

In Egyptian hieroglyphs, the symbol for water is a wavy line with small sharp crests, the water’s surface. The same symbol, when tripled, symbolized water in volume, primeval ocean and prime matter. The beginning.

The ancient Chinese considered water as the abode of the dragon; all life comes from the waters – as we do, you and I.

In the Vedas, the ancient Hindu texts, water is referred to a “the most maternal,” because, in the beginning, everything was like a sea without light. In India, the element of water is regarded as the preserver of life, circulating throughout the whole of nature, in the form of rain, of sap, of milk, and of blood. In modern psychology, water, dreams of water, images of water, represent the deep unconscious out of which we as human beings live, the unseen, unknown parts of ourselves.

When scholars compare these cross-cultural images of water, they understand water to symbolize the universal source of complete potential, that which precedes all form and creation.

And so, full circle, once again, to our own story of Creation, from the Holy Scriptures, the Hebrew scriptures, the Old Testament.

Something very basic and fundamental is imaged by water. And so we come to our own symbol of baptism – baptism with water, a sinking into the depths of water. Baptism is a sacrament, one of only two in the United Methodist tradition. IN our tradition, the sacraments are only two because, as we know in scriptures, Jesus experienced one: baptism, and was the giver of the second: holy communion.

A sacrament = an outward, visible sign of an inward, invisible grace.

In other words, we understand a sacrament as a way of pointing to something we cannot see: grace, life, hope, breath, depth. We understand God's grace as something we are given, also, without any action of volition of our own. For those of us who are United Methodists, this may cause us to question our understanding of the faith: are we God's because of what we do for others, for the world?

Or are we God's simply because we are God's?

The second points to the sacraments, outward signs of something we cannot see.

St. John Chrysostom - 4th century preacher and liturgist of the church, recognized as a Saint by both the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church, wrote of baptism:

"It represents death and interment, life and resurrection... when we plunge our heads beneath the water [in baptism], as in a sepulcher, the one we were becomes completely immersed and buried. When we leave the water, the new one suddenly appears."

In other words, baptism represents – it sacramentalizes – our identity with our spiritual nature, and not our bodily nature, which will die, and be buried, in one form or another. Baptism points to that self that is larger than our bodies. The one, our body, will die. Our Spirit, the other, will never die.

I like to say that all Jesus was really about was this: You are going to die. Now, how will you live?

To live as if you are going to die is the basis of baptism! In the past few years you've heard me say, many times, that the Church is not simply another social club. The Church is not simply a place we come to work hard to please ourselves and others. The Church, rather, is the community of human beings brought together through baptism, to live new lives, and to help one another grow in our new lives.

If the Church is any less, it is not the church. If the church is any less, it is simply another club.

I love baptism scenes in the movies, particularly those that show full immersion. One of my favorite movies of all time is "Tender Mercies," for which Robert Duvall won an Academy Award. There is a great, great baptism scene in that movie. The baptism takes place in the watery pool of a wood frame Baptist Church a long ways away on some lonesome country road in Texas. Mac, the man played by Duvall, has fallen in love with a young Vietnam widow and her son, and through their healing love, Mac, a once famous country singer whose life had fallen apart because of drinking and fame, comes to life again.

Buddy, the young son, decided it is time for him to be baptized, and one Sunday after church, he lets the preacher know he's ready. Buddy's mom reminds the preacher that she was baptized in this church. When the preacher asks Mac where he was baptized, he says: "I never was baptized." "Well, we'll have to work on you, then!" the preacher teases.

In the next scene, Buddy is baptized, immersed in the great pool of water in front of the whole congregation. His mother's face nearly bursts with pride as she watches her young son rise out of the waters of baptism. Then, the curtains to the baptismal pool close and open again. This time, Mac is immersed and brought up out of the waters. Again, Rosalynn's face is filled with emotion.

Later, as the three ride in Mac's truck, Buddy pulls down the rear-view mirror and puts his face up close. "Do I look any different?" he asks? His mother and Mac giggle. "I don't know! Do you?" Mac asks.

Do you look any different because of your baptism? Has your baptism washed away your reliance on your ego, and turned your heart toward power, toward love, toward hope?

Because that's what baptism does.