

B Epi 01
8 January 2012
St Michaels Studio City
RCL Mark 1.4-11, Psalm 29, Genesis 1.1-5, Acts 19.1-7

Water – Natural and Supernatural

I am a water person, maybe because I was born in March under the sign of Pisces, the fish. Or perhaps because I was born on the Olympic Peninsula outside of Seattle where there is lots of water – falling from the sky, pooling on the ground, omnipresent in ocean, stream, and lake. I like water.

The author, philosopher, and environmentalist Wallace Stegner once observed that the story of the American West is the story of water. We are a people dependent upon a precious and dwindling resource for the sustaining of our lives and the quality of those lives. Westerners are always aware of the availability of water, its abundance or its lack.

There are people around the world who view rivers of water as holy. We need only point out the Ganges in India, the Nile in northern Africa, the Rio Negro in South America, the Columbia and the Snake in northwestern United States, not to mention the Inuit reverence for frozen water in ice and snow. Remember all those river sprites and nymphs from Greek and Roman religion and mythology?

Hydrogen and oxygen, the constituent elements of water, are two of the most common elements in the universe. Current research is showing that water in various forms exists very commonly throughout interstellar space and interstellar clouds of gas. The water that covers most of our planet came from the bombardment of earth over eons by water- or ice-containing meteors. Though the Old Testament book of *Genesis* was not meant as a scientific account of creation, its poetic account of God's Spirit brooding over chaotic waters before bringing them into orderly life is not far from actuality.

Water is the unifying theme of our Bible readings today as we focus upon the baptism of our Lord Jesus in the River Jordan. He leaves behind His private life in Nazareth and begins His public work as God's agent of change.

In the reading from *Genesis* we have the opening verses of the first biblical creation story. There are two things present in that story that terrified our ancient Jewish ancestors in faith, darkness and chaotic oceanic water. Danger and death came from darkness and uncontrolled water. God acts upon these threatening realities and they lose their terror; darkness becomes light and the waters of destructive chaos are ordered into the waters above and the waters below, life-giving rain and life-sustaining irrigation of river and stream. God is master of all.

Psalm 29 reinforces this theme even more pointedly. God controls and uses for His purposes

earthquake, storm, flood, and volcanic eruption. The Lord is king of it all and uses these manifestations of glory and power to give strength to his people and to give his people the blessing of peace.

Today's reading from the Acts of the Apostles contrasts the uses of baptismal water between John the Baptist and Jesus. Saint Paul finds some God-respecting folks in the Turkish city of Ephesus who, in seeking God, have responded to the cleansing message of John and who have not yet heard of Jesus. They have made a partial pilgrimage which Paul now completes by baptizing them into the power of the Lord Jesus. They evidence the presence of God by the mysterious speaking-in-tongues and prophesying, the same activities that the first Christians showed on the day of Pentecost, when God's Spirit began a new presence of power in the people of the world.

Finally we hear from the evangelist Mark of the baptism of Jesus by John in the River Jordan. Once again we have a holy river; the Jordan waters and gives life to the valleys and fields of Galilee and Palestine. Moreover, it is the river that divided itself in order to allow God's people to cross over from Egyptian slavery into the freedom of God's people in the land of grace given to them by God. It is into this river water, fraught with meaning from of old, that John plunges the people who come to him, leading them into a closer relationship with their God. Jesus asks John to baptize Him as a public conjoining with John's mission. Jesus is about to begin His public mission of teaching, healing, and acting in God's power; He does so by going to the one man in their time whom the crowds recognize as acting with the integrity of a prophet. The baptism of the Galilean carpenter is accompanied by signs of God's presence and approval: an eerie voice from heaven and dove seemingly out of place and time.

Lots of water stuff going on here, and it is water carrying more than its own meaning and message. I watch those pbs, bbc, and nature channel programs about planet earth and I am humbled and amazed by the complexity and beauty of the role of water for life as we know it. The water cycle, as scientists name it, is essential for life to begin and grow: rain falls from the heavens, erosion and irrigation make their mark, the sea receives it all, and the sun evaporates water into vapor that falls again as rain. It is perfectly natural and wondrous. This is the meaning that water carries in itself.

But from the beginning, as our people have interpreted it, water has been associated with the presence and power of God, as we have just noted. In addition to its own glory and wonder, it speaks of a divine reality whose glory and wonder is far beyond its own natural resource. God works through water for blessing beyond the natural.

Paul in his letter to the Romans interprets baptism as a type of death and resurrection. For Paul, we drown in the waters of baptism as Jesus died on the cross. Then we rise out of those waters into a resurrected life guaranteed by the resurrection of Jesus. The waters of baptism encompass the death of our old, inadequate humanity and then they bring us to that place where God brings us to life again with a life beyond the power of anything we could ever have known on our own. It is the resurrected life of Jesus imparted to those who trust Him,

through the agency of God's Spirit, the Holy Spirit. It is what the Church's theology calls the life of grace. It is all very mysterious but not at all irrational. The supernatural meaning and power is signified and carried by the natural meaning and power.

So this is what we do when we baptize one of God's children. We use the natural creature of water essential for natural life to symbolize and channel the supernatural life that God wants to share with Her people. It is all part of the earthiness of Christian spirituality. We are blessed through and with our planet and its resources, not separate from them. God's original blessing is natural creation. God's second blessing is supernatural creation, His very own life and power and glory given to a people who could never have achieved it on their own.

Are we not blessed indeed?! We Westerners ought to be particularly aware of God's watery gifts. Especially if you are born under the sign of Pisces the fish.