

A person's silhouette is visible on the left, holding a lit lantern in their right hand. The lantern is glowing with a warm light, and the background is a soft, blue and purple twilight sky over a field of tall grass.

Sept/Oct 2023

Today

refresh, refocus, renew

going
HOME

ALSO: WATERS OF THE BIBLE

"There's no place like home," we sometimes say with a sigh of relief as we arrive home. Of course, the deep feelings tied to our sense of home are more than about a physical place. So many things are wrapped around home—love, meals, warmth, safety, comfort, celebrations—all helping to make life rich and meaningful.



Yet, as Pastor Joel Vande Werken reminds us in September, our feelings for home ultimately draw from a longing to be safe and secure in the arms of God, our heavenly Father. We can take comfort that no matter where we are or in what circumstances we find ourselves, we can be at home with God, who will never leave or forsake us. Through the sacrifice of his Son, God has given us everything we need in our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Then, in October, missionary teacher Kristopher Walhof invites us to reflect on water imagery in the Bible—and how it can help us ponder God's care and love for us. Our Lord calls us to trust in him as the "living water," and God shows that we can rest secure in him despite the powerful, destructive storms that may threaten us in life. We also learn that the water of baptism is a sign and seal of God's redeeming love and promises to us in Christ, giving us the comfort and courage to live with confidence and to share God's love with the world.

May you be refreshed, refocused, and renewed in God's Word!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kurt Selles". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Kurt Selles

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“Going Home”
Joel Vande Werken



“Waters of the Bible”
Kristopher Walhof

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Waters of the Bible

Kristopher Walhof

In the form of rain, clouds, oceans, rivers, lakes, and more, water is essential for natural life on our planet. At the same time, though, in the form of dangerous storms, flooding, and tsunamis, water can be terribly destructive.

At the beginning of the biblical story in Genesis 1, we see murky depths and chaotic waters. And yet the Spirit of God hovers over these waters and establishes his good world by shaping them. Then at the end of the Bible (Revelation 21-22) we see a vision in which the sea and its dangers are no more. Instead we see the peaceful river of life that delivers healing to all nations.

Throughout the Bible we also see many other passages referring to water, and among them is a picture of a man literally walking on the waves of the sea. We hear him telling the wind and waves to be at peace, and they are stilled. He also goes into a river to be baptized, and a voice from heaven declares, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well-pleased" (Matthew 3:17).

Though the Bible's many references to water may seem random and unrelated, reflecting on various examples can give us powerful insights into who God is, who we are, and how we are called to live in God's world. Let's see how the waters of the Bible can point us to Christ, who came to give us living water "welling up to eternal life" (John 4:14).

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THE DEEP

The earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.
—Genesis 1:2

Do you notice anything curious in the first verses of the Bible?

I have read these verses many times in my life, and just recently I wondered: Where did these *waters* come from? Well, God must have created these waters at some point, but we are not told that part of the story. We must be reading a poetic narrative that has been in progress for some time before we join with it.

The NIV translation of verse 2 says that the “Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.” The Hebrew word for “Spirit” is *ruach*, and that word can also be translated as “wind” or “breath.” So some translations say that the “wind of God” hovered (or moved) over the waters. Either way, we can begin to imagine God’s person and power moving over these deep

waters. In another passage the Hebrew word *rahap* for “hover” describes the Lord as a great eagle brooding, hovering over its beloved hatchlings as they leave the nest and learn to fly (Deuteronomy 32:11).

So in the first verses of Genesis we see God moving powerfully and lovingly over his yet unformed world of water. Now, here is another question, to which we will return: Do you know of any other stories in the Bible that mention water, wind (or Spirit), and perhaps a bird?

Creator God, may your Spirit hover within us, over us, and throughout your world as you bring all that is dark and chaotic into your peaceful light. Amen.

MOSES AND MONSTERS

*"I [Wisdom] was there . . . when [God] gave the sea its bound-
ary so the waters would not overstep his command. . . ."*

—Proverbs 8:27-29

Historically Moses, directed by God, is understood to be the writer of the first five books of the Bible. Growing up as part of the royal family in Egypt, Moses (a Hebrew child adopted by the king's daughter—Exodus 2) would have been taught many myths about the origin of the world. An old Mesopotamian myth, for example, held that Marduk, a warrior god, fought against Tiamat, a monster ruling the chaotic sea. Marduk defeated Tiamat and brought order out of chaos.

Now, let's look at Genesis 1 again. We see powerful waters, but they are not described as a god or a monster; they are simply a part of the world God is creating. God tells the waters where they can go and where they cannot go. (See also Proverbs 8:12-31.) Moses shows that the true God is in control of all things.

In myths about creation there is always uncertainty about whether a people's gods can hold back the forces of chaos. The ancient Egyptians, for example, believed that their sun god Ra had to descend into the underworld every night to defeat the great serpent Apophis, or else the ordered world would be destroyed.

But in the Genesis story, God creates and makes peace not through battle but with a word. No other force or would-be god is there; creation has only one true Lord.

Lord and God, we praise you that no force in heaven or on earth has power over you, and that you hold all things in your hands. Amen.

STEWARDS

The creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed.
—Romans 8:19

The world Moses grew up in had many stories about the origin of humans and their purpose. One ancient story said that some lesser gods were tired of serving higher gods, so they went on strike. Then one of the lesser gods created humans from clay so that they could serve the higher gods. So humans existed to build and maintain houses for the gods (temples) and to feed the gods through sacrifices.

To set things straight, God inspired Moses to explain *who* really created us and *why*. The one true God formed humans from dust and gave them life with his own breath (Genesis 2:7); God also created humans in his own image (Genesis 1:26). So we humans are created through love, not out of necessity or conflict, and we carry God's authority with us into the world. In other words, we are children of the Lord of

the universe, given authority to rule over and care for creation (Genesis 2:15). And if we would reflect God's wise rule and care for creation, the world would flourish and provide abundantly for us.

But our first human parents sinned (Genesis 3), so we have not reflected God's wise rule and stewardly care. As a result, creation has not flourished but has become chaotic and has actually made life difficult and dangerous. Thankfully, Jesus came to show us the way back to God, and God's Spirit came to teach us how to live for and serve God in the world till Jesus comes again.

Lord, forgive us for bringing destruction into this world, and teach us to reflect your wisdom and care. Amen.

THE STEWARDS' SECOND CHANCE

God . . . sent a wind over the earth, and the waters receded.

—Genesis 8:1

After human beings brought sin into the world (Genesis 3), things grew worse and worse until God decided to use the power of water in the form of a flood (Genesis 6). Many people would die, but God saved Noah and his family to become the stewards God had created them to be.

In Genesis 8 we are told that Noah's ark came to rest in some mountains, and that God "sent a wind over the earth, and the waters receded." Where have we seen a "wind" (or Spirit?) passing over waters before? Look back to Genesis 1:2. The Spirit (wind) of God hovers over the waters as the story of creation begins. And here, in Genesis 8, God is giving humans and his creation a new start. Noah sends out a dove to fly over the receding waters and look for a place to land. But it finds nothing at

first. Seven days later, though, the dove returns with a leaf from an olive tree—a clear sign that plant life was flourishing again on God's earth.

Here, then, we see God resurrecting creation after the flood and making it possible for human stewards to take care of the earth again.

How are we doing as the stewards of God's creation today?

Heavenly Father, we admit that we often ignore your call to care for your world and its creatures, including other people. Forgive us. Thank you for second chances (and many more) to listen to you and to obey your invitation to love and care for all that you have made. Amen.

DRAWN FROM THE WATER

She got a papyrus basket . . . and placed the child in it and put it among the reeds along the bank of the Nile. —Exodus 2:3

In our reading today, God's people Israel (the Hebrews) were living in Egypt, and they had been slaves there for generations. Their people had flourished after coming to live there in the time of Joseph (Exodus 1), but later a new king, driven by fear that Israel would grow too big and powerful, forced them into slavery. The king, Pharaoh, even tried to kill Israel's baby boys by having them thrown into the Nile River. Because of Egypt's beastly brutality, some Old Testament writers called the Egyptian empire "Rahab," the name of a mythical monster that symbolized the sea and its chaos (see Psalm 89:10; Isaiah 30:7; 51:9-10).

There is great irony here that God's rescue of his people begins with water. A Hebrew mother hides her baby boy in a basket and sets it among the reeds along the Nile River. The

Hebrew word for "basket" can also mean "ark." Does that remind us of Noah and his family being saved from the flood (Genesis 8)?

Then the daughter of Pharaoh finds this baby and decides to raise him as her son. She names him Moses, saying, "I drew him out of the water." And later Moses becomes the leader God uses to confront Pharaoh and to lead Israel out of slavery (Exodus 3-12).

So God rescues his people from the monster Rahab (Egypt). And the water, which could have been deadly, turns out to be a passageway to deliverance by God's hand.

Lord, give us faith to trust in you to preserve and care for us and our loved ones in surprising ways. Amen.

JUDGMENT ON THE GODS

"I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt. I am the LORD."
—Exodus 12:12

When Moses and Pharaoh face off, the biblical text makes clear that this is not merely a battle of wills between human leaders. Rather, the God of Israel is making war against the gods of Egypt.

The Nile River was the very heart of the Egyptian empire. Egypt depended on the Nile for crops, transport, and trade, making it powerful in its prosperity, politics, and religion.

So when God goes to war against the Egyptian gods, a number of the plagues strike at Egypt's very heart. For example, the first plague turns the waters of the Nile into blood. So there is no water for drinking or fishing or crops, making life very difficult for the Egyptians.

Of course, this plague had deep spiritual significance too. It meant that Egypt's gods of

the Nile (Sobek, Hapi, and Knuum) and its great fertility god (Osiris) had no power over the one true God. Osiris was also the supposed divine ancestor of the pharaohs who guided them into the afterlife.

The true Lord and Creator of the heavens and the earth showed that Egypt's gods were all false. Egypt and its king were powerless to stand in the way of God rescuing his people.

In what ways do we see God's power at work against false gods in our world today?

Lord and giver of life and death, we praise you that nothing in the spiritual realm or on the earth can separate us from your love, most clearly revealed in Jesus, our Savior. Amen.

A PASSAGE THROUGH THE SEA

Was it not you [God] who cut Rahab to pieces . . . ? Was it not you who dried up the sea . . . ?
—Isaiah 51:9-10

God had set his people free from slavery in Egypt (Exodus 12:31-38), and as they were traveling away, they came to a halt at the Red Sea. Then they were terrified as they saw that Pharaoh's army was pursuing them (14:1-10). But the Lord "drove the sea back with a strong east wind and turned it into dry land" so that his people could cross to the other side.

Where else have we heard of a wind (Spirit) interacting with water? In Genesis 1:2, God's Spirit/wind hovers over the chaotic waters, preparing for his creation. Then, in Genesis 8:1, God sends a wind to push back the waters of the great flood. Now here God drives the sea with a strong wind to provide a way of deliverance for his people.

And while Israel stands safe on the far bank of the Red

Sea, the waters come crashing down on Pharaoh's army. God's rescue of his people is dramatic and momentous, and so is the symbolism of this event. Remember that Egypt is described as the great sea monster "Rahab" in other Old Testament passages (see Psalm 89:10; Isaiah 30:7; 51:9-10). Here in Exodus the sea is cut in two. And then at God's command the sea drowns the mighty Egyptian army.

God has delivered his people, saving them from the chaotic, destructive forces of this world. Freed from slavery, they are set apart to bring blessing to the world through God's promises.

Saving God, we praise you for bringing us out from our slavery in sin to have abundant life in Jesus. Amen.

WORSHIP, WORLDVIEW, AND WATER

"Whenever they enter the tent of meeting, they shall wash with water so that they will not die."
—Exodus 30:20

After Israel had spent over 400 years in Egypt, God's biggest task was not so much to get the *people* out of Egypt but to get *Egypt* out of the people. They needed to worship God and learn a different view of the world so that they could share God's blessings with the world. And God used water to get them started.

God's instructions for setting up the tabernacle as a place of worship are in Exodus 25-31. The three main parts of the tabernacle reminded the people of the three basic levels of the cosmos (as understood in that day). The outer courtyard represented the earth—its dry land and sea. There people would wash in the basin, or "sea" (see 1 Kings 7:23-28), and be reminded that God had rescued them through the Red Sea. The Holy Place, a room inside the tent, repre-

sented the heavens. Another room, further inside, was the Most Holy Place, representing God's throne room in the highest heaven. In essence, heaven and earth came together in the tabernacle. And this served as a model of the renewed world where God will come to live with his people again (Revelation 21-22).

God wants humans to work with him in renewing the world, so he gave priests to Israel as a sort of renewed humanity, symbolically cleansed of sin and anointed for God's work. The role of the priest, purified by water and wearing royal robes, reminded God's people that they were created in his image.

Lord, guide us to serve you and to share your goodness and love with everyone. Amen.

A NEW START

The priests . . . stopped in the middle of the Jordan . . . until the whole nation had completed the crossing. . . . —Joshua 3:17

After Israel's long sojourn in the desert, God opened a way for them through the Jordan River into the promised land. The waters upstream "piled up in a heap," perhaps like the "wall of water" on the right and left as Israel crossed the Red Sea (Exodus 14:22). Both stories say that the people passed through "on dry ground" (Joshua 3:17).

Although God had been faithful to Israel, keeping his promises to rescue them and bring them to the land he had promised them (Genesis 12:1-8; 15:13-16; 28:10-15; 46:3-4; Exodus 3:4-10), the people turned away and rebelled. They did that again and again in a long history of unfaithfulness (Exodus 32; Numbers 14; Judges 2:10-23; 2 Kings 17:1-23; 25:1-21). Eventually they were punished and sent into exile, but God, ever faithful,

brought them back again (Ezra-Nehemiah).

Then, about 30 years after the birth of Jesus (Matthew 1; Luke 2), God called John to prepare the way for the Messiah, who had come to be the Savior of the world (John 1:29; 3:16). In Mark 1 we see John preaching in the wilderness, calling people to repent and baptizing them in the Jordan River. And here the people are called not to *cross* the Jordan but to be *baptized* in it. God calls them to make a new start through repentance, to seek forgiveness, and to prepare their hearts for the coming of the Savior.

O God, when we rebel against you, remind us that you have called us to repent and be forgiven, in Jesus, that we may live for you. Amen.

WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?!

[Jonah] answered . . . "I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land." —Jonah 1:9

In some ways we can think of Jonah's experience as a kind of baptism. Jonah is a rebellious, runaway prophet who needs to repent, seek God again, and obey what he is called to do.

God called Jonah to preach a message of repentance to the people of Nineveh. But Jonah didn't want to. The people of Nineveh were enemies of Israel, and Jonah wanted them destroyed. So he boarded a ship going the other way and tried to flee from God.

But God "sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up." Where else have we seen God's power at work in a wind on the sea? (Genesis 1:2; 8:1; and Exodus 14:21.) But here God created a storm and a different pathway for Jonah.

The sailors, who were terrified and cried out to their pagan

gods for help, showed more respect for Jonah's God than Jonah did. But at least Jonah admitted he had caused the problem, and he told the sailors to throw him overboard. When they finally did that, "the raging sea grew calm."

Though Jonah was still trying to escape, God still wanted to call Nineveh to repent, so he sent "a huge fish" to swallow Jonah. And after three days, the monster fish vomited Jonah "onto dry land." Here again, the sea should have meant death for one of God's people (and many others) but God rescued Jonah to share his blessing and grace.

Lord, guide us not to run from you, whatever you may call us to do. Forgive us, we pray, and pull us back to follow your way for us. Amen.

ANOINTED

As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. . . .

—Mark 1:10

John had baptized many people in the Jordan River before Jesus came to be baptized there. Jesus, who had no sin, had no need to repent. But John baptized him because Jesus said, “It is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness” (Matthew 3:15). Here, as Jesus set out to begin his teaching ministry and his mission to save us from sin and death, he was being anointed as the Messiah. In this role he would be the king and representative of a renewed people of God. He would be anointed by the Holy Spirit, and then, through Jesus, God’s people would receive the Spirit as well.

When Jesus came up out of the water in the Jordan, he saw heaven “torn open” and the Holy Spirit coming down in the form of a dove to anoint him. This showed that God was returning to live among his

people, as he had done in the tabernacle (see Oct. 8). Where else have we seen water and the Spirit of God described as a bird? We saw it in Genesis 1:2, with the Spirit hovering over the waters. And here, in Jesus the Son, who came to live among us as a human being, God was working to renew our relationship with himself.

After his anointing, Jesus was sent by the Spirit into the wilderness. There, like Adam and Eve, he was tempted by Satan. But Jesus succeeded where they had not (Luke 4:1-13).

Lord, fill us with your Spirit too, that we may work with you at renewing your world. Amen.

WATER AND SPIRIT

Jesus answered, "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit."

—John 3:5

What does Jesus mean when he says a person must be "born of water and the Spirit" to enter the kingdom of God? Is he saying that you have to be baptized with water to be counted among God's people?

I think the short answer has to be "Not necessarily, but usually." God can certainly save someone apart from water baptism. But God uses baptism to engage with us and to communicate his grace, so that is the usual practice in the church today.

We do well to keep in mind, though, the example of the criminal who was crucified along with Jesus. This man saw who Jesus was, and he asked to be remembered when Jesus came into his kingdom. And Jesus told him, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43).

In John 3, I think Jesus is echoing prophets like Ezekiel, who spoke about water as a symbol of cleansing from sin, and about the Spirit of God, who comes to fill us and renew our hearts (Ezekiel 36:24-27). That symbolism is picked up by John and Jesus in their practice of baptism.

Now this leads to another question: If a person is baptized as a baby or adult, does that mean they are saved? Not necessarily. Some people who are baptized might reject God. But, as some teachers have noted, baptism places us in the community of faith, the church, where we can grow to know and live by God's covenant love and grace.

Lord, thank you for baptism and for guiding us by your Spirit to grow in grace. Amen.

WATER FOR ETERNAL LIFE

"The water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life."
—John 4:14

In this story about a meeting at a well, we find some unusual imagery about water.

Jesus reaches out to a Samaritan woman—and that is surprising because Jews did not usually associate with Samaritans. But Jesus' purpose here, even though he was tired and thirsty, was to share the good news of eternal life so that more people could learn the truth about God, who loves them.

Jesus asks the woman for a drink of water, and her first reaction is to say, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" And Jesus, the master teacher, gives a response that can sound in some ways like a riddle. He talks about "the gift of God" and something called "living water," and he invites the woman to wonder "who it is that asks [her] for a drink."

He now certainly has her attention, and she is curious about this "living water," where it comes from, and if it has anything to do with the water at the well.

So Jesus explains that the water he is talking about is spiritual. He also says that it comes from him and that it will give people eternal life. The woman soon also learns that Jesus is the Messiah her people have been waiting for. And in amazement she rushes away to tell her townspeople, and many of them become believers (John 4:28-30, 39-41)!

Have you shared Jesus' message about living water with the people near you?

Lord Jesus, thank you for coming to give us the "living water" we need for eternal life. Teach us to share it freely! Amen.

RIVERS OF LIVING WATER

"Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them."
—John 7:38

When Jesus meets a Samaritan woman at a well, he talks with her about "living water" that he can give for eternal life (John 4:10-14; see Oct. 13).

In John 7, Jesus teaches again about "living water," and this time he speaks of "rivers of living water" flowing from people who believe in him.

Some other Bible passages help us to understand more about the "living water" Jesus introduces here. This imagery draws from some Old Testament prophets and points ahead to eternal life with God in the new heaven and earth.

The prophet Isaiah, for example, talks about recognizing the Lord as your salvation and says, "With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation" (Isaiah 12:1-3). Isaiah 58:11 adds that with the Lord as your guide, you will be "like a spring whose

waters never fail." In addition, the prophet Ezekiel describes a vision of a river flowing from God's temple in Jerusalem. The water begins as a trickle, but it grows wider and deeper as it flows. And when it reaches the Dead Sea far away, it "makes the salt water fresh; so where the river flows everything will live" (Ezekiel 47:9). This vision also points to a New Testament vision of "the river of the water of life" (Revelation 22:1-2).

In John 7, Jesus is saying that his followers have the water of life in them through the gift of the Holy Spirit. And they can go out into the world—even to all its dead places—to share the gift of new life with others.

Spirit of God, lead us to bring new life into the dead and dying places of your world, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

WHO IS THIS?

They were terrified and asked each other, "Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!"
—Mark 4:41

Have you ever been in a boat that seemed to be at the mercy of the wind or the waves, such that you found yourself praying to God for rescue?

In our reading for today, Jesus' disciples were doing all they could to keep their boat from capsizing as they were crossing a lake in the midst of a storm. And, at the same time, Jesus was taking a nap!

When the disciples woke Jesus, they were alarmed that he did not seem to care about the storm and its danger. But then Jesus simply got up and *spoke* to the wind and the waves, saying, "Quiet! Be still!" Jesus' words were not a plaintive request or even a prayer, but a *command*. And the wind and waves obeyed!

The disciples had just a moment of relief before another terrifying thought crept over them: "Who is this? Even the wind

and the waves obey him!" The disciples knew their Scriptures and were very much aware that, in the beginning, it was God who told the waters what their boundaries were. In the time of the great flood, it was God who commanded the waters to cover the earth. It was also God who had made a way for his people through the Red Sea. So the disciples clearly knew the answer to their question "Who is this?" And they were trying to come to grips with the reality that their friend, who had just been napping in the boat, was also the Lord of all creation!

Lord Jesus, touch us with appropriate awe and peace, knowing that you, the Lord of creation, have come to live with us, even (and especially) in the midst of life's chaos. Amen.

ALL AUTHORITY

"Make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you."

—Matthew 28:19-20

John the Baptist gathered people at the Jordan River, calling them to repent of their sin and be baptized in preparation for the Messiah's coming (Mark 1:1-8). These actions challenged the political powers of John's day. John even called Herod, the regional leader of Judea, to repent of his sin (because Herod had unlawfully married his own brother's wife). And eventually, Herod would behead John.

When Jesus arrived on the scene, his unique form of kingship (for example, loving enemies, caring for the poor, and speaking truth) also felt threatening to the powers of his day. And eventually, he too was executed, this time on a Roman cross. However, after three days he emerged from the tomb. No matter how powerful the leaders of Jesus' day thought they were, they could not defeat a man who would not stay dead. Jesus was victorious over death.

Shortly before the resurrected Jesus ascended into heaven to rule as King over the universe, he told his disciples that all authority over the world belonged to him (including authority over sin, death, and evil). Bearing his authority, Jesus calls his disciples to invite people into his kingdom by baptizing them into the family of the Triune God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), and teaching them to obey Jesus' commands.

In the footsteps of John—and with the authority of Jesus—we are called to do the same. And if we are ever afraid, Jesus assures us that his own Holy Spirit is always with us.

Lord Jesus, through your victory on the cross, you established your authority over this world. Show us how we can be involved in your mission of making disciples through baptizing and teaching. Amen.

SOUND OF A VIOLENT WIND

A sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and . . . they . . . were filled with the Holy Spirit. . . . Those who accepted his message were baptized. . . . —Acts 2:2, 41

The Holy Spirit is the main character in the book of Acts—and in the growth of the church. And through the Spirit-powered witness of his followers, Jesus said, the gospel will spread from Jerusalem (the city), to Judea and Samaria (the region), “to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

In Acts 2 we see how that work of the Holy Spirit began. “A sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven,” and Jesus’ apostles were filled with the Holy Spirit. As we have noted earlier, the Spirit of God and his mighty acts are often associated with *wind*. And the “sound . . . of a violent wind” echoes the power of the “strong wind” God used to make a pathway for his people through the Red Sea (Exodus 14:21). What’s more, as John the Baptist had prophesied, the work of Jesus would

result in people being baptized “with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Matthew 3:11)—and in Acts 2, as the Holy Spirit filled Jesus’ apostles, “what seemed to be tongues of fire . . . came to rest on each of them.”

So on Pentecost, the people of God, followers of Jesus, were renewed through a wind (Spirit), fire, and *water*. The wind of the Holy Spirit rushed on the apostles, and fire alighted on them—and later that day 3,000 people came to faith in Jesus and were *baptized* (Acts 2:41).

Lord and Savior, fill us with your Holy Spirit, and help us as we try to stay “in step” with the Spirit’s work in the world today. Amen.

BEYOND THE RIVERS OF CUSH

"From beyond the rivers of Cush, my worshipers, my scattered people, will bring me offerings."
—Zephaniah 3:10

Jesus told his disciples that they would be his "witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). One of these "ends" was the Kingdom of Ethiopia, "beyond the rivers of Cush" (in modern Sudan).

The Ethiopian eunuch in our story traveled fifteen hundred miles across rivers, mountains, and deserts to worship the God of Israel in the temple in Jerusalem.

However, Deuteronomy 23:1 states that no man with damaged or missing testicles (like the eunuch) could come near God's holy place. And so it is likely that the man would have been turned away.

On his long journey back to end-of-the-earth Ethiopia, the man read from the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 53:7-8). He read about a man who suffered greatly, a man who appeared to

be rejected by God and who suffered for the sins of other people. As the Ethiopian man wondered about this suffering man, a disciple of Jesus, named Philip, came alongside him and explained how this ancient prophecy was fulfilled in Jesus. Philip shared the good news that through Jesus, all people, including faithful foreigners and eunuchs, are welcomed into God's family (Isaiah 56:3-5). The Ethiopian man received the good news that day and was baptized into the family of God. Instead of encountering God in a brick and mortar temple, the Holy Spirit made his home in him.

Heavenly Father, we praise you that even if we have experienced exclusion in this world, through Jesus, you have welcomed us into your family and made your home within us. Amen.

AS ONE ABNORMALLY BORN

Something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength.
—Acts 9:18-19

As we can imagine, Saul's experience of meeting Jesus on the way to Damascus must have been terrifying. He said later that when Jesus appeared to him, he felt as if he were like a child taken from the womb too early ("one abnormally born"). Being stopped by a blinding light, falling to the ground, and learning that he had persecuted the church of God by chasing followers of the crucified Messiah—who was now ruling in heaven—was all too much!

Saul, blinded by glory, had to be led by hand along the rest of the way to Damascus. Then, a few days later, the Lord sent Ananias to visit Saul, and he received the Holy Spirit, was healed from blindness, and was baptized.

The book of Acts shows that people come to faith in Jesus

in many different ways. The Spirit is free and does not follow a formula. Sometimes the Spirit uses words of Scripture to move a person's heart. Sometimes a person hears the good news through someone else. Sometimes the Lord speaks through a dream or a vision. In some cases, as with Saul, the encounter may be dramatic and even terrifying, followed by a vision and the coming of the Spirit a few days later. In other cases, whole households are baptized, including children who will grow in faith throughout their life. But in all of these ways the Spirit is at work!

Lord, to some of us you come hovering gently. Others of us need to be knocked to our knees. You know best how to fill us, Lord. Amen.

THEY RECEIVED THE HOLY SPIRIT

"Surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptized with water. They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have."

—Acts 10:47

As we can see in this story, in the new era of Jesus and the pouring out of the Holy Spirit, God was doing a new thing!

Through a vision, Peter had received a new way of thinking about the people of other nations, and he was called to speak to a Roman centurion (Acts 10:9-23). Later, at the centurion's house, Peter also met the man's "relatives and close friends," and he was able to share with all of them the good news about Jesus. Peter explained that Jesus came to save all who will believe in him. Jesus came to take away all our sin by dying on a cross, and then he rose from the dead and is now Lord over all.

While Peter was still teaching, the Holy Spirit unexpectedly "came on all who heard the message." This was surprising to the Jewish believers who

had come with Peter that day. God was accepting even the Gentiles? Amazing! Well, "the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out" on them. So there was nothing to "stand in the way of their being baptized with water."

Peter, who, like other Jewish believers, had previously preferred to keep away from Gentiles, now embraced these people from other nations, welcoming them into Christ's renewed family, the church.

Heavenly Father, it is sometimes said that we Christians are merely beggars who show other beggars where to find bread. Help us to see all people through the eyes of your love. Amen.

HOUSEHOLD OF FAITH

He and all his household were baptized.

—Acts 16:33

Not long ago I found myself detained in a police station, in a country not my own. My offense? Taking a U-turn while driving and, as the police officer put it, “obstructing traffic” (which was not true). I prayed lots of silent (but angry) prayers that day—and eventually God sent a “good Samaritan” (a newspaper reporter) who helped me post bail so that I could go home.

Paul and Silas found themselves unjustly detained. But their situation was much different. They had been sharing the message of Jesus and were falsely accused of causing an uproar, so they were beaten and thrown in jail (Acts 16:16-24). In prison they prayed, and they sang hymns to God while the other prisoners listened. They had a deep confidence (faith) that God could use even their misfortunes to draw

others (even criminals and jailers) into his family.

When an earthquake sent by God opened the prison and unchained everyone, Paul and Silas assured the jailer that no one had escaped. And the jailer, who had been ready to kill himself, learned about salvation through belief in Jesus. Then the jailer and “all his household were baptized.” (See also Acts 16:15.) In that time a “household” often included a wife and children, aging parents, and slaves or servants. In examples like this, God makes clear that he wants whole households brought into his covenant family!

Lord Jesus, Savior to all who call on you, bring us and our loved ones into the family of God, and use us to draw others to you. Amen.

SET APART

You were circumcised by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him. . . .

—Colossians 2:11-12

God called his people to be distinct (“set apart, holy”) from other nations. That way, the other nations could see this blessed nation and be drawn to meet the one, true, loving God (Genesis 12:1-3).

Since the time of Abraham, God’s people were set apart by circumcision (of males, and usually as babies—Genesis 17:9-14). But that eventually led to a major question in the early church, as the Lord sent his renewed people, who were mainly Jewish, to bring the gospel to Gentiles and welcome them into his family. Did Gentiles have to be circumcised in order to be fully Christian? The early church eventually concluded, “No.” Since God was already accepting them through the Holy Spirit, they needed to be received into the church through baptism. Baptism, not circum-

cision, became the primary way that all of God’s people (Jews and Gentiles) were set apart as holy.

So in the church today, adults and children, including infants, are set apart as “holy” in baptism just as adults and children in Israel were set apart by circumcision. Throughout the centuries, the church has practiced baptism this way as the sign of God’s lasting covenant with his people, welcoming all who are in the households of believers into the family of God.

Lord, we praise you that all kinds of people, male and female, young and old, from all nations, are welcome in your family. In Jesus, Amen.

A SIGN

[Abraham] is the father of all who believe but have not been circumcised, in order that righteousness might be credited to them.

—Romans 4:11

The water of baptism is a *physical* “sign” that points symbolically to the washing away of sin through the finished work of Jesus Christ. It is also a *spiritual* “sign” of the renewing work of God’s Spirit in our lives. So in the way we live, think, speak, and act it should be clear that, by the grace of God, we are different, set apart (“holy”). As a song puts it clearly, “They’ll know we are Christians by our love”—of God and all people.

Water baptism, then, is really important. The sacrament of baptism is public and experiential, and it engages our imaginations. Further, when an adult or a baby is baptized, the congregation is asked to make promises to nurture that person in the faith and to help them as they follow God’s calling. Making these vows and seeing the ritual reminds us of the promises that were made

over us at our own baptism, and the entire sacrament reminds us of the covenant promises of God.

A road sign is something that points beyond itself to a destination, and it guides all who see it. Baptism is like that, pointing the community of faith to the reality of God’s grace found in the saving work of Christ for us. It guides us in the life of faith until the day Jesus returns to renew all things.

Lord, we thank you for giving us the sacrament of baptism to remind us of the reality of your grace. Amen.

A SEAL

All of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.
—Galatians 3:27

Some Christian teachers have described baptism as a kind of “seal” that the Spirit of God places upon believers. Sometimes people say this is like a wax seal on a letter, identifying the sender and showing that it was sent by them for a purpose. The fourth-century church teacher Augustine used another analogy to understand baptism as a seal. He said it was like the sealing kiss at a marriage ceremony: witnesses are present, promises are made, love is declared, and all of that is affectionately summed up in a kiss.

Many Christians throughout the centuries have also then asked: Will all who are “sealed” in baptism be “saved” in the end? Not necessarily. At weddings, love is declared and promises are made, but in some cases a marriage may fall apart. A pastor friend of mine

describes the seal of baptism as something like a coupon: a customer must use the coupon to claim the value that is placed on it.

God’s baptismal promises and his claim on us are sure and true, but the one who is baptized is also called to live into those promises and to claim that identity. Further, though a person can walk away from a relationship with Christ, we may never underestimate the love of Christ for that person. He promises to pursue his lost sheep, and his church is called to do that too.

Lord, thank you for your ever-pursuing love, your promises, and your claim on all who are baptized in the community of faith. Amen.

I.D.

[Hannah said,] "I give him to the LORD. For his whole life he will be given over to the LORD."
—1 Samuel 1:28

The story of Hannah and Samuel can help us understand the transition of *identity* that takes place in baptism. Hannah had not been able to bear a child, but she prayed, asking that if God would give her a child, she would give him to the Lord "for all the days of his life" (1 Samuel 1:11). God answered her prayer, and she eventually brought her little boy to Eli the priest to begin his training in the service of the Lord. And Samuel served God faithfully for many years.

In a way like what Hannah did, giving up her beloved child to God's service, in baptism we give children to be a part of Christ's church and kingdom, in which we are called to serve the Lord. The child's *primary* identity shifts to become part of the church, the family of God. In baptism, we recognize that the Lord claims and sets

the child apart as his own. And the child is introduced to their new church family (which extends across history and geography). The parents or caregivers are then entrusted to raise the child in the Christian faith, with the church's help.

Bringing a child for baptism is therefore a profound act of faith, because the child may be called to serve God in radical or even dangerous ways for Christ's kingdom. Even so, the Spirit assures us that each one's destiny is always in God's hand (John 10:27-30).

Lord, thank you for calling us to be your own. We give our whole lives over to you, for you gave yourself completely for us. Use us for your purposes. Amen.

WASHED

"And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name." —Acts 22:16

Earlier we talked about priests who had to wash with water, symbolically washing their sins away before they came into God's holy presence in the tabernacle (Oct. 8). Because the seriousness of sin resulted in death, the symbolically purified priest would sacrifice an animal in the place of the sinful people. The priest would then sprinkle the sacrificial blood on the people to show that their sins were atoned for. Yet the priest's washing with water and the sprinkling of blood did not actually take away the people's sin (Hebrews 10:11).

By the Spirit of God, Isaiah prophesied about a dedicated, suffering Servant who came to represent God's people and take their sins on himself, even though he was innocent of sin (Isaiah 49-50; 52:13-53:12). This Servant was Jesus, and he became the great, sinless High

Priest who offered himself for the forgiveness of all of our sins, and spiritually covered us with his blood (Hebrews 8-10).

Old Testament priests looked forward to the day when God would somehow deal with sin, and today we can look back to the cross of Christ Jesus. And all of this is symbolized when someone is washed, covered in the waters of baptism. The next time someone asks you, "When were you saved?" be sure to answer, "About two thousand years ago."

"Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love. . . . Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin" (Psalm 51:1-2). Amen.

DYING AND RISING

All of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death. . . .
—Romans 6:3

I have never been a “water person.” As a boy, I did *not* enjoy going under water, so water parks were not much fun for me. Even as an adult, when I am swimming in a lake, river, or ocean, I am always wondering about the creatures that are much more at home in those deeps than I am. . . .

When some religious leaders taunted Jesus, saying they wanted to see a sign proving who he was, he said that the only sign he would give them was “the sign of Jonah.” Jonah, we remember, had been as good as dead, for he was thrown into the chaotic sea and was then swallowed by a sea-monster. But God had the monster spew him out on dry land after three days (Jonah 1-2). Jesus then said he would be “in the belly of the earth” three days, referring to his burial in a tomb. When Jesus

explained this to his disciples, he said he would “be killed and on the third day raised to life” (Matthew 16:21). And then later Jesus died on a cross, was buried in a tomb, and on the third day rose to life again. He defeated sin and death for our sake so that we can have new life in him!

When a person is baptized in a pool or a lake or river, they go under water, picturing how, in Christ, our old sinful nature has died. Then they come up out of the water, showing how we rise to new life in Christ. And the renewed person is empowered to follow Christ in his mission.

Lord, thank you that in baptism we die and rise with you to live a new life. Amen.

ONE BAPTISM, ONE BODY

We were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body.

—1 Corinthians 12:13

How often should a Christian be baptized? Only *once* in life.

This is quite different from the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, which Jesus gave us for regular spiritual nourishment (Luke 22:19; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26). That's because, in baptism, God (not us) is making the primary statement of grace and faithfulness. However, we can continually be *reminded* of our baptism through the baptisms of others, through worship, and even in a church building's physical features.

In some medieval churches, for example, the baptismal pool was at the entrance to the worship area. Some pools were even made in the shape of a cross, since we are baptized into Christ's death. Often these pools also had three steps going down into the water, signifying baptism in the name of God the Father, the Son, and

the Holy Spirit. As a baptized person came up out of the water, they were also given a white robe to wear, a symbol of being clothed with Christ (see Galatians 3:27; Revelation 7:14).

When, as an adult, a person comes to faith in Christ, they are called to be baptized and to profess their faith publicly before entering the full life of the church—its fellowship, worship, and participation in the Lord's Supper. In doing so, the believer commits to being *one* with Christ and with his people in the *one* body of Christ, the *one* family of God.

Lord, thank you for receiving us into your one covenant family through baptism. In Jesus, Amen.

ARK OF THE CHURCH

In [the ark] only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also. . . .
—1 Peter 3:20-21

In our reading for today, the apostle Peter mentions Noah and the ark, which we discussed on October 4 (Genesis 8). Do you remember another story this month that also pointed to the ark? In Exodus 2 (Oct. 5), as you may recall, Moses' mother places him as a baby in a "basket," and the Hebrew word for that can also mean "ark." Moses' mother did this, in faith, hoping that her little boy would escape the murderous reach of Pharaoh, the king of Egypt (see Exodus 1:22).

In the New Testament, the apostle and fisherman Peter states that just as God rescued Noah and his family "through water" while other people were swept away in judgment, Christians are rescued from judgment by Christ's death and resurrection, which is symbolized in baptism. If believers

in Christ are symbolically rescued (like Noah and his family) "through water" (baptism), then what is the "ark"? What is the vessel of God's rescue for us and indeed for the whole creation? It seems that this would be the church, the community of faith. Remember, baptism places us in the nurturing community of the people of God with its worship, prayers, sacraments, and fellowship. In this "ark" we are on the way to the resurrection and full life in God's renewed world.

Lord, we praise you for the church, which, though it can be rocked by powerful winds and waves, is nonetheless piloted by you and is the place of your grace and salvation. Amen.

RETURN OF THE SEA MONSTERS

The dragon stood on the shore of the sea. And I saw a beast coming out of the sea.
—Revelation 13:1

In Revelation 4-5, the apostle John describes a vision of heaven. He sees God the Father on the throne, the Holy Spirit in the form of seven torches, and Christ as a Lamb, looking like it was slaughtered. In front of the throne is a peaceful “sea of glass, clear as crystal.” Around the throne, creatures representing all animal life give praise to God.

Later John sees the spiritual reality behind events that take place on earth. There a dragon, Satan himself, stands on the shore of a chaotic sea, which brings forth monsters that have “power to wage war against God’s holy people and to conquer them” (Revelation 13:7). These beasts represent a world turned upside down from what God intended. God had created humans to fill the earth and steward it (including its animals) with his authority and care. But instead humans

turned away from God and sinned, worshiping idols and degenerating into beastly empires, brutalizing other people and nature.

As John received these visions, the Roman Empire had begun persecuting the church. But although the empire had crucified Jesus, the Lamb of God, he had come back to life and had taken his rightful place as King of heaven and earth. Further, the Spirit of God was now living in believers, united with Christ in the waters of baptism. And the dragon knew his time was short . . . (Revelation 12:12).

Lord and King, you are alive, and you rule over all things. Come quickly, Lord, to bring your kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.

THE RIVER OF LIFE

There was no longer any sea. . . . Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life. . . .
—Revelation 21:1; 22:1

At the end of history, after battles long and hard, Satan is defeated by Christ and his followers (Revelation 12:10-11). And Jesus completes the work he began when he first came: the restoration of true human stewards and his good world.

Heaven and earth are united; God's will is fully done on earth as it was already done in heaven (Matthew 6:10). And we are told something odd: "there was no longer any sea." Here God is not ridding the world of its "good" natural seas (Genesis 1:10) but, rather, what the sea represents: chaos and rebellion. Anything that threatens to harm God's good creation is done away with. Then we see "the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal," flowing from God's throne, delivering the leaves of the tree of life to the world for its healing after so many years of sin,

death, destruction, and evil (remember also the living water of John 7:38; Ezekiel 47). And at last the earth is "filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea" (Habakkuk 2:14).

This is the final reality we envision when a person is baptized in the name of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Baptism anticipates renewal in Christ and the rebirth of the whole world to new life, flooded with grace.

Lord Christ, in baptism, we anticipate the day when you will return to finish all you started when you came to bring us salvation. Continue in the work of your Spirit-filled saints, and bring the restoration of all things. Amen.



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