

Baptism of Our Lord (RCL/B): "Water Is Life!"
Genesis 1:1-5; Mark 1:4-11
January 6-7, 2024
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

"Water is life," cried out the Standing Rock Sioux in their Lakota language when they protested the oil pipeline being built on their tribe's land. "The first medicine" is what many native peoples call water, so basic is it to life and health. ¹

*In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of **the deep**, while a wind from God swept over the face of **the waters**. (Genesis 1:1)*

More than half of the average adult human body is made up of water. This is why we're apt to feel headachy and listless when we're suffering from dehydration. If any of you have peace lilies, you can picture how they look when they're thirsty: their leaves become limp. They're very forgiving, though: give them a drink and they perk right back up!

Harkening back to Genesis, but also considering what science teaches about earth's evolution, the sea could be called the earthly mother of us all. No water, no life. "Water is life," the Sioux remind us. Most folks expect to pay a water bill, but we also expect water to flow as long as we need it to. But that's not a guarantee as climate change ramps up and ground water recedes.

The headline of an interesting article in last week's paper was, "What if Farmers Were Taxed on Water? In California, Some Are." "Pajaro" is the Spanish word for bird, and the Pajaro Valley, nestled along California's beautiful Monterey Bay, is one of the berry-growing capitals of the world. In order to irrigate the crops, farmers there pay as much as \$400 per acre-foot; acre-foot means one acre of water, one foot deep. That water tax creates income of "\$12 million dollars/year, which is used to recycle, restore and conserve the region's groundwater." **Why** are the farmers willing to shell out that kind of money? To prevent what happened about 40 years

ago, when the ground water level fell so low, sea water leached into the fields and killed the berry plants. “Water is life.” But for many purposes, like agriculture, it’s gotta be pure. Charge more for water and growers will use less. Charge more and the proceeds can become water recycling plants that convert sewage into irrigation water. The proceeds can also become a system to capture rainwater and collect it in storage basins, allowing it to seep back into underground wells.

Our baptismal font has been dry since lockdown in March of 2020, except for times when a baptism is actually occurring. Before then, we often kept water in the font, so that worshipers could dip their finger in, make the sign of the cross or simply trace a cross on their forehead. Martin Luther said he made the sign of the cross to remember his baptism, “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” He also advised, “Wash your face and remember your baptism!” We could add, “Jump into the pool and remember your baptism!” “Dive into the ocean and remember your baptism!”

It takes a leap of imagination, but our pouring of water over the head of the person being baptized is meant to represent not just cleansing of original sin, but **drowning** of the old self. The baptismal banner that was hanging here before Advent is a silk-screened painting of the sea slamming against rocks. Kristin Gilje, the artist, created it just for us here at Holy Trinity, here at the Shore, where we are in such close proximity to the power of the Atlantic Ocean. The root meaning of the word baptism is dunking or drowning. Immersion baptism conveys that meaning better than pouring water from a shell, but the net effect is the same. As St. Paul wrote to the Romans (ch. 6), in *The Message* paraphrase:

³That is what happened in baptism. When we went under the water, we left the old country of sin behind; when we came up out of the water, we entered into the new country of grace—a new life in a new land!

3-5 That's what baptism into the life of Jesus means. When we are lowered into the water, it is like the burial of Jesus; when we are raised up out of the water, it is like the resurrection of Jesus. Each of us is raised into a light-filled world by our Father so that we can see where we're going in our new grace-sovereign country.

6-11 Could it be any clearer? Our old way of life was nailed to the cross with Christ, a decisive end to that sin-miserable life—no longer captive to sin's demands! What we believe is this: If we get included in Christ's sin-conquering death, we also get included in his life-saving resurrection. We know that when Jesus was raised from the dead it was a signal of the end of death-as-the-end. Never again will death have the last word. When Jesus died, he took sin down with him, but alive he brings God down to us. From now on, think of it this way: Sin speaks a dead language that means nothing to you; God speaks your mother tongue, and you hang on every word. You are dead to sin and alive to God. That's what Jesus did.

12-14 That means you must not give sin a vote in the way you conduct your lives. Don't give it the time of day. Don't even run little errands that are connected with that old way of life. Throw yourselves wholeheartedly and full-time—remember, you've been raised from the dead!—into God's way of doing things. Sin can't tell you how to live. After all, you're not living under that old tyranny any longer. You're living in the freedom of God.

Living water in its most literal sense is **moving** water. Baptismal fonts that are actual **fountains** with **flowing** water (like at St. Denis) have **literal** living water. But our modest, beloved font here at Holy Trinity, also has living water in a **spiritual** sense, once water and the Word come together in the holy sacrament of Baptism. We have Jesus' command (¹⁹*“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...”* Matt. 28), we have the earthly element of water, and we have the Word: “I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” We believe this makes all the difference in the world: *“For if we have died with him in a baptism like his, we shall surely be raised with him in a resurrection like his.”* (Romans 6:5)

At time we may wilt like a strawberry plant whose field has been swamped with salt water, we may droop like a peace lily that is overdue for watering, but those are simply the best times for us to sink our roots again into the living water of our Baptism, to remember and call upon the Holy Spirit, dwelling in us, at home within us. In St. John's Gospel Jesus says: *“Out of the believer's heart*

shall flow rivers of living water.” ‘ Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive....’ (John 7:38-39) Earlier He’d said to the Samaritan woman at the well, *“If you knew the gift of God and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.”* (John 4:10) That’s a fulfillment of the promise made through the prophet Isaiah, that we hear at the Easter Vigil every year: *“Hear, everyone who thirsts; come to the waters....”* (Isaiah 55:1) And in the Book of Revelation Jesus says, *“I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.”* (Rev. 21:6) Psalm 1 describes those who love the Lord, and obey the Lord’s commandments, like this:

*³They are like trees
planted by streams of water,
which yield their fruit in its season,
and their leaves do not wither.
In all that they do, they prosper.*

On this weekend as we remember the Baptism of Our Lord, let us revisit our own Baptism, and not just “consider the possibility” but **embrace the reality** that it gives us far more strength and power than we realize. In this new year of grace, may the Holy Spirit continuously drench our souls in living water, helping us **access** the spiritual strength and **harness** the power of Jesus’ resurrection, for the sake of the Kingdom and to the glory of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Amen

¹*Sundays & Seasons*, Year B, 2024 (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2023), p. 72.

²Coral Davenport, “What if Farmers Were Taxed on Water? In California, Some Are” (*NY Times*, Jan. 4, 2024, A1, A13), A1.

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