

Living Water
Matthew 3:13-17

Baptism of the Lord/ 12th January 2020

Come to the water. The water beckons us. Calls us. We hear it before we see it. It's running. Flowing. Moving. Not a lake. Not an ocean. A river. The Jordan is not like the Mississippi, deep and wide, or the Nile, more than 4,000 miles long. Neither does it have the force and intensity of, say, the Congo River, which carries 1.25 million cubic feet of water—more than thirteen Olympic-sized pools—into the Atlantic Ocean every second. The River Jordan flows gently, gradually, steady and slow. It doesn't even look like it's moving, but it is.

Baptism, from the Greek *baptizo*, means to “wash” or “take a bath.” Ritual bathing is found in many religions, not only Christianity. Christian baptism has its roots in ceremonial washing practice in some segments of Judaism. The Jewish *mikveh*, a pool of water used for ritual cleansing, began to emerge in Judaism around the time of Jesus, and is still in use today. We know that the Essenes, a Jewish isolationist sect that left Jerusalem about one hundred years before Jesus to form a monastic community along the Dead Sea in Qumran— inhabited until 68 AD, when the Romans destroyed the community but not their scrolls, scrolls that were hidden and discovered in 1947 by a curious shepherd boy exploring some caves—we know that Qumran had several mikvehs or mikva'ots. Ritual bathing, washing and being washed to prepare one's self for the coming of the Messiah, was central to their communal life. Some [scholars](#) believe that John the Baptist, and maybe even Jesus, spent some time in Qumran and were shaped by the beliefs and practices of Essenes.¹

The only thing required for baptism is water. John could have baptized folk in the Sea of Galilee (which is really a large lake) or in the Mediterranean. He could have use a pitcher of water fetched from a well. Instead, John sets up shop along a river and chooses to baptize in flowing water, moving water, water that, we could say, is “living.” It's not stagnant. It moves. And it seems to me this is significant to note as we think about Jesus' baptism and our baptism *into* Jesus and what it means to say, “I am baptized. I have been washed. I am washed.”

In the [Didache](#), a Christian worship manual written perhaps as early as 50-70 AD, we find guidelines for baptism. It reads: “And ²concerning Baptism, this is how you shall baptize. ...baptize in living water in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (*Didache*, 7:1-2). Did you hear that? “Living water,” meaning running water. That is best. And it continues, “But if you do not have running water, then baptize in other water; And if you are not able in cold, then in warm. But if you have neither, then pour water on the head three times in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (*Didache*, 7:3-5). These are preferences, but I love that these Christians were not being legalistic about it all. You just need water and the Trinitarian formula. But the best water, if possible, is living water, flowing water, running water.

If you go down into the undercroft of St. Pierre Cathedral in Geneva—the church John Calvin served during the Reformation, originally built in the twelfth century—you will see the

ruins of an even older church, parts of which date back to the fourth century. Among the ruins is a large, eight-sided baptismal font built into the main floor of the former church. You can clearly see that it was designed to have water enter in one side, flow through the font, and then flow out the opposite side. You can see the channel cut into the floor of the church to guide the water. It had running, flowing water.

As you can tell, I'm fascinated by the theology of baptism and the design of baptismal fonts. One of the more unique fonts I've ever come across is at the First Presbyterian Church of Bayamón, near San Juan, Puerto Rico, where our work team worshipped back in November. It is an eight-sided wooden pedestal, about three feet tall, and on wheels, with a round porcelain bowl built into the top. At the bottom of the bowl is a drain to let the water out. You can roll it anywhere in the sanctuary—I really liked that feature. I noticed there was a faucet with a dove perched on top, allowing water to pour into the font. Then wondered about the source of the water; I didn't see a hose or pipe connected to the font. I noticed a door on one of the sides of the pedestal, opened it, and discovered a tank for water, with a pump! Here was an octagonal, mobile font with running water. Baptism to go—which was very cool.

Now, I'm not suggesting that we need a new font here at CPC. Neither am I hinting that the Trustees should come up with a way to get water flowing through the sanctuary into and through the font. There's nothing wrong about having a bowl. There's nothing wrong with our font. It's a beautiful font—although having wheels on ours would make it easier to move. Marble is heavy. I was reminded this week of a pastor in the Church of Scotland, years ago, who wanted to make a connection between what we do in worship and our relationship to creation and the need to care for it. So he kept the baptismal font filled with water all the time and threw in one or two goldfish. I'm not sure how often he had to change the water or how long the fish survived in that water. He was eventually censured by the presbytery (for this and other things) and removed from the church.

Water. Living water. Water that moves, that flows. The font shape doesn't really matter a whole lot. What's essential is that the water should help us remember that to be baptized into Christ means that we have been baptized into *living* water, water that's alive, that moves and moves us. Water that doesn't move becomes stagnant over time and the breeding ground for all kinds of nasty stuff. Living water allows us to live and yields life. To be baptized means we have been immersed into that deeper flow, the deeper life of God. That water is flowing in us, like a steady undercurrent, that by grace we can tap into and draw strength from.

Didn't Jesus said to the woman at the well, "...those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life" (John 4:15)?

Later in John's Gospel we find reference to a similar image. Jesus tells us, "As the scripture has said, 'Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water'" (Jn. 7:38). Now if you go searching for this verse in scripture you won't find it. Either John, or Jesus, didn't quite get the verse correct because we don't have anything like it in the Hebrew scripture. But there is something close. Ezekiel had a vision of being at the entrance to the temple and seeing that "water was flowing from below the threshold of the temple toward the east," water was flowing

everywhere (Ezekiel 47:1ff). The prophet Zechariah had a vision: “On that day,” he said, “living waters shall flow out from Jerusalem, half of them to eastern sea and half of them to the western sea; it shall continue in summer as in winter” (Zechariah 14:8). Rivers, flowing with living water from the source of life.

Baptism can be understood in so many ways in the Christian tradition. Deep down, baptism is about plunging into the depths and coming up new persons. It’s about jumping into the flow of God’s love and being carried away by those currents of grace and joy and into new life, a life aligned with the work of righteousness and wholeness and well-being and justice. Contemporary English poet [Malcolm Guite](#) says, “[Christ] calls us too, to step into that river/ To die and rise and live and love forever.”³ Baptized in Christ means that we are baptized into his life, his life springing up within and around us; it means we are baptized into the life of God that is flowing through us, dynamic and free.

For the Benedictine Abbess Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179), flowing water was a powerful image and reminder that God was at work through her and through the world. Water appears often in her visions and writings and it literally moved her life. She was called to establish not one, but two monasteries along the Rhine in Germany. Rupertsberg on one side and Eibingen on the other bank. The Rhine flowed between them. She moved back and forth by boat and spent a lot of time on the water. The river was elemental in her life—the traffic along the river allowed her writings to be transported all over Europe. Later in life, she made four prophetic travels along rivers, fighting to restore the truth of the faith in challenging times. She wrote extensively about the beauty of water and described eight specific elemental attributes of “living water” as purification. “Water comes from the living source,” she wrote, “and it is from this source that the gushing waters that wash away all of the filth also flow.”⁴ She loved “her” rivers—the Rhine, the Main, the Danube, the Moselle, the Nahe, and the Glan. They gave her life. And she saw in the river something of the flowing love of God at work to heal a broken and divided world. “Rivers of living water,” she said, “are to be poured out over the whole world, to ensure that people, like fishes caught in a net, can be restored to wholeness.”

Isn’t this what we’re called to be as baptized children of the living Christ? Rivers of living water, agents of wholeness. Isn’t this what we’re baptized into? The life of Christ. And like Christ, living lives offered up to God, the source of our life. In the living of these days—these challenging, demanding, depressing, and unsettling days—it’s incumbent upon us as the church to be clear about *who* we are and *whose* we are and *what* it means to washed in these waters of our baptism—clear about the specific claims these waters are making upon us.

In the fifth century, Pope Leo the Great (d.461) wrote an eight couplet poem that was inscribed over the entrance to the baptistry in the Lateran Basilica in Rome, which dates from the fourth century. It reads:

*A people consecrated to the heavens is here born from a fruitful seed
established by waters made fertile by the Spirit.
Plunge in, O sinner, and be cleansed by the sacred flow.
Whom it receives old, the wave returns new.
No differences remain among the reborn,*

whom one font, one spirit, and one faith make one.

...

*You who wish to be innocent, wash in the bath,
whether you are burdened by ancestral sins or your own.
This is the fountain of life that cleanses the whole world....
Anyone reborn in this river will be holy.⁵*

May it be so.

¹ James H. Charlesworth, "John the Baptizer and Qumran," Bible Odyssey.

<https://www.bibleodyssey.org/en/passages/related-articles/john-the-baptizer-and-qumran>

² See also Aaron Milavec, *The Didache: Text, Translation, Analysis, and Commentary* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003)

³ Malcolm Guite, "A Sonnet for the First Sunday of Epiphany – Jesus' Baptism," *Sounding the Seasons: Poetry for the Christian Year* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2012).

<https://malcolmguite.wordpress.com/2020/01/10/the-first-sunday-of-epiphany-jesus-baptism-5/>

⁴ Cited in Sara Salvadori, *Hildegard von Bingen: A Journey into the Images* (Milan: Skira, 2019), 14-15.

⁵ Cited and translated by Robin M. Jensen, *Baptismal Imagery in Early Christianity: Ritual, Visual, and Theological Dimensions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 53.