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Why Baptize?

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Isaiah 43:1-3a; Mark 1:4-11

Water plays a prominent role in scripture. It's there in the primordial aquatic chaos over which the Spirit broods at the dawn of creation. The four rivers flowing out of the Garden of Eden give geographic definition to the ancient world. The Great Flood is a turning point for God and God's people.

Water runs alongside the story of the Hebrew people. They cross the Sea of Reeds on their way out of slavery in Egypt and ford the River Jordan on their way into the freedom of the Land of Promise. Their prophets foresee a day when springs would bring life to the desert. Water flows through the narrative.

In his book *Safe from the Sea*, this year's selection for Westminster's All-Church Book Read, author Peter Geye ("Guy") sets the story along the north shore of Lake Superior. The characters and their lives are never far from the big lake. Through their experiences with water they eventually work out their salvation.

Water figures prominently in the gospel, as well. Almost all the ministry of Jesus takes place on the shores or near the shores of the large lake we call the Sea of Galilee. A Westminster group will be there in two weeks. Every time I travel to the Holy Land, I find the natural setting of the hills of the Galilee and the large lake out of which the Jordan flows to be the most moving part of the journey. The light, the air, the land, the water. They all carry an ancient atmospheric resonance linking the present with the world of Jesus.

A few years ago Beth and I walked the Jesus Trail from Nazareth to Capernaum, which is located at the north end of that body of water. The Horns of Hittim, two peaks overlooking the water, are the highest point on the trail. From that lookout we could see almost the entire area of the ministry of Jesus: Magdala, the village of Mary Magdalene. Tiberius, the Roman city. The Mount of the Beatitudes. Capernaum. The land of the Gerasenes. All located around the Sea of Galilee.

In the quiet beauty of that mountaintop, looking out over the water, I was overwhelmed with a sense of belonging. I was spontaneously remembering my baptism, and it was deeply comforting. I was grateful.

Cultures have long given sacred meaning to water, associating it with life, and with the end of life. The Celtic people referred to death as “the river hard to see.” The Hebrew people conceived of death as passing through the waters. The prophet Isaiah reminds us that at death we are not alone:

“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you...For I am the LORD your God...your Savior.” (Isaiah 43:1-3)

As in scripture, the water in Peter Geye’s novel brings both life and death, only not in that order in the story. A son appropriately named Noah works out his relationship with his father, Olaf. Many years earlier Olaf had been an officer on an ore ship that sank in a terrible storm on Lake Superior. He and two others were the only survivors. That night haunts him the rest of his life.

As many of you know, my own father was on a troop ship that sank in the English Channel on Christmas Eve, 1944, torpedoed by a German U-boat. His entire life was shaped by that one night of darkened chaos and terror on the water, similar to what takes places in the novel.

Olaf calls his estranged son Noah back from Boston back to his isolated cabin in the north woods near Superior when he realizes he’s dying. He wants to resolve the estrangement. The book chronicles their slow reconciliation, which occurs only as Olaf tells the full story – for the first time – of the night of the shipwreck, when he lost so many of his friends and shipmates.

The power of water to take life, and to give it, is a thread running through the book, as it runs through scripture. At one point Noah

takes a wintry bath in the lake, as his father and grandfather had done before him.

“From the moment he went under he could feel the water seizing him. Although he’d been anticipating something like it he could never have expected the grip of the water. If he hadn’t kicked and pulled for the surface the instant he was submerged he might have ended up sunk.” (*Safe from the Sea* [Unbridled Books, 2010], p. 134)

Water accompanies God’s people on their way through history, and it’s with us on our personal journeys, as well. We’re born out of the waters of life, and in the Church we use water as a potent symbol of God’s love as we come into the community of faith through baptism.

For all who’ve been through the waters of baptism, our worship today reminds us of the promise of God’s love that carries us through life and through death.

I spoke this week with a church member whose mother had just died. We talked about today’s service in which the promise of our baptism would be renewed and reaffirmed and the congregation would be sprinkled with water. His mother was a devout Catholic who presented him for baptism as a baby. I thought about my own mother, who died five years ago. She presented me, as well, for baptism when I was a baby, so when I feel the water drops today, I will remember my mother and the promise she made at my baptism.

All of us who were baptized as infants were brought to the font by someone who loved us. They trusted in the promise of God's love symbolized in the water.

Remember your baptism, and be thankful.

I've spoken with parents of infants who tell me they don't plan to present their child for baptism, preferring rather to let them decide when they've come of age. That's fine, of course, but it implies baptism is something *we* do. It's not. *God baptizes*, through the action of the church – whatever our age, *God does the baptizing*, through the action of the Church.

Some churches teach that baptism is necessary for salvation, and that an unbaptized person's soul is at risk. We Presbyterians disagree. God's saving action is found in the grace freely offered in Jesus Christ and does not wait for the Church to perform a sacrament, or depend the Church to do something.

Some churches baptize again and again, every time believers report they have "fallen away" and need to receive God's grace once more in the sacrament. We do not re-baptize, as if God's grace were somehow deficient or not fully activated or evident the first time through the water.

So – if it's not necessary for the salvation of our souls, and it's not needed as a sign of our commitment as Christian believers...*why baptize?*

Baptism itself may not save us, but it's a *sign* of our salvation, of our "engrafting into the body of Christ," to use the old liturgical language. When the Church baptizes, it re-enacts the grace of God, freely given to all. We baptize to remind us whose we are, and upon whom we can depend, and whose love will sustain us, through whatever comes, in this life and in the next.

The water symbolizes the beginning and the end, our dying and rising with Jesus.

Last summer we stayed for a week on the island of Iona off the western coast of Scotland. At the heart of that windswept, barren community stands the old Abbey, whose location dates from the time of the visit of Saint Columba, who brought Christianity to Scotland from Ireland in the year 563. The Abbey is a place of ancient beauty, with its stone and glass, its light and scents of centuries of candles.

But what gives the cold rock walls of that ancient sanctuary warmth and life is the prayer that takes place there. Our own congregation's Wednesdays evening services in Westminster Hall are modelled on those services of Iona, with candlelit silence, music, prayer, and quiet meditation.

After an evening prayer service in the Abbey one day this past summer, I remained in the pew to enjoy the quiet. I watched worshippers move slowly up the nave and down the aisle, up the flight of stairs at the west end of the nave, and out the door. As is common in older churches, the baptismal font was just inside the

sanctuary doors, as we have in the narthex, as a sign of entering the church. They all filed out past the font. I wondered if they noticed it.

The last person to leave was a frail elderly gentleman, maybe in his late 80's. He was having trouble negotiating the steps, I noticed from a distance of about 150 feet away. There was no railing. I watched helplessly from the other end of the Abbey as he teetered halfway up the stairs. He was losing his balance and about to tumble onto the hard stone floor. A fall could seriously injure or even kill him.

It all happened in an instant. I could do nothing to help him. Just as he was starting to fall back, he reached out and his craggy hand grasped the rim of the solid, heavy stone baptismal font that had stood there for centuries welcoming people into the church - that font which for centuries had welcomed people into the church and sent them on their way, steadied him. With a strong grip on the font he stopped his fall. And holding fast to the font, to that symbol of the saving power of God's love, he slowly pulled himself up the steps. Soon he was out the door on his way home through the night.

I wonder if the old man whispered to himself, as he clung to the font, "I remember my baptism and am thankful."

I wonder if he remembered the prophet's words in that moment.

“When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you...For I am the LORD your God...your Savior.”

In Peter Geye’s novel, *Olaf*, the father who survived the shipwreck, had been given a pocket watch by his wife, early in their marriage. She spent many months in their marriage waiting for his ships to return safely to the harbor, and he carried that watch on each trip. As he lies dying Olaf gives the watch to his son Noah. Noah had not known about the watch, which had been with his father the night the ship sank. Engraved on it were these words: *You will come safe from the sea.*

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you, through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you. It was a kind of baptismal promise.

Most of us don’t recall our baptisms, but we know they happened. We know the church made promises. We know we went through the river of welcome. We know our name was called. We know God’s grace poured out on us. We know we were brought to the font, where the promise of God’s saving love was made real in the water that ran down our faces.

Why baptize? Because we need to know, you and I, that in life, and in death, and in life beyond death, we belong to God, and we are not alone.

And so let us remember our baptism, and be thankful.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.