The Power of Water

Grace, Mercy, and Peace be to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. The Gospel according to Mark is considered by scholars and historians to be one of the synoptic gospels. The other two are Matthew and Luke. The term synoptic simply means that the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke all contain similar stories and follow a similar track as it relates to telling the story of Jesus. The Gospel of John is different than all three in that there are several stories that are only found there such as the wedding at Cana. However one thing that is consistent among all four Gospels is the mention of Jesus’ baptism. Now while it may not be as explicit in John’s account it does state the following, “**And John bore witness: “I saw the spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God.**” Despite the fact that this is not a firsthand account like the one we find in our reading from Mark’s account, there is one common thread that can be found in all four Gospel accounts, the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove. This is the account that we have come to know and love when it comes to putting a picture to baptism. At one of the churches I attended when I was young there was a picture of this in stained glass right behind the altar. Some baptismal candles have a dove on them and one of our banners here has a dove on it surrounded by three drops of water. We may see this as a onetime occurrence, as if this image of a dove only appears one time, at the moment of Jesus’ baptism. But I would like you to call to your memories what it was Noah used to find land. Not to mention just last week we saw that it was part of the Law of Moses that required two doves to be sacrificed in the temple upon the birth of one’s first child. Doves have been used as symbols of peace going back to the times of St. Augustine and the Romans. Christians have also explicitly used the dove as a symbol of the Holy Spirit. Many red paraments have the symbol of a dove on them because that is the color we use to celebrate feast days like Pentacost and All Saints Day. Yet this connection goes back to the very beginning.

So why is this connection and this symbolism so important? Well it is important because the mortal nature of Jesus was covered in baptism in the same manner in which we were. By his own baptism Jesus was instituting it for us as a manner of our salvation. It may be a popular conception that it was in fact John that pointed out this connection when he says that, “**I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.**” And thanks to the baptism of Jesus and his own command, God has given the authority to his pastors to share and give this gift of baptism to all who come to the waters, large and small. But what of this new invention of John, this idea he had to simply symbolically wash away peoples sins. Certainly this was not a valid practice before Jesus instituted this new tradition by going to his cousin and being submerged beneath the waters of the Jordan. Or was it? The connection between God and water is present from the very beginning of time. In our old Testament lesson, the creation narrative, something that we all know by heart, the second verse tells us that the Spirit of God hovered above the waters. This was such a powerful image that the Talmud, the religious text of the Jews, shows the Spirit as a dove hovering over the waters. Hmmm. So perhaps it is more fitting for us to say that the connection between the Spirit and water has always been present.

There is so much that we know about water and its importance to not just human life, but all life on this planet. Just look at a picture of the Sahara desert or our own Death Valley here in the United States. The one thing that you do not see is great evidence of life. The Sahara for example has miles and miles of sand dunes that constantly shift and move due to the winds. Not a tree in sight. Compare that to the climates of the equatorial rainforests and the difference could not be starker. If you look at a satellite image of the globe you can tell the areas that get even just a marginal amount of rain compared to those that get none. They’re green because after all water is a source of life. The ancient Egyptian empire was almost entirely situated upon the Nile. The city of Rome was founded upon the Tiber River and my own home city of Pittsburgh was founded where two rivers, the Allegheny and Monongahela, meet to form the mighty Ohio. Humanity has been drawn towards water because water is life for us. We need it to sustain ourselves, our livestock, and our crops. It is such a basic element that we sometimes forget how important it is. Water is a powerful force for life and also a powerful force of destruction. Just simply think about the hurricane that dumped 40 inches of water on the city of Houston or the floods that took countless lives in Baton Rouge the year before. And certainly we can think back to the impact that water had on the city of New Orleans in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina. We see the evidence for the destruction that water can bring when we look at the beauty of the Grand Canyon. Water has a wide variety of uses, both for our benefit and our harm.

So would it surprise you that if I told you your baptism is an example of both the destructive and restorative power of water? We often don’t think of the destruction that takes place in our baptism because often we simply associate it with being covered by the Holy Spirit and we assume that is simply a restorative act. Yet for it to be restorative something has to be destroyed, and that which is destroyed in us is our Old Adam, that which we call our original sin. Paul tells us, “**Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.**” Paul tells us that we were buried by our baptism. Martin Luther uses the imagery of “…the Old Adam in us should by daily sorrow and repentance be drowned and die with all sins and evil desires…” We know that burying and drowning are destructive acts and that this is necessary for us to live as children of God. We need to have that old, original sin drowned, buried, and dead, so that a new person, one that is redeemed in the eyes of God, can arise and walk as a new creation. Because after all, that is what baptism does, it creates. In the same manner that the Spirit of God hovered over the waters at the foundation of the creation of the earth, that same Spirit hovers over the waters of baptism at the foundation of a new creation in Christ Jesus. After all once we are baptized we are no longer seen as that which was conceived in sin. We are no longer that which will cause God to look away, but we are his. We are his new creation marked as one redeemed by Christ Jesus. And so today we remember the fact that our very Lord and savior Jesus needed to have that original sin stamped out. He himself needed to become a new creation as a man, and by doing so he opened the door for us to participate in this sacrament of Baptism as well. Through this act of baptism, we as God’s children are made his very heirs to his heavenly kingdom. The root of our corruption has been drowned and we have been made a new creation, buried with Christ that we may walk a new. We have died a death like his so that we may have a resurrection like his. This is our reality as his baptized children. Amen. Now may the peace of God which surpasses our understanding keep and guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus now and forever. Amen.