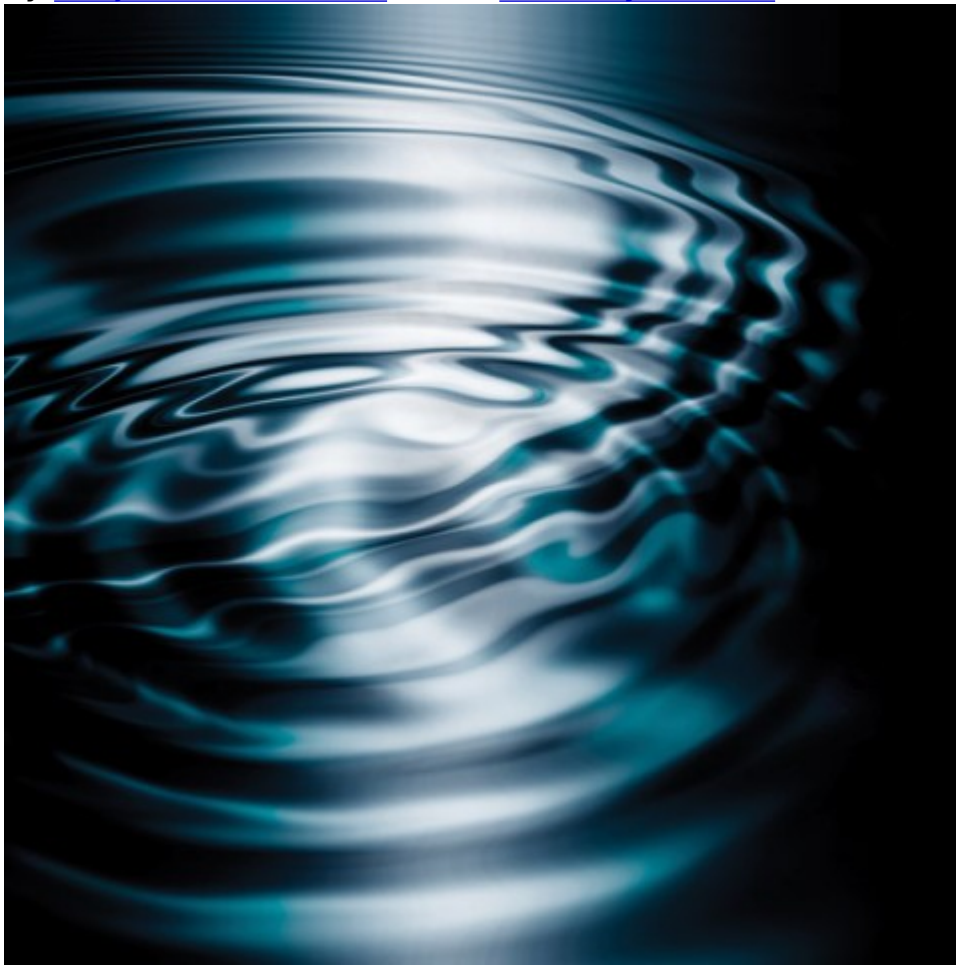


Water in worship: The ecology of baptism

The Christian heritage of praying next to water is older than Christianity itself, being deeply influenced by our Jewish heritage. One of our stunning water-prayer treasures is Psalm 104.

by [Benjamin M. Stewart](#) in the [February 8, 2011](#) issue



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For as long as humans have prayed, they have probably prayed at water places. Water often moves us to wonder, joy, terror or peace, and many times, water—whether it's the awesome power of ocean waves, the cold upwelling waters

of a spring, a small, still pond, the sound of a mountain stream flowing over rocks, deep, slow rivers with creatures rippling the surface, crashing waterfalls, nourishing rain on parched land, the seemingly infinite expanse of the sea or hot springs rising mysteriously from the earth—moves us to prayer.

The Christian heritage of praying next to water is older than Christianity itself, being deeply influenced by our Jewish heritage. One of our stunning water-prayer treasures is Psalm 104, in which the psalmist looks out over a water-nourished landscape, teeming with abundant creatures and life, and gives thanks to God for blessings that overflow from God to humans and to the whole earth like water streaming down:

You, O God, lay the beams of your chambers in the waters above;
you make the clouds your chariot;
you ride on the wings of the wind.
You make springs gush forth in the valleys;
they flow between the hills,
giving drink to every wild animal;
the wild donkeys quench their thirst.
By the streams the birds of the air have their home;
they sing among the branches.
From your lofty home you water the mountains;
the earth is satisfied with the fruitfulness of your creation.

One might ask after reading this psalm: What is flowing down from the mountains and the skies with such powerful blessings? What is it that is giving life to the diverse creatures named in the psalm? Is it water? Is it God? The beautiful answer is, of course, both, simultaneously.

Something important is happening in psalms like this one—something that doesn't always happen in our prayers. A comparison may be helpful. When we sing Psalm 23, "The Lord is my shepherd," in worship, we give thanks that God acts like a good shepherd. While we may also be grateful to God for real-life shepherds and real-life woolly sheep, Psalm 23 is not really about agricultural laborers or livestock. Psalm 104, on the other hand, is indeed about giving thanks that God acts like nourishing water flowing through our world; however, it is also simultaneously about giving thanks to God for the actual water that flowed thousands of years ago over the psalmist's local landscape, and, perhaps even more, it is about giving thanks for the

water that flows around us today, nourishing our lands and all creatures, as we pray this psalm.

Many of us have known scenes such as the one in Psalm 104 and have ourselves been moved to prayers of gratitude for the great panorama of life, in which diverse creatures flourish and the land produces bountifully, all of it watered by nourishing rain and flowing streams. Psalm 104 offers an example of a way of praying beside water in which our prayer does not leave the water behind as a disposable symbol. Rather the prayer beside the water calls forth our sustained attention to the ecological marvels of water—in order to appreciate the very real physical blessings that water provides to the earth, and also because we find in water flowing over the landscape deep and scripturally resonant images of the overflowing blessings of God.

The water beside which the psalmist prayed, however, was not a single, simple location. The psalmist contemplated, at least in the mind's eye, an entire watershed—from the heavens' rains and the mountain springs, down through streams flowing between the hills, into fertile valleys and out into the sea. How might a vision as grand as Psalm 104 be glimpsed at our local baptisms and in our worship spaces?

Baptism into Christ has always been an entrance into water (just as our death in Christ, the completion of our baptism, will be an entrance into the earth, the depths, where we are held both in Christ and in the earth). And while baptismal theology has much to say about ecological ethics and eco-theology, I focus here on the rite of baptism itself and its connections to ecological realities. In what sort of water do we baptize? How does the water place look, feel, and sound? What sort of prayer does the place evoke?

The Gospels show baptism occurring on the edge of wilderness. People went out from populated places to the wild locale of John the Baptist, who presided over baptisms in the Jordan River, with John's own voice crying out in the wilderness over the water. Jesus himself was baptized there, just before he moved even deeper into the wilderness.

Over time, Christian baptisms largely moved indoors. But even as they did, at least some Christians continued to treasure the wild nature of baptismal water. One early Christian document known as the *Didache* gave brief but specific instructions about

the act of baptizing and about which type of water is to be preferred:

Concerning baptism, baptize in this way: after speaking all these words, baptize into the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit in living water. If you do not have living water, baptize in other water; if you are not able in cold water, in warm. If you do not have either, pour water on the head three times into the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The *Didache* first lists water that is flowing from a "living" source—*living* in this context means naturally flowing, like a river or stream. And it seems that the *Didache* assumes that the baptized are plunged into this water three times. However, if there were no sufficient pool of living water, a pool of cold water would suffice. Cold water likely would have most recently been "living water," flowing from the earth (and, more practically, also likely would have had fewer impurities and bacteria). If no cold water were available, warmer water (we might think "room temperature") would suffice for plunging the baptized. And if no water pool of sufficient size were available, then, the *Didache* counseled, pouring water over the baptized's head three times was appropriate.

In all this specificity there may be wisdom for us today. Baptism may take a number of different forms and be enacted with different sets of practices. But the form and shape of the water we use for baptism, and the way in which we baptize, matters.

For many of us, there is quite a gap between, on the one hand, the wilderness-pilgrimage baptisms of John and the attention to the "living" character of the water in the *Didache* and, on the other, what is often the small and hidden—perhaps even dry and covered—baptismal places in many of our worship spaces.

Happily, this is changing. Many congregations, especially in the past 50 years as part of the liturgical renewal movement, have been enlarging and strengthening the water places for baptism in their worship spaces. Congregations seeking to wade deeper into the ecological and theological waters that flow through Psalm 104, the baptisms of John the Baptist and the community of the *Didache* might consider how their own baptismal water place might more fully welcome the living nature of earth's water.

We might think of the eco-theological dimensions of a baptismal water place in terms of four characteristics: a place of life, an oasis; water that is living, that flows; a place that holds depths of water; and a place that welcomes the untamed or even

wild character of water.

Water of life: oasis. Every living thing depends fundamentally on water. In dry regions, the emergence of fresh water as a spring or a stream in the landscape typically creates an area that flourishes with life and biological diversity, perhaps being transformed more dramatically than surrounding areas as the seasons turn from winter to spring and from summer to fall. Such places make it clear that from water bursts forth abundant life. Some congregations celebrate and call attention to this life-giving ecological character of water by dressing their baptismal places as oases. Potted plants and flowers and perhaps even small trees may be arranged around the font, suggesting that the font is an oasis of life—baptism gives new life to Christians as water gives life to all living things.

The baptismal water place might also show seasonal changes that reflect the turning of earth's seasons together with the liturgical year. During Lent, the baptismal area might be dressed with some river stones and perhaps some dry branches, with the growing plants removed from the baptismal area. At Easter, the baptismal area might overflow with life, including Easter lilies and flowers of many kinds, recalling the power of water to give life to parched lands, along with God's power to bring life out of death, in the landscape, in Christ's resurrection, and in our baptisms.

Living water: flowing and pouring. Flowing water serves, in Psalm 104, as a sign of God's overflowing blessings on creation, pouring down from God to the earth and giving life to creatures. Many congregations, in building new worship spaces or remodeling them, are finding ways for their fonts to carry flowing water—"living water," as the *Didache* and the Bible describe it. Some fonts have two levels: an upper basin, perhaps for the baptism of infants, out of which water flows into a larger pool below, which might be used for the baptism of older children and adults. Some pooled fonts gently circulate water within the pool, much like a pooled spring, serving as a subtle reminder that water flows to the font from beyond this place. Some congregations, while waiting to reform the structure of their font, are practicing a more robust pouring of water over the head of the baptized, perhaps while the minister and the baptized stand in a pool of water set out and adorned specially for a baptismal festival.

In the flowing water at our fonts, we may be reminded of water's flow over the landscape that brings life to the earth and, by its flowing nature, is always being refreshed, always new. In water's flow, we may also be reminded that water flows

with a power of its own and that it comes to us, as one liturgical theologian has written, from "beyond our circle," from places outside of our control. When new Christians are made in flowing baptismal waters, all of these associations—the overflowing blessings of God, the nourishing flow of water over the landscape, the always new quality of flowing water, and life-giving power that flows to us from beyond our control—wash over the newly baptized and deepen our appreciation for the significance of baptism.

Pooled water: mysterious depths. Besides encountering water flowing and pouring over the landscape, we encounter water in pooled form. In other words, in addition to rain, streams, rivers and waterfalls, we also experience water as lakes, pools, ponds and seas. This pooled state of water on the landscape holds and conserves ecological riches: a source for the clouds that rain down on the land, diverse ecologies on and under the surface for myriads of creatures, space for water creatures such as whales and giant squid for whom many other bodies of water are too small, a place of refuge for water creatures hiding from others whose home is on land or in the air, and a reservoir of nourishing water that endures and will not simply flow away.

Deeply pooled water holds mysteries and dangers: we cannot on our own see into or even approach the hidden depths of lakes or seas. The threats in deep water include both drowning and the hungry creatures who make the deep water their home and hunting ground. At the same time, descending bodily into pooled water is often a euphoric experience of well-being and beatitude.

Fonts that hold pooled water deep enough for our bodies to enter them evoke the many pooled water places of the earth and resonate with the theological significance arising from scriptural images: the pooled abyss of water, covered in darkness, over which the Spirit broods in the first creation narrative in Genesis 1; the waters of the flood covering the earth, out of which the earth is reborn (Gen. 6–9); the pooled waters of the Red Sea forming a boundary between slavery and freedom for the Israelites (Exod. 14); the pool of Siloam to which Jesus sends a blind man to wash and be healed (John 9:6–11).

Welcoming the nature of water. How shall we welcome the living waters of the earth into our worship spaces? What sort of space gives the waters a home so that they can show forth their connection to all the living waters? Can we, even within our buildings, glimpse the untamed nature of earth's great waters without which we

could not live?

First, we might simply ask if the assembly can see the water. Many fonts today are designed so that water is the star. Such fonts might be designed with pumps that allow for pouring or flowing water, or they might include a large wide bowl—perhaps of glass or brass—for holding the water. Some congregations that have inherited and may still treasure an old wooden font-stand in which a small metal bowl was originally inset are replacing the metal bowl with a large glass bowl that is meant to rest only partially in the inset space and thus extends significantly higher than the wooden base; the water in the glass bowl therefore stands above the base and can be seen by all. Lighting also plays a role in how well the water can be seen: is the baptismal area well lit?

Another consideration in welcoming the untamed dimension of the earth's water is the space around the baptismal water. Does it welcome the splashes of water that are inevitably part of a baptism in which water is generously used? Many churches are installing stone or tile flooring around the baptismal font in order to construct a space that invites plentiful use of water and that can help relieve any worries about water on wooden floors or carpeting.

The experience of "untamed" water might be deepened by providing space for the assembly to gather around the font for baptisms and for other occasional rites, and to pass by the font to touch the water and perhaps make the sign of the cross as a remembrance of baptism. Proximity to and engagement with the water helps keep it from being sealed off from the assembly, literally out of touch and completely tamed. Does the baptismal space create a liturgical center that clearly indicates that baptism—and the water of baptism—matters to this community and is welcomed? In other words, is water given a strong and meaningful place in the worship space?

The materials used in constructing the font also contribute to the sense of the font bearing a basic part of earth and life into the worship space. Materials that recognizably come from the earth and that have been fashioned carefully and minimally by human beings may attest to the "wild" origins of all of these materials and of the water itself: stone, wood, glass and ores refined into metals. For sprinkling baptismal water over the assembly during worship (an act that echoes rain as a remembrance of baptism), an evergreen bough or a brushlike aspergillum made of natural fibers embodies a direct connection to earthly materials. Some congregations, working with an artist, install attractive pin lights or artistically

crafted reflective materials above the font to connect the font's waters with the air, the rain, the heavens.

Of course, many congregations celebrate baptismal festivals at local bodies of water, including lakes, streams and oceans. These settings may provide a robust encounter with water in its wider ecological setting. Congregations might schedule a yearly baptismal festival at a local body of water on or around the festival of St. John the Baptist (June 24), a time at which some congregations already hold an annual blessing of the local watercourses.

At baptisms and other baptismal occasions, the presider prays a prayer of thanksgiving at the water. The prayer of baptismal thanksgiving written by Martin Luther is known as the "flood prayer," and it has been tremendously influential ecumenically. Although the prayer includes other water imagery, Luther uses Noah's flood as the prayer's central image. Luther, writing elsewhere about baptism as a flood, highlights the global nature of the flood: the entire world is covered; and while the flood of Noah was what Luther called "a flood of wrath," the flood of baptism is, in Luther's language, "a flood of grace," submerging the entire world in God's mercy.

Luther's prayer did not ask God to change the small pool of water in the font into "holy water," but rather thanked God that, through the baptism of Christ in the Jordan, "the Jordan and all water" have been "sanctified and set apart . . . for a saving flood." In other words, for Luther, all the waters in the world are even now a saving flood of mercy flowing from God.

Within the prayers of thanksgiving at the water, a simple interpolation can honor Luther's insistence that all water has been made a saving flood and can connect the biblical and baptismal waters to our local watersheds: we may add a specific local body of water or two to the list of waters for which we give thanks. One community in Washington State adapted "Thanksgiving at the Font" from *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (the worship book of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America) to take note of the local watershed:

Glory to you for oceans and lakes, rivers and creeks. Honor to you for cloud and rain, dew and snow.

Praise to you for Isella Glacier and Railroad Creek, for Lake Chelan and Columbia River,

Your waters are below us, around us, above us: our life is born in you.

You are the fountain of resurrection.

Luther famously wrote that in baptism every Christian has enough to learn and to practice for an entire lifetime. This essay has left most of the dimensions of baptism unexplored, but perhaps some previously unexplored ecological dimensions of baptism have been opened. From even a few glimpses, a wide panorama spreads out: Psalm 104 leads us into a prayer that sees the ecologically flourishing, water-nourished landscape as a glorious sign of God's overflowing blessings on the earth. In baptism we are invited into such vision that sees in the life-giving waters of the earth the promise of God in Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit.

In this age of ecological emergency, the images of water that saturate our baptismal theology and prayers are as needed and relevant as ever before. Our prayer and study at the baptismal waters may draw us deeper into the waters that washed with healing over Naaman, that flowed over the psalmist's flourishing landscape and that flow bright as crystal through the promised city of God beside the healing Tree of Life.

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