

## Living Water

A Sermon on Baptism for the Season of Epiphany

In this season of Epiphany we are looking at the Word of God. The coming of the Word is described as the coming of the light. The Word is also described as the water of life.

The problem of water shortages and drought happens in every generation. (Perhaps some examples.) In Isaiah 44:3 the Lord says: "I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground." (Perhaps use lyrics from "Cool Water," by Bob Nolan)

The problem of the opposite extreme, of floods and too much water, also happens in every generation. (Perhaps some examples.) Genesis 7 tells the story of the flood which lasted forty days.

We can have too little and too much water. Both are big problems. And there's the problem of impure or contaminated water. Flint, Michigan, had a serious contaminated water problem a few years ago. Other cities have had that same problem, too.

Our bodies and our minds need clean water to live.

If we use water as a metaphor for the Christian message, we could say that atheists are those who say: "You don't need water. You just think you need water, but you really don't. It's all in your head. The remnant of a bygone era. Prayer and God are part of old-world thinking when people didn't know much about life. Now science tells us that all your thoughts and feelings are a matter of brain chemistry. And science is "it." Science is the ultimate judge of Truth with a capital T."

One could say that atheists and two-year-olds have this in common: They are confident that their wisdom is vast, and they can handle what comes.

Contrast the atheist's confidence with the enormity of who God is. In the Book of Job Job wonders why? Why this world? Why all his suffering? And the Lord says: "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the world? Were you there?" (Job 38:4)

Or Romans 9:19-21, citing Isaiah 29:16: Does the clay say to the one making pots: "Why have you done this? You have to do it my way. You have to do it the way I want."

There is something ridiculous about finding fault with God. Lord, you should do this, and you should do that. No wonder it says that the Lord laughs in derision (Ps 2:4).

This brings us to the matter of "living water," the water which gives life. We have this problem: Where is there living water?

A lot of people think that what life is about is doing good and having good intentions. They presume that good is rewarded and evil is punished, and that's the way it works out, and that must be the way it is because that's the way they see it.

Over against this kind of thinking is the Christian message. And the Christian message says: The cross is that which tells us what the problem is. It is so great that only this is the answer. It doesn't have to do with good works. It is answered by what God does through Jesus Christ on the cross.

This is an entirely different message. It doesn't say as people often do: Well, a few good works don't do any harm. Just in case. Or: It has to be a matter of how I live, and my good works, and my good intentions.

Over against that is the message of the cross which tells us about God's holiness and about how desperate the problem of sin and death is.

Every time we try to say something different, what we are really doing is we are diminishing the cross.

What we have here is an either/or between the general kind of thinking that is prevalent among us and the Christian message.

In the Book of Amos, chapter 5, Amos says to the people: "You think: Of course, we'll manage when the Day of the Lord comes." And then Amos 5:18-20 reads: "Is not the day of the Lord darkness, and not light, and gloom with no brightness at all?"

Amos says: "Woe to you who say: I'll manage. I can manage it when the Day of the Lord comes." Then in Amos 8:11 comes one of the most fearsome verses in the whole Old Testament: "The days are coming, says the Lord, when I will send a famine in the land, not a famine of bread or thirst for water, but a famine of hearing the Word of the Lord."

And that's what we're asking ourselves: Where is there living water? How do we sort that out? Hebrews 10:31 says: "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."

The New Testament message is foreshadowed in the Old. Psalm 51:7 reads: "Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow." Isaiah 1:18 reads: "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow." Isaiah 55:1: "Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters."

We know from John the Baptist that prior to Jesus' coming, the people had known of a washing, a baptism, but it was a baptism that was repeated. In the New Testament comes something entirely different.

It's the message that comes in Romans 6:5: "If we have been united with him in a death like his (Baptism), we shall **certainly** be united with him in a resurrection like his." (The Greek idiom requires the word "certainly.") The water with the Word is that which makes the

difference. It's not repeated. The desperate problem of sin and death has been taken care of.

The Gospel of John frequently talks about living water. John 3:5: "Unless you baptized with water and the Holy Spirit, you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven." The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Christ. Thus: "Unless you are baptized with water and the Spirit of Christ, you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven."

Baptism saves, as Luther writes in his Large Catechism:

"Further, we are not primarily concerned whether the baptized person believes or not, for in the latter case Baptism does not become invalid. Everything depends upon the Word and commandment of God. This, perhaps, is a rather subtle point, but it is based upon what I have already said, that Baptism is simply water and God's Word in and with each other: that is, when the Word accompanies the water, **Baptism is valid, even though faith be lacking.** For my faith does not constitute Baptism but receives it. Baptism does not become invalid even if it is wrongly received or used, for it is bound not to our faith but to the Word.

"So you see that the objection of the sectarians is absurd. As we said, even if infants did not believe – which, however, is not the case, as we have proved – still their Baptism would be valid and no one should rebaptize them. Similarly, the Sacrament of the Altar is not vitiated if someone approaches it with an evil purpose, and he would not be permitted on account of that abuse to take it again the selfsame hour, as if he had not really received the sacrament the first time. That would be to blaspheme and desecrate the sacrament in the worst way. **How dare we think that God's Word and ordinance should be wrong and invalid because we use it wrongly?"**<sup>1</sup>

The Gospel of John, as we have noted, frequently talks about living water. In John 4 the Samaritan woman meets Jesus at the well. He talks to her about water and says as he points to the well: "Everyone who drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water I give him will never thirst; the water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." She said to him, "Sir, give me this water, that I may not thirst, nor come here to draw." (John 4:13-14).

John 6:35 reads: "He who believes in me will never thirst."

John 7:37: "If any one thirst, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the scripture has said, 'Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.'" "Living water" is water that gives life, and you can depend on that. You can depend on your Baptism.

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<sup>1</sup> Large Catechism, Part IV, Baptism, 52-53, 55 (Tappert 443; Kolb/Wengert 463).

We talk about the weather because it affects our daily lives. Is it going to snow? Is it going to rain? Is there a drought? Too little water? Too much? We talk about water because it is vital in every time and place.

“Living water” is the water of life which comes through Baptism, by which he takes us and makes us his own. Amen