

Volume 2.1 Fall 2015

The Yale ISM Review
VOLUME 2 · NO. 1: *Water*



Editorial V2.1

By | Volume 2.1 Fall 2015

To Our Readers:

We are pleased to present the Fall 2015 issue of *The Yale ISM Review*. Published by [Yale Institute of Sacred Music](#), the *Review* is a biannual, open-access online publication serving practitioners in the fields of sacred music, worship, and the related arts. You are invited to join us for stimulating discussions, enriched by contributions from Yale faculty and others who are leaders in their fields.

Our current issue is organized around the theme of water—that basic human element that plays such an important role in our lives, and thus appears in worship and the arts in myriad ways.

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~ Rita Ferrone, editor
November 15, 2015

In this Issue

By Rita Ferrone, editor | Volume 2.1 Fall 2015

This issue's theme of water takes us to tsunami-afflicted Japan, a Norwegian fjord, the Sonoran desert, the glaciers of Alaska, and the Gulf of Mexico. It invites us to step into the hold of slave ships, into mosques and synagogues and churches, and into the River Jordan. It calls us outdoors to pray for rain under a cloudless California sky, and to play and be cleansed with water at a funeral in the Catskill Mountains. It asks us to reflect on how we invite people to the waters of baptism, how we conserve the natural gift of water, and how we celebrate the seasons of creation in the church's worship.

Water is life-giving, but it can also be a threat to life. This issue is therefore about water as gift and mercy but also as danger and a form of wilderness. Because of the necessity of water for all life, we cannot consider it without also paying due attention to its absence, both real and metaphorical. Water inspires song and plays a role in worship. But it is likewise true that drought, thirst, dryness, aridity—the need for water—call forth a response from creature to Creator, one that must somehow be expressed, whether by means of song, prayer, movement, poetry, or art.

Our last entry, "One Final Note," considers water as the polyvalent sign of the Spirit's powerful presence in our midst. Could it be that water is not only something in which we can play, but also an expression of God's ecstasy in animating all of human existence?

To all our contributors: Thank you for the insights drawn from the wells of your experience, reflection, research, and wisdom. To our readers: Drink deeply!

On the Cover

By | Volume 2.1 Fall 2015

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Pietro Perugino (1448-1523). *The Baptism of Christ*, c. 1498. Oil on olive wood, 30 x 23.3 cm. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna. Photo Credit: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY

Cover design: Maura Gianakos, Yale Printing & Publishing Services

A Blessing Over Waters

By Teresa Berger | Volume 2.1 Fall 2015

This text originally appeared in an interactive multimedia CD-ROM entitled Ocean Psalms: Meditations, Stories, Prayers, Songs and Blessings from the Sea, co-produced by Teresa Berger and Lorna Collingridge (Durham, NC: MysticWaters Media, 2008). Text by Teresa Berger, melody adapted from the chant of the Exsultet by Lorna Collingridge; reproduced by kind permission of the authors.

[Melody: A Blessing Over Waters](#)

Living God,

we call you mother

because you are the source of all life.

At the very dawn of creation

you birthed the cosmos

and took it in your arms to nurture it.

Ever since then

mothers have known your creative energy

in the breaking of their waters

when giving birth.

Your Spirit breathed gently on the waters of creation

making them wellsprings of life.

You taught the waves

their words of wisdom

and the ocean depths

their silent song of praise.

*The torrential waters of the great flood
became a sign of the waters of redemption
as they brought an end to worlds of violence
and a new beginning of life.*

*In the rainbow
you gave water
the color of hope.*

*You showed Hagar a well in the desert
to revive her dying child.*

*You inspired Hebrew midwives
to save the children of Israel
thus preparing a people
to walk through the waters of the Red Sea.*

*You moved a Levite woman
to hide her son in a basket
and entrust him to a river.*

*Miriam sang your praises
as you freed her people from slavery
and drowned Pharaoh's chariots
in the waters of the sea.*

*Like a mother
you carried your people
through the desert,*

providing water in the wilderness.

No wonder your prophets spoke of your grace

as morning dew

as overflowing torrent

as mother's milk.

When the time had come,

your Word took human form

in the water of Mary's womb.

Blessed, indeed, the fruit of this womb:

Jesus.

He was baptized in the waters of the Jordan.

At a well, he spoke truth to an outcast woman

and promised her living waters.

He calmed the storm over the Sea of Galilee

and the wind and waves recognized his voice.

Dying on a cross,

water and blood flowed from his side.

In them, you birthed your church.

Living God

you have made water a symbol of your life

ever since the dawn of creation.

Let your Spirit breathe gently on these waters

*that they may become for us the waters of life,
the color of hope,
the sound of rain in the desert.
May you birth us
ever anew
in water and the Spirit
from now on until the very end of time
when the river of the water of life
will be all in all.*



Teresa Berger is Professor of Liturgical Studies and Thomas E. Golden Jr. Professor of Catholic Theology at the Yale Institute of Sacred Music and Yale Divinity School. Her scholarly interests lie at the intersection of theological and liturgical studies with gender theory. Her publications include *Gender Differences and the Making of Liturgical History*; *Dissident Daughters: Feminist Liturgies in Global Context*; and *Fragments of Real Presence: Liturgical Traditions in the Hands of Women*. She has also written on the hymns of Charles Wesley and on the nineteenth-century Anglo-Catholic revival. She was editor of *Liturgy in Migration: From the Upper Room to Cyberspace*, essays from the 2011 ISM Liturgy Conference.

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The Water Worlds of John Muir

By Anne Rowthorn | Volume 2.1 Fall 2015

Water is humanity's cradle; it was our first home deep in our mothers' wombs. Water is all things to all of life; it is as close to us as the tear in our eye and as distant as the cloud hovering over the open sea. As the Tao reminds us, "Water benefits ten thousand things," though today we surely would not stop at ten thousand.

John Muir, the great Scottish-born naturalist and founder of the Sierra Club, America's most ardent defender of the wilderness, cautioned against valuing one essential natural element apart from the others. In the account of his thousand-mile walk from his home in Wisconsin to the Gulf of Mexico, he said, "There is not a fragment in all nature, for every relative fragment of one thing is a full harmonious unit in itself. All together form one grand palimpsest of the world."^[1] Later, he observed during his first summer in the Sierra that, "When we try to pick out anything by itself we find it hitched to everything else in the universe."^[2] Still, water in all its forms, was picked out by John Muir and it was to occupy him for most of his life.

Water was in his view from his earliest boyhood days on the North Sea coast of Dunbar, Scotland where he scoured the shore for crabs and shells, bringing home his treasures from the sea. When he was eleven years old, he and his father and two siblings were the family advance party seeking new opportunity in the New World. By sailing ship to New York, and then canal boats through the Great Lakes and finally by wagon, the Muirs arrived in Wisconsin and built their first home in America. It was a small cabin on a kettle pond named Fountain Lake, close to Portage. It was an attractive location overlooking the pond. Young John Muir and his siblings fished and swam in it, but the future naturalist paid about as much attention to water as he did to sleeping and breathing.

It took John Muir's first summer in Yosemite for him to comprehend the full significance of water and especially frozen water in the form of glaciers. "In October, 1871 . . . I discovered the Black Mountain Glacier in a shadowy amphitheater between Black and Red Mountains, two of the peaks of the Merced group."^[3] Thus began Muir's quest to learn all he could about these unique, colossal, moving masses of ice. A series of glaciations modified the region starting about two to three million years ago and ending sometime around 10,000 years ago. Glacial systems reached depths of up to 4,000 feet, and their slowly moving floes of ice sculpted the Yosemite Valley. The retreating glaciers left fertile moraines, glacial boulders, and magnificent upland lakes and ponds. The longest glacier in the Yosemite area ran down the Grand Canyon of the Tuolumne River for sixty miles. The Merced Glacier flowed out of Yosemite Valley into the Merced River Gorge. Only Yosemite's highest peaks were not covered by glaciers.

Glaciers are the indelible markers of the ages, and the eons of geological time never ceased to stir John Muir's imagination. He said in his first published newspaper article in 1871, "There is a sublimity in the life of a glacier. Water rivers work openly, and so the rains and the gentle dews, and the great sea also grasping all the world; and even the universal ocean of breath, though invisible, yet speaks aloud in a thousand voices, and proclaims its modes of working and its power. But glaciers work apart from men, exerting their tremendous energies in silence and darkness, outspread, spirit-like, brooding above predestined rocks unknown to light, unborn, working on unwearied through unmeasured times, unhalting as the stars, until at length, their creations complete, their mountains brought forth, homes

made for the meadows and the lakes, and fields for waiting forests, calm as when they came as crystals from the sky, they depart.”[4]

Yosemite’s lush valleys, moraines, waterfalls, verdant upland pastures were all sculptured by glaciers. Muir was so captivated by the effects of glacial action in Yosemite and how they fashioned the terrain that his sense of curiosity stoked his desire to seek what he described as “living glaciers,” glaciers that were still carving Earth’s landscape. Alaska would be the location where the action of living glaciers could be best observed. In his seven trips to the Land of the Midnight Sun, Muir never ceased to be energized by Alaska’s pristine land and seascapes—fresh air, tall trees, rushing rivers and waterfalls, abundant wildlife, and especially the glaciated landscape. Having spent the day canoeing between the head of the Wrangell Narrows and Cape Fanshaw, he recorded in his journal, “[One] learns that the world, though made, is being made; that this is still the morning of creation, that mountains and valleys long since conceived and now being born, channels traced for rivers, basins hollowed for lakes; that moraine soil is being ground and outspread for coming grasses . . . building particle on particle, cementing and crystallizing to make mountains, and valleys and plains . . . which like fluent pulsing water, rise in endless rhythm and beauty,”[5]

Water in all its forms not only shaped the landscape of the world, it was to engrave the naturalist’s inner landscape and impart a sense of well-being. Muir continuously wanted to be beside water or in it or on it. He had to taste it, feel it, hear it, smell its freshness. He camped by still lakes and the racing streams in Yosemite. He climbed trees in downpours to get the feel of water and wind against his body. He traversed rocky ledges to waterfalls where he silently sat while the mist soaked him through to the skin. Water to John Muir was life-force, source of inspiration, wonder, solace and beauty.

While John Muir might have wished to remain in a state of wonder and profound praise for water, his love for it and for all that was natural and wild catapulted him into the politics of water in the legendary Hetch Hetchy controversy. In 1906, the State of California ceded the Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Grove to become Yosemite National Park. No sooner were papers signed establishing the park when the great San Francisco earthquake and fire occurred, fueling the city’s long-time desire to dam the Hetch Hetchy Valley in Yosemite for a new water supply. Muir, with the backing of the Sierra Club, presented strong opposition to the project. In 1908 he wrote to President Theodore Roosevelt, “There is not in all the wonderful Sierra, or indeed in the world, another so grand and wonderful a block in Nature’s handiwork[6] . . . These sacred mountain temples are the holiest ground that the heart of man has consecrated, and behooves us all faithfully to do our part in seeing that these wild mountain parks are passed on unspoiled to those who come after us.”[7] Muir and others believed that the sources for the city’s water were sufficient and that to flood and dam the breathtakingly beautiful Hetch Hetchy Valley, said to be lovelier than the Yosemite Valley, would be a travesty.

Unfortunately the odds were against him. Roosevelt left office in 1909 and the powerful Chief United States Forester, Gifford Pinchot, along with the City Supervisors of the City of San Francisco, held sway. Muir said, “Their arguments are curiously like those of the devil . . . These temple destroyers, devotees of raging commercialism, seem to have a perfect contempt for Nature, and, instead of lifting their eyes to the God of the mountains, lift them to the Almighty Dollar. Dam Hetch Hetchy!”[8] In December 1913 the United States Senate passed the enabling bill granting San Francisco full rights to Hetch Hetchy, even though it lay within the National Park. Some said that the loss of this pristine river valley broke John Muir’s heart. He died one year later on Christmas Eve.

Like John Muir, we all live in water worlds. The water that courses through our bodies is the water that

upholds and nourishes all that is created, every animal of the land, fish of the sea, bird of the air; every flower, every fern and great towering sequoia. Water created the mountains, plains and valleys of the earth; water is yet creating, never ceasing. Water refreshes the soul and feeds the imagination. Water is life. We need to defend and protect it with our lives. Just as John Muir did. Water. "It is blessed thing to go free in this world, to see God playing upon everything . . . His fingers upon the lightening and torrent, on every wave of sea and sky, and every living thing, making all together sing and shine in sweet accord, the one love-harmony of the Universe."^[9]



Anne Rowthorn, like many mothers and grandmothers of her generation, has worked in a number of venues—teacher at all levels from high school to graduate school, community organizer, professional interviewer at Yale, special-projects writer for the Episcopal Church in the U.S.A. She has a master’s degree from Columbia University and a PhD degree from New York University. She has written or compiled twelve books, of late specializing in the area of religion and ecology. Her most recent book is *The Wisdom of John Muir: 100+ Selections from the Letters, Journals and Essays of the Great Naturalist*.

FOOTNOTES

^[1] John Muir, *A Thousand-Mile Walk to the Gulf* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1966), 164.

^[2] John Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988), 110. Original publication, 1911, by Houghton Mifflin.

^[3] John Muir, *The Mountains of California* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1894), Chapter 2. Courtesy of the Sierra Club. http://vault.sierraclub.org/john_muir_exhibit/writings/the_mountains_of_california/, accessed August 28, 2015.

^[4] John Muir, "Yosemite Glaciers," *New York Tribune*, December 5, 1871.

^[5] John Muir, Journal entry for July 10, 1879, from *Picturesque California and the Region West of the Rocky Mountains, from Alaska to Mexico* (J. Dewling Publishing Co., 1888). Courtesy of the Sierra Club. http://vault.sierraclub.org/john_muir_exhibit/writings/picturesque_california/, accessed August 19, 2015.

^[6] Note: Capitalization and punctuation throughout this article are from the original Muir texts.

^[7] John Muir, Letter to Theodore Roosevelt [July 21, 1908], in William Frederic Badè, *The Life and*

Letters of John Muir (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1924), vol. 2, Chapter 18.

[8] John Muir, *The Yosemite*, 1912, Chapter 16. Courtesy of the Sierra Club, http://vault.sierraclub.org/john_muir_exhibit/writings/the_yosemite/chapter_16.aspx, accessed August 24, 2015.

[9] John Muir, Letter to Janet Douglass Moores, February, 23, 1887, in *The Life and Letters of John Muir*, Vol. II, Ed. William Frederic Badè (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1924), Chapter 15. http://vault.sierraclub.org/john_muir_exhibit/life/life_and_letters/chapter_15.aspx, accessed August 28, 2015.

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Praying for Rain in the California Drought

By Megan Sweas | Volume 2.1 Fall 2015

“As an American Indian, all my life I have been cursed with the myth of the ‘Indian rain dance,’” Johnny P. Flynn wrote in [Religion Dispatches](#) in 2012 when the United States Agricultural Secretary, Tom Vilsack, suggested a rain dance to end a drought. “I am here to say there is no such thing. Not in my Potawatomi tribe or in any other tribe across the Americas.” Weather-related rituals, Flynn wearily pointed out—including the Hopi’s famous late summer dances—recognize the season rather than bring on the rain.

That hasn’t stopped some from trying.

On a hot September day, while wildfires raged two hundred miles to the north, a motley crew of rain dancers gathered on the lawn outside of the San Juan Bautista Mission in Central California. A few of the dozen participants claimed Native American ancestry, but most did not. They wore everything from long floral dresses to athletic shorts. Each carried a bottle of water.

Sonne Reyna, who said he grew up participating in ceremonies as part of the Lipan Apache and Yaqui tribes, instructed the group to line up facing west. They took a bit of tobacco—the messenger to the Creator, Reyna said—and tossed it into the wind. Standing at the center of the line, Reyna beat his drum and led the group in song. With laughter, each tossed water from their bottles as an offering, and then turned to the south, repeating the process in each cardinal direction. The group started holding rain dances in 2014 and promised to keep on going until California’s drought ended.

In California’s fourth year of drought, people of all types of faith are returning to their roots, adapting them, and sometimes inventing new ways to seek relief in the form of rain. “There’s something very natural about praying for good weather,” said Father Mark Morozowich, dean of the School of Theology and Religious Studies at Catholic University of America. “It’s part of our world; we’re immersed in it. It affects us, and it impinges upon us.”

Rain dances, though, are controversial. While some native peoples, particularly in what is now Arizona and New Mexico, do have traditions around the seasons, it’s not unusual to find “New Age appropriation” of native traditions, said John Barry Ryan, emeritus professor of religious studies at Manhattan College in New York. Based on a [Los Angeles Times](#) article on the San Juan Bautista “rain dance,” Ryan thought this is what happened in California. “What became interesting to the outsiders is this whole notion of dance that’s going to make rain,” Ryan said. “I don’t think it respects Native American traditions Some Native people say, ‘They took our land. Now they want to take our rituals.’”

Native or not, weather-related rituals can raise questions about God, the world, and our place in it. Indeed, a tension exists across traditions in the way people understand what it means to pray for—and sometimes receive—rain. Some see it as a magical solution or an exercise in trusting God, while a modern understanding of climate colors others’ approach to such traditions.

The Jewish people also have an ancient connection to the land, although their homeland is far from California. Reform Rabbi Ron Stern of Stephen Wise Temple in Los Angeles agrees with Reyna that

Jewish traditions come out of indigenous cultures. “As modern scholarship understands it, [Jewish holidays] are originally days that pagans recognized as holidays associated with the rain fall, and Judaism layered meaning on top of it,” Stern said.

Not long after the Jewish New Year and Yom Kippur comes Sukkot, a seven-day holiday commemorating the forty years during which the Jewish people wandered in the desert. It also marks the time of harvest in Israel. The holiday of Shemini Atzeret concludes Sukkot and includes a [lengthy, poetic prayer](#) asking God to remember the ancestors and “not keep back water.” It concludes with a phrase that is added to the Amidah, the central prayer of Jewish liturgy, every day until Passover in the spring: “You are Adonai, our God, the one who causes the wind to blow and the rain to fall.”

This line is optional in the Reform tradition. “The ancient notions of God as kind of a superhuman, supernatural being that maneuvers the world are just not tenable in our day and age,” said Stern, who gave [a sermon in February 2014](#) about why modern Jews don’t pray for the rain.

Still, if this Jewish tradition fits anywhere outside of Israel, it’s California, where a Mediterranean-like climate mirrors that of Israel, with dry, hot summers and mild, wetter winters.

The Talmud lays out a plan if the rains do not come, starting with fasts by the leaders and progressing to fasts by the community. The process is optional after the fall of the temple in Jerusalem. A few Oakland rabbis, including Rabbi Mark Bloom of the Conservative Temple Beth Abraham, decided to give fasting a try anyway, in January 2014.

Bloom understands his Reform peers’ objections—that they don’t want people thinking it’s magic—but “Sometimes you just have to let it go and realize . . . not everything is in our control,” he said. “In the end, it can’t hurt, right?”

After his fast, it poured rain, Bloom said.

His congregation was energized by the experience. “The mystically oriented people like that we’re actually confronting prayer head on and trying to talk openly about our relationship with God. Rationalists like it also because it talks about resources, the environment and helps us concentrate on that,” Bloom said.

The Talmud says that, once it rains, the fast should end. Last winter, a group of youth skipped over the rabbis and fasted by themselves. December was rainy, but it didn’t continue. In 2015, Bloom said, the congregation plans to adapt the ancient rules and continue its fasts throughout the rainy season.

The Islamic Society of Orange County also tied fasting and prayer into their overall response to the drought, promoting a “green” Ramadan this year. “I told the people, ask God for rain, pray for it, but don’t waste water,” said Muzammil Siddiqi, the center’s religious director.

Siddiqi led 20,000 Muslims in prayers for Eid al-Fitr, the end of Ramadan, at the Anaheim Convention Center. After the gathered faithful bowed and prostrated themselves before God, Siddiqi stood up, raised his hands to heaven and prayed out loud for rain. He summed up the lengthy prayer in a few words: “Allah, give us the rain, give us the water, good rain, beneficial rain, plenty of rain, the rain that will bring benefit to us, and will not bring any harm to us.”

The tradition comes from the Hadith, or sayings of the Prophet. During the Prophet Muhammad’s

Friday sermon, somebody told him that people and their animals were suffering and dying from the lack of water. He asked the Prophet to pray for rain. The sky did not have even a speck of clouds, but after the Prophet prayed, clouds immediately appeared and it started to rain, the story goes.

As it did for rabbis, it poured for the Muslims, following the Eid prayers, setting [records](#) for July, when rain is typically nonexistent in Southern California.

Imam Mohammed Zafarullah of the Ahmadiyya mosque in Chino Hills, east of Los Angeles, saw the same storm system as a result of his mosque's interfaith prayer event a few weeks earlier. An extension of their long-standing interfaith relationships, the mosque invited Catholic, Buddhist, Hindu, Sikh, Mormon and Christian Scientists to perform and explain their rain prayers with them.

But when it didn't rain right away after that service, members questioned what it meant. Zafarullah counseled humility. Muslims prostrate themselves in prayer, he explained, because "you are making yourself so humble to God: 'We are nothing and, O God, you are everything.'"

Siddiqi agrees. "Our understanding is that God is in control of the whole world. We should always turn to God," he said. "Whatever happens, it happens by his own wisdom, his own power and his own will. Sometimes we understand, sometimes we don't understand."

But if God brings rain, did God also bring the drought?

Brian Malison, a pastor at Christ Lutheran Church in Visalia, California, simply isn't sure. "I don't know anyone who can really truly answer that question," he said.

His church is in the Central Valley, an agricultural area dependent on snow pack from the Sierras and groundwater from wells. In two weeks this summer, fourteen wells ran dry in Tulare County. One of his member spent \$40,000 to drill a 300-foot well. Some have talked about moving to the city water grid for relief.

People may not voice their uncertainty in religious language, but the subtext is "Where's God in the midst of all of this?" Malison said.

For Stern, that's not a concern; the weather is the weather. Bloom, on the other hand, emphasizes our insignificant place in a huge universe. Like Zafarullah, he counsels humility.

Still another approach, grounded in biblical texts, is to explain the lack of water as a consequence of sin. "If you faithfully obey the commands I am giving you today—to love the Lord your God and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul—then I will send rain on your land in its season," reads Deuteronomy 11:13-14.

The Fountain of Love Christian Center in Pomona, California turned to this text in their prayers for the rain. "We remind him of his word," Pastor Jarron O'Neal explained. "We go to scriptures and say, 'Father you promised that if we repented of our sins, turned from our wicked ways, humbled ourselves and prayed, you would heal our land.'"

The passage from Deuteronomy is also in the Jewish liturgy, but it has been removed from the readings in the Reform tradition, Stern noted. Nevertheless, despite his skepticism about praying for rain, there is a sense in which he agrees with the biblical account.

“Human behavior has resulted in a failure of the rains now,” Stern said. “The Bible didn’t know it in terms of global climate change; but . . . now we realize we actually can affect the climate through our behavior.”

The Catholic Church has long been vocal on the consequences of climate change. Pope Francis elevated the issue as a priority with his encyclical *Laudato Si’: On Care for Our Common Home*, which agrees with the scientific consensus that human activity affects the climate.

In 2014, Bishop Jaime Soto of Sacramento, on behalf of the California Catholic Conference, released a set of sample prayers for rain to end the drought. Although all the prayers acknowledge human need, some also include notes of wonder and confidence:

We realize now, looking up into the clear, blue sky, what a marvel even the least drop of rain really is. . . . Look to our dry hills and fields, dear God, and bless them with the living blessing of soft rain.

In presenting the prayers, the California bishops drew from *The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, a document of the Pontifical Council on Justice and Peace, to explain their perspective. Water is a gift from God, the document affirms, and a resource we are morally obligated to protect and share with all people, especially those who are poor. The Catholic approach balances “our dependence on the Creator” with our call “to be good stewards,” [Soto said when he released the prayers](#).

Prayer reinforces stewardship, said Sister Anna Keim. At Ramona Convent Secondary School in Alhambra, California, just outside Los Angeles, Keim teaches water conservation to her freshman students. On World Water Day on March 19, the students gather to pray about water.

“Our language that we use is that our sister water should not be bought or sold It’s a gift from God for everyone,” Keim said. Cultivating gratitude for God’s gift helps motivate action, she added. “As far as uniting Christian communities and also people of others faiths, it’s great to have that spiritual component.”

But prayers around weather also can be egocentric, as Malison noted. We ask for a sunny day for a wedding or church picnic, for example. “It’s sometimes a little capricious of us to think that God is sending us rain or sunshine in such a way as to be responsive to [our] prayers,” he said. “Plus,” he added, “I don’t know what we’d do if God all of a sudden said, ‘OK, fine. I’m going to send you four feet of water continually for the next thirty days.’”

This fear—of a strong El Niño winter bringing too much rain to California—contributes to his congregation’s uncertainty. Although another year of drought would devastate the Central Valley, flooding also could hurt farmlands, washing away nutrient-rich topsoil. The last strong El Niño, in 1997, caused [17 deaths and more than half a billion dollars in damage in California](#).

A day after the first rain dance of the fall 2015 season in San Juan Bautista, it poured—but not over the dry fields of Central California or the burning valleys of Northern California. The remnants of a tropical storm dumped [2.39 inches of water](#) on downtown Los Angeles in a month when the city typically receives 0.24 inches of rain.

Scientists predict that climate change will bring more extreme weather. [In California](#) that means less snowpack, longer droughts and heavier storms. “Sometimes the answer . . . is not that we ask God for more of something, but that we’d ask God in wisdom to use what we have in order to be sustainable,” Malison said.

The Hadith presents another solution to the prospect of a destructive El Niño. A week after Muhammad asked God for rain, a follower came to him and asked him to ask God to make it stop. “Make it around us, not on us,” the Prophet prayed. Just as quickly as the clouds came, they dispersed.



Megan Sweas is a freelance journalist based in Los Angeles and the editor at the [USC Center for Religion and Civil Culture](#). She is the author of *Putting Education to Work: How Cristo Rey High Schools are Transforming Urban Education*. She writes about social and economic justice issues and world religions for a variety of publications, including *GlobalPost*, *National Catholic Reporter*, *Religion Dispatches*, *Religion News Service*, and *The Washington Post*. You can follow her on Twitter: [@msweas](#)

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Ten Fathom Ledge

By Martha Serpas | Volume 2.1 Fall 2015

All that's visible
is a ribbon of coral,
briny phrasals above a ledge nearly

erased by silt and scalloped water,
ghostly and opaque.

Beyond is the dead outer shelf,
its tragic red surge of blossoms
bruising the abyss.

What to do?

The others have entered

the freighter's wrenched hull,
their light beams sliding like opera gloves
along the awkward deck and sides.

I am left playing with goatfish
on Ten Fathom Ledge, like the forbidden
step off your grandmother's porch,
the first plank as far as you will go
toward the long bright yard, the pitch

of children rippling from a swing.

Why not be content with spadefish and nurse sharks,
the confusion of gravity, the wise bezel
that grasps all our time as bottom time?

A gentle surge toward the wreck, lifts, pauses,
then sloshes me right back on the ledge.

≈≈

Everything lasts forever: the jetties,
sand, sky, pipers, even the pebbles
of sea glass, cobalt, old as lace
doilies. Others can walk down the beach
toward thin shacks and driftwood shelters,
toward haze and mist. I'll sit on an unclaimed
log, which has drifted here, for now,
and watch a midday sun crystal
on the waves. Don't be fooled:

The Gulf is not a polished cruiser
or a V-hull on the dock.

The Gulf
is not a flatiron idling
between sets of bowing waves.

Its striated water lifts itself inch by inch
and closes in on the shore.

It is alive,
playing its chords, humming its undertow.

You will be welcomed on your back
as it slides its dress collar over
your thighs, runs its breezes and tensions
all over you. It will welcome your face floating down,
closed eyes or open, breathing
August's strong sweat.

It will welcome you a thousand times.

It wants you to practice sinking
and feel how much you belong.

Others can walk the shore's silver brocade
and pace back again.

Don't be fooled: The sky is complicit.

There's no discerning compass here.

The wings and water pull equally
toward the beauty of transparency—
cirri, sea fans, music, love

and the pans and stirrups of pelicans

which weigh that anything is possible,

but that nothing has to be.



Martha Serpas has published three collections of poetry, *Côte Blanche*, *The Dirty Side of the Storm*, and, most recently, *The Diener*. Her work has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The Nation*, *Image*, and *Southwest Review*. A native of Southern Louisiana's wetlands, she co-produced *Veins in the Gulf*, a documentary about coastal erosion. She teaches at the University of Houston and serves as a hospital trauma chaplain. More information about her work can be found at marthaserpas.com.

Martha Serpas, "Ten Fathom Ledge" from *The Diener* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 2015). Reprinted with kind permission of LSU Press.

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View article as a PDF: [Ten Fathom Ledge](#)

Walking on Water-Azurite

By Makoto Fujimura | Volume 2.1 Fall 2015

from the Walking on Water series



Walking on Water-Azurite, 2012. Mineral Pigments on polished gesso, 82 x 137 in.

Artist's note: The *Walking on Water* images were painted in the new Princeton studio. They were meant as an elegy to victims of the 3/11 tsunami. As I attempted to finish the last of the three, *Walking on Water - Banquo's Dream*, Superstorm Sandy hit, wiping out some fifty works of mine at Dillon Gallery. Thus, the process of painting has now become, literally, a way to "walk on water."



Makoto Fujimura, recently appointed Director of Fuller's Brehm Center, is an artist, writer, and speaker. He was a Presidential appointee to the National Council on the Arts from 2003 to 2009.

Fujimura's work is exhibited at galleries around the world, including Dillon Gallery in New York, Sato Museum in Tokyo, The Contemporary Museum of Tokyo, Tokyo National University of Fine Arts Museum, Bentley Gallery in Arizona, Gallery Exit and Oxford House at Taikoo Place in Hong Kong, and Vienna's Belvedere Museum. In celebration of the 400th Anniversary of the King James Bible, Crossway Publishing commissioned and published The Four Holy Gospels, featuring Fujimura's illuminations of the sacred texts. His most recent book, Culture Care, was published in 2014. Fujimura is a recipient of four Doctor of Arts Honorary Degrees and was awarded the American Academy of Religion's 2014 Religion and the Arts Award.

Irrigation

By Martha Serpas | Volume 2.1 Fall 2015

we steal water when we make rain, the way
everything I have is from somewhere else,
from someone else, what I am

the riverbed looks scalded
but the wound is full thickness
and elsewhere

in a variegated field or on a lawn
of grass named for a saint
or a saint once removed

we can't walk on it
eventually it comes up
dry and tired

the way we wear everything out
especially each other
listening with heavy feet

unlike the river which never tires
whose pocket we pick
down to the lint



Martha Serpas has published three collections of poetry, *Côte Blanche*, *The Dirty Side of the Storm*, and, most recently, *The Diener*. Her work has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The Nation*, *Image*, and *Southwest Review*. A native of Southern Louisiana's wetlands, she co-produced *Veins in the Gulf*, a documentary about coastal erosion. She teaches at the University of Houston and serves as a hospital trauma chaplain. More information about her work can be found at marthaserpas.com.

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Water in the Book of Common Prayer

By Jeffery Rowthorn | Volume 2.1 Fall 2015

The freighter plowed its way steadily across the North Atlantic as I stood in the prow of the ship, looking out over an immense and empty expanse of water. No other boats in sight, no sea birds, no jet trails up above, only water. For the third day in a row water, only water.

More than 70% of the earth's surface is covered by ocean water. Half to three-quarters of the human body is made up of water. A child's first home is in the water of the mother's womb. Our everyday vocabulary conveys the power of water to shape and misshape our daily life: tsunamis and hurricanes, spring rains and relentless drought, the Colorado River and contention over water rights, polluted coastlines and the Exxon Valdez, dirty rivers and streams, and the call for universal access to clean water.

Without water there is no life. More than food and clothing and shelter, it is needed if life is to survive. From the womb to the last sips taken by a person close to death, water is our close companion whose presence is all too often taken for granted but whose absence is dreaded. Is it an exaggeration to take Saint Paul's words to the Athenians (Acts 17:28) and apply them to water: "In [it] we live and move and have our being"? And what is true for us is true for every animal and plant. Water in all its life-sustaining abundance and awesome beauty is God's gift to all living things.

* * * * *

You send the springs into the valleys;

they flow between the mountains.

All the beasts of the fields drink their fill from them,

and the wild asses quench their thirst.

Beside them the birds of the air make their nests

and sing among the branches.

You water the mountains from your dwelling on high;

the earth is fully satisfied by the fruit of your works. (Ps. 104:10-13)

The Psalmist celebrates the precious gift of water and is awed by the God from whom this and every good gift comes:

You visit the earth and water it abundantly;

you make it very plenteous;

the river of God is full of water. (Ps. 65:9)

The Lord changed rivers into deserts,

and water-springs into thirsty ground.....

He changed deserts into pools of water

and dry land into water-springs. (Ps. 107: 33, 35)

Mightier than the sound of many waters,

mightier than the breakers of the sea,

mightier is the Lord who dwells on high. (Ps. 93:5)

These and the twenty-eight other psalms that make reference to water are all part of the worship the Church offers to our Creator. If we look further than the Psalter, what place in our prayer and praise does water hold—the gift on which all life depends? The scope of this article is necessarily limited, so let us seek a partial answer to that question by examining just one liturgical resource—the 1979 Book of Common Prayer of the Episcopal Church (BCP).

At the heart of the Episcopal Rite of Holy Baptism is the Thanksgiving over the Water (BCP, pp. 306-7), which begins with these words:

We thank you, Almighty God, for the gift of water.

Over it the Holy Spirit moved in the beginning of creation.

Through it you led the children of Israel out of their

bondage in Egypt into the land of promise.

In it your Son Jesus received the baptism of John

and was anointed by the Holy Spirit as the Messiah, the Christ

The second paragraph of the prayer thanks God for the water of Baptism through which “we are buried with Christ in his death . . . share in his resurrection (and) are reborn by the Holy Spirit. “

The celebrant then touches the water and prays that it may be sanctified by the power of the Holy Spirit so that “those who here are cleansed from sin and born again may continue for ever in the risen life of Jesus Christ our Savior.”

The rich biblical references and the cumulative use of prepositions (“over/through/in”) make this a memorable prayer to proclaim and to hear. However, what is remarkable is that, despite the opening words of the prayer, the water is not itself the gift for which we thank God. Instead it provides the medium through which the saving acts of God are *effected*. In that respect the water of Baptism is similarly the medium through which the salvation of those baptized is brought about.

Elsewhere in the Prayer Book there is a surprising absence of references to water. In the extensive section of prayers (pp. 814–835) there is just one petition—for rain “in this time of need” (no.43). In the section entitled *Thanksgivings* (pp. 836–841), no mention is made of the wonder of water in all its forms and the indispensable blessings that it brings to us.

Eucharistic Prayer C (pp. 370–372), which is notable because of its focus on the created order, makes no reference to water. In the Daily Office, Canticle 8 (p. 85) recalls Israel’s deliverance at the Red Sea,^[1] but once again it is God’s saving act that claims our attention.

Only the *Benedicite* (*A Song of Creation*, Canticle 12) celebrates the gift of water which responds to its Creator with exuberant praise:

Glorify the Lord, every shower of rain and fall of dew . . .

Frost and cold, ice and sleet, glorify the Lord . . .

Glorify the Lord, O springs of water, seas and streams,

O whales and all that move in the waters . . .

Praise him and glorify him forever. (pp. 88–89)

Here is one of the few places in the Book of Common Prayer where there is a clear echo of the Psalmist offering thanks to the Creator for God’s wondrous works in creation, water included.

* * * * *

Why this drought? Why this dearth of references to water in the prayer and praise of the Episcopal Church?

In the first place, the prayer of Christians in the West has been largely focused on the redeeming life and work of Jesus Christ, Lord and Savior. In the past century the sanctifying and empowering activity of the Holy Spirit has come to the fore. Now, with a growing sense of urgency, God the Father is being celebrated as the “maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.” Those familiar words from both the Nicene Creed and the Apostles’ Creed are now being amplified with references to God as Creator in the Eucharistic Prayers and the Prayers of the People and in the Daily Office.

Secondly, this failure to celebrate both the Creator and the creation he has brought into being has led to a divorce between the staples of daily existence and their sacramental use in worship. A communion wafer has nothing in common with the crusty bread on our table; a sip of wine from the chalice bears little resemblance to a festive drink; a handful of baptismal water does not suggest being washed clean all over; a smudge of chrism on the brow is a poor substitute for anointing the body with perfumed oil.

By failing to use these elements of daily life liturgically in an immediately recognizable form, we diminish the close relationship between our sacramental worship and the created world we live in. This can lead to indifference to the material universe that impoverishes our worship and diminishes our sense of responsibility for the creation entrusted to us.

A third factor is the trivialization of the Rite of Holy Baptism. In his book, *Celebrating the Rites of Initiation*, James Turrell recalls the church in which he grew up:

The parish used a small bowl, no larger than a salad bowl, as the baptismal font. But because it was inconvenient to clean and polish this bowl, there was placed within it a Pyrex custard cup, about two ounces in capacity. The custard cup held the water to be used in baptism. This was such seriously impoverished symbolism as to render the deep language of the baptismal rite ludicrous If the vessel under consideration makes one snicker as one describes its contents as the waters of creation and as the Red Sea's tides, then one needs a larger vessel.[\[2\]](#)

This is an extreme example of trivialization, but the majority of baptisms even today make for a disjunction between the way the sacrament is celebrated and the powerful images recalled in the lessons and prayers accompanying the baptism. Even when the congregation is asperged immediately following the baptism, the appropriate teaching has not been done and as a result the people are not reminded of their own baptism. Sadly, when all this is the case, the most public use of water in a liturgical context does little to drive home the material and spiritual significance of God's gift of water.

* * * * *

*All creatures of our God and King,
lift up your voices, let us sing: Alleluia, alleluia! . . .
Swift flowing water, pure and clear,
make music for your Lord to hear, Alleluia, alleluia!*

So, what are we to do? As one way of rectifying the dearth of attention to water in our worship, we might sing and preach about Saint Francis's great hymn of creation. We might also draw on the Psalter, especially on those psalms that have significant references to water (Pss. 65, 93, 104, 107, and 124). We can select biblical lessons that have water at their heart: Jonah overtaken by a mighty storm as he seeks to avoid God's call to go to Nineveh; Jesus calming the wind and the waves; Saint Paul shipwrecked en route to Rome.[\[3\]](#) We can find or compose prayers that give God thanks and praise for water in its many forms. Above all, we can celebrate Baptism with careful attention paid to the powerful words and actions that constitute the rite. All these will provide much needed springs in the desert.

Most promising in this regard is the "Season of Creation" which is being increasingly embraced by Christians around the world. This optional season in the Church Year begins on September 1 (the Day of Creation in the Eastern Orthodox Church) and extends through four Sundays to October 4 (the Feast of Saint Francis). Each of these four Sundays in the three-year cycle is devoted to an element of God's

creation. Those Sundays that bear directly on water are the Fourth Sunday in Year A (River Sunday) and the First Sunday in Year C (Ocean Sunday).

Each Sunday in the Season of Creation is provided with lessons, prayers and hymns, and sermon material. Taken together, they allow for all that God has brought into being to be in our minds and on our lips as we worship. Humankind in all its diversity, the beauty of the physical world, and the magnitude of the universe beyond our sight— all are the subject of our prayer and praise.

The Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and Pope Francis have called on Christians to pray and work for the protection of the earth and its peoples, all alike the work of God's hands. Like all else that God has made, the gift of water is to be celebrated, cherished and conserved. In that way we will give glory to God and help in realizing Jesus's words: "I have come that all may have life and have it in all its fullness" (John 10:10).

In conclusion here is the Prayer for the Day from the Australian liturgy for Ocean Sunday:

God our Creator,

as we reflect on the mysteries of the ocean depths,

we celebrate the wondrous design of the seas that surround us. Help us to discern how we have polluted our oceans

and to empathize with the groaning of creation beneath us.

Teach us to sense the presence of God in the tides and currents of the surging seas.

Teach us to care for the oceans and all our waterways.

In the name of the Wisdom of God,

the creative force that designs and governs all creation.

Amen.[\[4\]](#)



Jeffery Rowthorn came from Union Seminary to Yale in 1973 as one of the founding faculty members of the new Institute of Sacred Music. For the next fourteen years he taught liturgy and served as Yale Divinity School's first Chapel Minister. In 1987 he was elected Suffragan Bishop of Connecticut and then from 1994 to 2001 served as Bishop of the Episcopal congregations in Europe. Over the past forty years he has compiled and edited three hymnals and written hymns, among them the school hymn for Berkeley Divinity School and a hymn commissioned to mark the tercentenary of Yale University.

FOOTNOTES

[1] Cantic 8, The Song of Moses (*Cantemus Domino*) consists of selected verses from Exodus 15 (vv. 1-6, 11-13, 17-18).

[2] James Turrell, *Celebrating the Rites of Initiation* (New York: Church Publishing, 2013), p. 79.

[3] Jonah 1:1- 2:10; Matthew 8: 23-27; Acts 27: 13-44.

[4] The Season of Creation, First Sunday, Year C (Ocean Sunday)

Note: Under the leadership of Dr. Norman Habel, the Uniting Church of Australia developed the first "Season of Creation," providing a liturgy for each of the Sundays in the three-year cycle. The most recent liturgies for all the Sundays can be found at: seasonofcreation.com/worship-resources/liturgies. A further resource is: *The Season of Creation: A Preaching Commentary*, edited by Norman C. Habel, David Rhoades and H. Paul Santmire (Fortress Press, 2011).

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Why We Need an Altar Call to the Font

By Benjamin M. Stewart | Volume 2.1 Fall 2015

Author's note: A number of people were helpful conversation partners in thinking through this essay. I am especially grateful for extended conversations with Susan Briehl, Jennifer Davidson, Paul Hoffman, and Gordon Lathrop.

The impetus for this essay comes partly from the open communion, or open table, movement.^[1] At the heart of that generative and provocative movement is an invitation. The invitation is to communion, but it is especially provocative because it implicitly or explicitly invites those who are not baptized. This essay is not about the open table movement. However, I propose that we think further about invitation from a locus that has been surprisingly little engaged in conversations about open table: Christian baptism. A few recent essays, particularly among Lutherans, have addressed some of the baptismal issues raised by open communion.^[2] As one response to those essays, this article proposes a modest but pivotal reform in contemporary baptismal practice: a regular practice of liturgical invitation to baptism.

Ecumenical context

A Sunday invitation to baptism is also a logical outgrowth of wider ecumenical work on baptism. The past century of ecumenical collaboration has produced significant convergences between evangelical and catholic streams of baptismal theology and practice. Specifically, ecumenical documents and worship resources now approach baptism as normally a public event on Sunday, mutually recognized across denominations, conducted with ample water, serious about discipleship and formation, emphatic about God's grace, normally (even if not typically) for adults in addition to children, and an enduringly meaningful beginning-point for a lifetime of Christian vocation.^[3] This is a profound change from the mostly private perfunctory baptisms of less than a century ago. Liturgical historian Maxwell Johnson writes that the current ecumenical convergence in baptismal theology and ritual offers "to modern Christians, as never before in history, the opportunity to recover a profound Christian spirituality, a way of living in Christ, which is consciously and intentionally rooted in Christian initiation in water and the Holy Spirit."^[4]

For all of this ecumenical baptismal prominence and promise, however, it is remarkable that relatively few worship services publicly invite anyone into the path toward baptism. In many places, there is not even any public *information* about how to begin the path toward baptism, much less a regular, liturgically integrated *invitation*. In many congregations, one might hear dozens or hundreds of liturgical invitations to confession, communion, and offering—and more prosaic invitations to committees and fundraisers—before hearing a single invitation to baptism.

Evangelical patterns of invitation

American evangelicals have been especially interested in speaking the language of invitation in worship. While the altar call may have its roots in invitation to the communion table, today the altar call (or invitation to discipleship, or opening the doors of the church) is more associated with individual

commitment or recommitment to the life of faith. Many churches in the revivalist tradition include a time at every Sunday service that culminates in an invitation to discipleship, in which individuals who respond are supported by conversation and prayer with ministers, elders, and others. This ritual event sometimes occurs near the end of the service so that the time of prayer may extend for as long as needed.[5]

The specific practice of evangelical invitation to discipleship now often takes place within an emphasis on creating an ecclesial and liturgical environment of hospitality. While American cultural accents on inclusion and growth certainly influence contemporary practice, many of today's evangelicals articulate calls to discipleship that are grounded in the radical hospitality of God. Thus, in many places the general concern for hospitality—from accessible websites to worship resources—may be understood as reaching its most concentrated and culminating form in the invitation to faith and discipleship. While the evangelical practice of altar call may not serve as a direct model for invitations to the font, it nevertheless represents an example of a clear, liturgically integrated open door for adult entry into the Christian life—something that mainline Protestant and Catholic liturgies rarely achieve.

A new option for the gathering rite from the Lutherans

Lutherans in North America now sometimes anchor the Sunday gathering rite in baptism—even when no baptism is celebrated. The new worship book of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (ELW), provides the option of beginning Sunday worship with a newly created rite, “Thanksgiving for Baptism.”[6] It is an alternative to a brief order for confession and forgiveness with which recent generations of Lutherans have often begun Sunday worship. The option for Thanksgiving for Baptism arose out of the ecumenical recovery of baptismal practice and the classic Lutheran understanding of confession as a subspecies of baptismal renewal.[7]

The Thanksgiving for Baptism rite is fairly simple and already includes something of an invitation. It begins with a Trinitarian invocation, including an option phrased in expansive baptismal imagery: “Blessed by the Holy Trinity, + one God, the fountain of living water, the rock who gave us birth, our light and our salvation.”[8] The presiding minister then leads a concise ritual pivot: “Joined to Christ in the waters of baptism, we are clothed with God’s mercy and forgiveness. Let us give thanks for the gift of baptism.”[9] Thus, in just a few words, there is a brief *proclamation* (of the promise of baptism) and an *invitation* (to give thanks for the gift of baptism).[10] This is followed by a thanksgiving prayer over the water that is a slightly modified version of the water blessing used at baptisms. The rite concludes with a gathering song, perhaps with baptismal imagery, during which “as a reminder of the gift of baptism, the assembly may be sprinkled with water.”[11] The rite is both baptismal and invitational, yet the invitation seems to be addressed to the already baptized.

Toward an invitation to baptism

Baptism, writes Lars Hartmann, is “the door into a new human community.”[12] While this door has undergone great ecumenical renovation and restoration in the past century, it remains ritually closed on most Sundays in many congregations. Thus, a number of factors make this moment in North American Christianity especially right for introducing a Sunday-morning invitation into baptism, as rehearsed above: an ecumenical convergence around a robust baptismal theology and practice, an open table movement pressing the question of how those who are not baptized are invited into sacramental participation, some newly created rites around baptism that begin worship with a thanksgiving for baptism, evangelical practices of liturgical invitation to discipleship, and the North American cultural

reality of increasing percentages of seekers (as opposed to life-long Christians) in Sunday worship.

An example of an invitation extended

The occasion for this invitation to baptism was the closing eucharist for a national worship conference in Atlanta, *Jubilee 2015: Called to Be a Living Voice*, of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Association of Lutheran Church Musicians, with approximately 600 people participating. The event was held in a hotel ballroom, with Gordon Lathrop presiding and Nadia Bolz-Weber preaching.

Worship began with an adapted version of ELW's Thanksgiving for Baptism rite. The planners of the conference assumed that there would be only a small number of people present who had not been baptized (perhaps most likely a guest musician or one of the employees of the hotel attending or helping with logistics during the service). However, the planning team committed early in the process to offering an authentic open door into baptism preparation^[13] at this worship service partly because it would be much observed by such a large number of worship leaders.

The gathering rite began with singing as the assembly gathered around a central baptismal font.^[14] A number of people came forward carrying glass pitchers and generously poured water into the large central font. The presiding minister spoke a Trinitarian baptismal invocation:

Blessed be the holy Trinity, + one God,

the fountain of living water,

the rock who gave us birth,

our light and our salvation.^[15]

The presider then directly addressed the assembly:

Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters.

The waters of God's mercy promise

freedom to those in slavery,

forgiveness to the sinners,

new birth to the weary,

and a royal anointing for all people.

The font is open to all,

and the promise is for you, for all who are far away,

everyone whom God calls.

At these waters, you are invited to the way

of baptism into Jesus Christ,

*and, for those who have been baptized,
you are invited to renewal in the grace
that washed over you on the day of your baptism.*

I am quite serious about this invitation. If you are not baptized and if you desire now, here, to begin to come to these waters that join you to Christ and to life with Christ's people, then please come.

During the entire liturgy of the word that follows, two pastors will be standing here by the font, identifiable by their clerical dress. You may know them by name. They are Pastor Susan Briehl and Pastor Benjamin Stewart. Come to them. They are prepared to help you begin the way of baptism, to find a congregation and a catechumenate, and to be your sponsors as you begin. These waters are for you.

And, if you are baptized, then once again hear the promise of Christ that has been spoken to you in these waters and once again stand in the daily dying and rising that was first made your way on the day you were baptized.

Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters. Let us give thanks for the waters of baptism.[\[16\]](#)

The rite continued with a prayer of thanksgiving for water and for baptism,[\[17\]](#) after which the assembly processed, singing, to the east end of the ballroom for the beginning of the service of the word. During the entire service of the word, the two pastors stood near the font, including throughout the intercessory prayers. The time for intercessory prayer in this service was called Open Space. The prayers were stational, modeled on what some know as the Thomas Mass.[\[18\]](#) During this time, a third minister stood at the font with an ewer, lifting and pouring water through the entire course of the prayers.

All of the ministers were prepared to welcome a candidate for baptism during Open Space. Each had become familiar with an adapted version of the rite of Welcome to Baptism[\[19\]](#) to use with anyone who responded to the invitation.

Reflections on the invitation

From the beginning, the leadership team understood that the demographics of this worship conference meant that the odds of someone presenting themselves as a candidate for baptism were statistically low. However, since we were speaking a public invitation, we knew that the odds were not zero, and this realization was both unsettling and energizing. Extending the invitation made us newly vigilant to the margins of our gathering, attentive to the open-door nature of baptism, and serious about the actual details of welcoming someone to Christianity and a local congregation.

In the end, no one presented themselves as a new candidate for baptism. However, many people came to the font to remember their baptism, a number of people came to the ministers at the font for some form of individual prayer and counseling, and the font itself seemed to stand newly in the center of our gathering as an open—and gently disruptive—invitation to the newcomer and outsider.

As I thought about how many liturgical, programmatic, and ministerial adaptations were needed in order to make an apparently simple invitation to baptism, I remembered Aidan Kavanagh's description

of the far-reaching and as-yet-unfinished baptismal reforms of the twentieth century:

One may turn an altar around and leave reform at that. But one cannot set an adult catechumenate in motion without becoming necessarily involved with renewal in the ways a local church lives its faith from top to bottom In this area, when one change occurs, all changes.[\[20\]](#)

Kavanagh was rarely guilty of understatement, and this essay can hardly address the reform of church life “from top to bottom.” However, Kavanagh’s observation is consistent with the experience in Atlanta: opening the way of baptism to newcomers in liturgy calls for an engaged rethinking of a number of liturgical and ecclesial practices. Toward that end, and aware of their necessarily preliminary nature, I offer some concluding suggestions for introducing liturgical invitations to baptism.

Into the way of baptism. The invitation modeled here is to “the way of baptism,” not simply immediately to baptism. This phrase recognizes the journey-nature of baptism and baptismal preparation, and eases unrealistic pressure for and undue emphasis on unplanned individual decision. The invitation might mention an upcoming baptismal festival at Epiphany or Easter. In order to invite someone on a journey, a way, toward baptism means that a way must be prepared. There needs to be something into which to invite people. Susan Briehl imagines a congregation being transformed by taking months to wrestle with the question, “How can we prepare to welcome people who respond to such an invitation?”[\[21\]](#) Answering this question might lead to the formation of sponsors, mentors, catechists, service projects, baptismal festivals, outreach efforts, and ministers prepared to pray for and with candidates.[\[22\]](#)

Beauty is an invitation. The aesthetic dimensions of a welcome to baptism are integral to any invitation. Beauty itself, Edward Farley writes, testifies to the benevolence of God and invites people into a journey of self-transcendence.[\[23\]](#) Some considerations include: the inviting sound, sight, and touch of clean, abundant water; language that compellingly reimagines life, God, and the world through biblical images; music and song around the font that nurture ritual participation; and ritual action and elements that are beautiful in their simplicity (laying on of hands and prayer, anointing, addressing, candle lighting, signation, robing, pouring and immersing, applauding).

But we still need clear directions. Biblical images and layered metaphor are central to sacramental rites, but sometimes people just need to know where to stand. As the example rite above demonstrated, clear and blessedly concise directions for how to respond to an invitation makes the invitation more authentic and hospitable. Inviting people to respond during an open time of prayer, such as during a Thomas Mass or Open Space, is more flexible and forgiving as it allows further directions and conversation to occur individually while members of the assembly are at different stations for prayer.

Both welcome and warning.[\[24\]](#) Baptism into Jesus Christ is a pure gift—an immersion in what Martin Luther called “a flood of grace.”[\[25\]](#) Because such grace is radically for *all*, it is never cheap, but is costly.[\[26\]](#) Therefore, invitations to baptism are most truthful when they speak of baptism not simply as an individual gift, but rather also as being swept into a landscape wholly altered by a flood of grace. Susan Briehl once phrased words of simultaneous welcome and warning at the font in this way: “Deeper than these waters is the mystery and mercy of God that waits for you.”[\[27\]](#)

The invitation comes from God. The waters of baptism, Christians say, flow toward humanity as an

invitation from God. To speak an invitation in God's name at the font is first of all simply to give voice to the nature of baptismal water. This means that invitations are not reminders of a religious to-do list nor are they one more strategy for institutional growth or survival. Invitations to baptism are proclamations of God's expansive but partly hidden workings in history, of God's present-day offering of promises, and of the holy thirst for God placed within all creatures. Thus, invitation is integral to the meaning of the font. Baptism stands among us as a door for the newcomers. To the extent that the door is closed on Sunday, we can open it with a simple invitation when we pray or sing beside the water.



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FOOTNOTES

[1] For introductions to the movement see the online collection of various articles from *The Anglican Theological Review*, <http://www.anglicantheologicalreview.org/read/conversations/1/>; Charles Hefling's "Who Is Communion for? The Debate over the Open Table." *The Christian Century* 129, no. 24 (2012); and Sara Miles's influential *Take This Bread: A Radical Conversion* (New York: Ballantine, 2008).

[2] See especially these essays in the 2014 collection "Table and Font: Who is Welcome?" published by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, available under the "Table and Font" tab at <http://www.elca.org/Resources/Worship>: Gordon W. Lathrop, "Welcome to Life in Christ: Reflections on Baptism and Hospitality at the Table of the Lord;" Melinda A. Quivik, "'Butter in the Sunshine': The Fragility of Faith and the Gift of Baptism;" Thomas H. Schattauer, "Exploring the Baptismal Foundations of Eucharistic Hospitality;" and Benjamin M. Stewart, "Invitation and Open Table."

[3] Two documents from the World Council of Churches chart the progress of the past half century: *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper 111, (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982); and *Baptism Today: Understanding, Practice, Ecumenical Implications*, Faith and Order Paper 207, (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, World Council of Churches Publications, 2008). Substantial resources for baptismal preparation and catechumenal formation are increasingly available from denominational, ecumenical, and congregational sources.

[4] Maxwell E. Johnson, *The Rites of Christian Initiation: Their Evolution and Interpretation*, Exp Rev

Ed. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2007), 450.

[5] For descriptions, see Daniel E. Albrecht, *Rites in the Spirit: A Ritual Approach to Pentecostal/Charismatic Spirituality* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 165-174, 253-259.

[6] Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. Leader's desk edition. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 169.

[7] The primary companion volume to ELW describes the rite as making "the baptismal character of our coming together even more explicit . . . [Thanksgiving for Baptism] may be the preparatory act . . . for this service of word and sacrament." Lorraine S. Brugh and Gordon W. Lathrop, *The Sunday Assembly: Using Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008), 119. In ELW, both the confession and forgiveness and thanksgiving for baptism rites are optional. Martin Luther framed confession and forgiveness as a baptismal practice. "Repentance, therefore, is nothing else than a return and approach to baptism, to resume and practice what has earlier been begun but abandoned." Martin Luther, *Large Catechism*, 4.77-79.

[8] *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, Leader's desk edition, 169.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Notice that, because this proclamation phrases the state of being baptized in the present tense, it implies that the initiating event has occurred.

[11] Ibid. The order, in sum: Trinitarian invocation, brief proclamation, brief invitation, prayer, and song, perhaps with sprinkling.

[12] Lars Hartmann, *Into the Name of the Lord Jesus: Baptism in the Early Church* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), 46.

[13] The planners did not rule out the possibility of encountering a sort of Ethiopian eunuch occasion in which an immediate baptism was called for. However, given the planning team's commitments to catechumenal formation, individual discernment, and local congregational relationships, the invitation was phrased to invite people into "the way of baptism" in order to signal support for immediately beginning catechumenal preparation for baptism.

[14] The ballroom was arranged around three central spaces: on the far west end a platform with leaders' chairs and ambo as a place for the word, with seats for the assembly facing the platform; on the far east end another raised platform for the table, designed for the assembly to stand around (along with a few of chairs for those who needed to sit); and in the middle third of the ballroom a large area of open space with ten dispersed stations for various forms of prayer, in the center of which was a large, clear, elevated, baptismal bowl filled with water.

[15] As noted above, this is one of the invocations offered as an option in Thanksgiving for Baptism in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, Leader's desk edition, 169.

[16] This text was drafted by Gordon Lathrop and Benjamin Stewart.

[17] Using an adapted version of ELW's Thanksgiving at the Font V, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, 589.

[18] While the musicians led Taize-style chant, participants visited prayer stations to which they were drawn, moving at their own pace between one or more stations. The stations included baptismal remembrance at the font, footwashing, offering for a local ministry, letter-writing for advocacy, confession and forgiveness, anointing for healing, labyrinth prayer walk, candle-lighting and contemplation at a station with icons, prayers on fabric woven into a tapestry, prayers for those named in the weaving.

[19] In the adapted rite, the candidate marked the beginning of preparation of baptism, one or both pastors promised to accompany the candidate in preparation for baptism (essentially becoming baptismal sponsors), the candidate was signed with the cross, offered prayer with laying on of hands, and a blessing. See "Welcome to Baptism" in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, Leader's desk edition, 592.

[20] Aidan Kavanagh, "Christian Initiation in Post-Conciliar Roman Catholicism: A Brief Report," in *Living Water, Sealing Spirit: Readings on Christian Initiation*, ed. Maxwell E. Johnson (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, A Pueblo Book, 1995), 8.

[21] Susan Briehl, phone conversation with author, September 16, 2015.

[22] Paul Hoffman's recent writing evocatively describes how his congregation was transformed by practicing a robust baptismal ministry to adult newcomers. See his *Faith Forming Faith: Bringing New Christians to Baptism and Beyond*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012. One example of Hoffman's parish practice: among the other weekly intercessory prayers, his congregation regularly prayed for the newly baptized, and then prayed ". . . that you might send yet others to this font of grace to join us in the mission of Christ, we pray. . ." Paul Hoffman, email message to author, September 15, 2015.

[23] Edward Farley, *Faith and Beauty: A Theological Aesthetic* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001).

[24] On the pairing of welcome and warning see Lathrop, "Welcome to Life in Christ: Reflections on Baptism and Hospitality at the Table of the Lord," and, regarding invitations to Holy Communion, see especially Chapter 5: "Access to Holy Things" in Gordon W. Lathrop, *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998). I have written elsewhere about the need for invitations to communion not simply to speak of *receiving* the Body of Christ, but also, drawing on Augustine's famous image from his sermon 272, of communicants *becoming* the Body of Christ in the eucharist. This latter image—while being an astonishing promise—is also a bracing warning to those who would avoid being transformed by ritual participation. See Benjamin M. Stewart, "Listening for the Accents: Noticing Patterns in the Conversation about Table and Font" in *Let's Talk: Living Theology in the Metropolitan Chicago Synod*.

<http://mcsletstalk.org/communion-and-community/listening-accents-noticing-patterns-conversation-table-font/>.

[25] Martin Luther, "The Holy and Blessed Sacrament of Baptism (1519)," in *Luther's Works*, ed. Theodore Bachmann, vol. 35 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1960), 32.

[26] Bonhoeffer linked the phrase "cheap grace" to inadequate sacramental discourse and practice: "Cheap grace is preaching forgiveness without repentance; it is baptism without the discipline of community; it is the Lord's Supper without confession of sin; it is absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without the living,

incarnate Jesus Christ.” But note that for Bonhoeffer costly grace is not first of all about a more rigorous of baptismal discipleship: “Above all, grace is costly because it was costly to God.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 44-45.

[27] Susan Briehl, phone conversation with author, September 16, 2015.

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A 'Saguaro Church' at Worship

By Talitha Arnold | Volume 2.1 Fall 2015

On June 12, 2011, we celebrated our first “Blue Pentecost” at the United Church of Santa Fe. Like churches around the world, we had traditionally based our Pentecost celebrations on the Acts story, with its “mighty wind” and “tongues of fire.” Pentecost at United was always red, noisy, and fun. We would fill the Sanctuary with red balloons and hang the red Pentecost banner. Children and adults blew like the wind, spoke in different languages, and waved slips of red paper above their heads as their “tongues of fire.”

But that year, everything changed. Santa Fe, like the rest of the Southwest, was in the grip of a decades-long drought. Ten days before Pentecost and hundreds of miles west of Santa Fe, an abandoned campfire in Arizona’s White Mountains started the largest fire in the state’s history. Fueled by tinder-dry forests and grasslands, it raced into New Mexico. By the Monday before Pentecost, its smoke descended upon Santa Fe. The normally azure sky turned grey. The smoke blocked the sun by day and turned the moon blood-red by night.

As the Southwest continued to burn, we knew our worship couldn’t include the traditional symbols of wind and fire to represent God’s spirit. So we designed a “Blue Pentecost,” based not on the Acts story, but on Jesus’ baptism—another time when God’s Spirit descended to fill someone with power. Water—not fire—became our central symbol of Pentecost. We hung the blue baptismal banner and used hymns such as “Spirit of the Living God, Fall Afresh on Me.” Rather than slips of red paper as tongues of fire, the children used pinon branches to bless the congregation with water from the baptismal font, as we sang John Chisum’s “Let Your Spirit Come:”

Let your rain fall down, pour upon our souls.

Come and wash us now; come and make us whole.

Our “Blue Pentecost” didn’t follow the usual script for worship that year. But the congregation definitely experienced God’s powerful spirit poured out upon us and all creation in that dry and harsh time. The story of Jesus’ baptism, the prayers and songs for rain, and especially the feel of those drops of water from the baptismal font renewed our spirits as surely as the tongues of fire had energized the apostles that first Pentecost.

The “Blue Pentecost” is one way our congregation has adapted our liturgy to life in a land of little rain. Although Christianity, like Judaism and Islam, arose in the arid lands of the Mideast, much of the American Protestant tradition historically comes either from the green hills of Germany and England or the equally green landscapes of New England and the American South. Our hymnody, prayers, and even church architecture often reflect our attachment to the “fields, forests, and flowery meadows” of colder climes. With its steeply-slanted roof to keep the snow off, the Congregational (UCC) Church of my Arizona childhood could have come from the New Haven Green. At Christmas, we sang “in the bleak midwinter, snow on snow” when it was 70 degrees outside and it hadn’t even rained for months.

The issue is not simply aesthetics or the cognitive dissonance of singing about lush landscapes when we're surrounded by desert. When our worship affirms God's beauty only in green forests and verdant meadows (the landscape many current desert-dwellers left behind), then despite its abundant and tenacious life, the desert is seen as "God-forsaken" or as Belden Lane's "fierce landscapes" of trial and temptation. It is not "home." The results have included not only transplanted New England-style churches, but also and especially the development of unsustainable desert cities like Phoenix with its green lawns and verdant golf courses. If worship in the desert fails to connect our congregations with the sacred creation outside the sanctuary doors, we will fail to love and save this unique corner of creation.

When, after a ten-year sojourn in the green hills of Connecticut, I became pastor of the newly-formed United Church of Santa Fe, I saw part of my call as making the connection between worship and the desert. Just as the magnificent saguaro cactus is adapted to life in the desert we hoped to grow a "saguaro church" with deep roots its natural environment. It was a commitment shared by the congregation's founders. The church's original covenant affirms that we will "live in harmony with all creation" and "give ourselves to the challenges and opportunities" of life in this high desert setting. Even the architecture bears witness to that commitment. One wall of the sanctuary is adobe. The Pueblo-style roof is flat. The original entrance to the church has an "acequia," a turquoise-tiled fountain that stretches the length of the sanctuary and serves as a reminder of both the waters of baptism and the irrigation ditches ("acequias") that give life to the communities of New Mexico.

Worship at United reflects our "desert faith" in various ways. For Children's Sundays, the Parable of the Mustard Seed became the Parable of the Pinon Tree (of northern New Mexico) and the Saguaro (the giant cactus of the Sonoran Desert). Like the mustard seed, both plants grow from the smallest of seeds into great trees that provide shelter and life for other creatures. They also illustrate how to live in dry times: grow deep roots; adapt to change; acknowledge our dependence on one another; and seek God's living waters.

In Lent, we use biblical images of water to speak of our thirst for God. Here is an example of a prayer that makes this connection:

In the deserts of our lives, in the wilderness within,

God gives us the waters of new life.

To give us hope when our lives run dry, to give us strength when our world seems barren,

God gives us the waters of new life.

To make justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a living stream,

To give us—and our world—a second chance and a new beginning,

God gives us the waters of new life.

In the Sacrament of Baptism, we include a question for the congregation that links the holy water in the font to God's sacred gift of all water:

As we bless this water of Baptism, will you give thanks for God's gift of water in all ways and recommit yourself to the wise use of this sacred resource for the sake of generations yet to come?

We also seek to learn from other desert peoples who have lived and prayed in this land far longer than any of us Protestants. For example, in both Native and Biblical traditions, prayers for rain are connected to prayers for a right relationship with the Creator and the rest of creation. The rains come when harmony and justice are restored. These traditions help us understand our own faith better. In times of drought or fire, we pray:

For rain in a thirsty land and hope in a hard time,

For all creation that suffers because of drought or human greed,

For the remembrance of the Source upstream and our neighbors downstream,

Lord, hear our prayer.

The continual incorporation of desert images, prayers, stories, and understandings in the worship life of the church shapes the rest of our life and ministry. Six years ago, the congregation adopted a "Whole Earth Covenant" that has led to practical projects such as solar panels and water conservation systems.

United's "desert worship" not only connects us to the natural world outside the church. It also helps us draw on the deep well of God's presence in the driest of emotional or spiritual times. Experiences of such dryness can be found in all congregations, regardless of where they are located. Every Sunday, people come through our doors from the deserts of their lives—divorce, job loss, a bad diagnosis, or other harsh and lonely places. Like the deer that longs for cool streams, they are thirsty for the living waters of hope, faith, and love.

From the story of Hagar in the wilderness to Moses striking the rock to Jesus asking a Samaritan woman for a drink, our Biblical faith abounds with the promise that God will provide that living water in the deserts of our lives. When our liturgy incorporates the lessons and practices of a desert faith, worship makes good on that promise.



Talitha Arnold (YDS, '80) was called in 1987 as Minister of United Church of Santa Fe, a new UCC congregation in the desert Southwest. Known for its worship, music, commitment to the wider community, and children's and youth ministries, the church participated in the 2011 ISM "Congregations" project. Talitha also served congregations in Connecticut and Arizona and as Associate Chaplain for Yale. Author of *Worship for Vital Congregations* (Pilgrim Press) and articles for *Feasting on the Word*, *The Christian Century*, and *NPR's All Things Considered*, her current work is *A Desert Faith for a Desert Time* (funded by the Louisville Institute).

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The Rain: A Funeral Story

By Michelle Lewis | Volume 2.1 Fall 2015

We each made our solemn march to the places that had been designated for us. I watched as those who were going to sit took tentative steps toward their chairs. Others stood silently toward the back of the canopy. It was as though they were trying to will themselves as far away as they could from the open hole in the ground.

They had gathered here to pay their last respects to one they knew and loved as son, brother, father, and friend. He loved the ocean, and anything that was related to the water. It was imperative that the ritual that day include water. He didn't just love rivers and streams and lakes and oceans, he loved the rain. His last promise to his now five-year-old daughter was that they would play in the rain that summer. He died before that could happen.

His mother was a devout Christian and it was important for her that this element of playing in the rain be turned into a liturgy that could be both playful and respectful—something that both the children and adults could participate in. Connections between play and worship are not unknown: Diane Ackerman writes that play “. . . carries us across fear and uncertainty toward the slippery edges of possibility, where one must use oneself fully and stretch human limits to achieve the remarkable . . .”^[1] This was where the liturgy needed to take all of us. Not just the children, but the other family and friends that would gather. This was where the liturgy needed to take me, as their pastor, as well.

It was my third funeral in about two weeks. I looked at the somber faces of those who gathered to pay their last respects, and thought back to the death of my own sister only a month before. When I was called to do this, a part of me wanted to say no. But there was a part of me that wanted to say yes. I knew today we would be confronting death and its hold, which was both invisible and tangible.

When I was asked to do this, I thought back to the last time I had played in the rain. It was in the summer of my first year of graduate studies at Yale. Taking a break from my research that day, I decided to go to a Sunflower Farm. The afternoon started out idyllic. The scene was as picturesque as something out of a novel. The sunflowers were in bloom and stretched as far as the eye could see. They were offering hayrides. I had never been on a hayride and thought this would be a great day to give one a try. I joined the group of women and children in a wagon and took in the sights and smells around me. It was a beautiful summer day. The wagon took us through a meadow and into a forest.

We were about fifteen minutes into the hayride when the sky became ominously dark. It began to rain. It wasn't a light summer rain or a passing shower. It was a torrential downpour. Some of the children screamed in delight while their mothers tried to shield their heads and cameras from the rain that wouldn't stop. Our peaceful mood was shattered. The person driving our wagon scrambled to find the shortest route back to where the trip started. I thought about the irony of it all. A day that had started with such hope and beauty had ended, for many, with some type of destruction. More than one person would have to replace a cell phone or a water-logged camera.

As we finally made it back to the place where we'd started the journey in our wagon, the sky began to clear and the rain stopped. We knew it wouldn't rain forever, but while we were in that moment, as the rains were pouring down on us, it felt like forever.

Despite the havoc, I experienced the rain that day as cleansing. As we waited our turn to get off the wagon one of the ladies sitting next to me looked at me and said, “Well that was something else,” and we laughed. It wasn’t a small chuckle, but one of those laughs that comes from deep down in the pit of your belly. It was one of those laughs that reach your very soul. Before I knew it, I was standing and laughing with this woman whom I’d only just met and we were laughing so hard we were crying.

This is the power of water. It can be both devastating and life-creating. A day doesn’t go by that we don’t experience its life-giving power in some way, whether through the leaves on a tree, or plants in a garden, or through drinking and bathing. Water carries us through birth, and through the rebirth of baptism. At its worst, water can be destructive. At its best, it is cleansing.

I hoped the people sitting before me would be renewed and refreshed by the funeral liturgy that was about to take place. We said prayers and read scripture. Then, using the water that the family brought in from a stream from their family farm, we used a seashell to make it rain, scooping the water up in the shell and throwing it up in the air. With each shower of raindrops we said the words, “We remember you.” Children giggled, adults laughed and smiled, some wiped tears from their eyes. All were cleansed by the gentle raindrops. Instead of causing destruction that day, the rain was cleansing, as it washed away our pain and terror and fear.

There is pain and fear in losing a loved one: The pain of realizing you will never again have that person to walk with or cry with; the fear of knowing you must face a new day without them. There is also a terror in acknowledging death itself, and realizing that each of us meets the same end. Yet that day we laughed. We laughed fearlessly in the face of death, and we were cleansed as we played in the rain.



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FOOTNOTE

[1] Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, ed. *Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology* (West Sussex, UK: Blackwell Publishing Limited, 2012), 42.

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Stormy Weather: A Homiletic Essay

By Maggi Dawn | Volume 2.1 Fall 2015

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In my home country of England, you are never more than seventy-four miles from the coast, so wherever you live it is possible to get to the sea in a day. At different points in my life I have lived close to coastline overlooked by huge cliffs, or by long, shallow beaches that extend across bleak mudflats. There is something therapeutic about the salty smell and the beating of waves on the shore—perhaps because that liminal space between land and sea opens up a sense of possibility. On a beach, our defined, landlocked life encounters the edge of an uncontrollable freedom; we are reminded of endless possibility, but also that we are not as much in control as we might like to think. Therapeutic though a beach may be, the wildness of the sea is not to be underestimated.

My father served in the Royal Navy during the Second World War, and had the misfortune never completely to get his sea legs. I remember him telling funny stories about journeys through choppy waters, and how he learned to fend off seasickness by avoiding looking at the waves or the boat, instead keeping his eyes fixed on the horizon. Years later, in the days before you could take a train from London to France, his advice served me well on many a ferry trip across the English Channel. What my father never mentioned until I was much older, though, was the life-threatening kind of storm in which the sea, the sky and the rain all blend into one grey mess, and you can't see the horizon at all.

I experienced just such a storm when, in my early twenties, I went to live in a small town on the edge of a Norwegian fjord. My new friends were amazed to discover that, despite coming from a maritime nation, I had never been fishing at sea. Determined to correct this lack in my experience, they took me with them the next time they set out to fish. We stowed our waterproofs and sweaters as it was a warm, dry day, and set out on smooth seas as the sun glinted on the gently moving water beneath the boat. Out on the water we set up various nets and lines, and the degree of excitement I felt at my first catch far outweighed the size of the fish on the end of the line, which was deemed too small to keep.

After some hours, quite suddenly the sun faded, the sky turned grey, and the captain announced that we should pack up urgently and head for home. Within the space of a few minutes, the sea turned angry, the clouds grew dark and forbidding, and the rain began to come down in sheets. The horizon blurred so that you couldn't tell where the rain ended and the sea began.

The fishermen went into emergency mode, tying us all on to the boat, and we headed towards land, lurching from side to side in enormous waves. Too numb to feel fear, I remember willing the storm to subside, trying in vain to find a point of focus to stop my head from spinning. A long time later when we came in to land, the quayside was lined with people waiting with blankets and hot drinks. As we stepped ashore, I saw the anxiety and relief in the faces of the waiting women, and wondered how often they had stood there, scanning the horizon. I had sung countless times the hymn for naval and fishing boats. Now I felt more starkly what it meant to cry out "for those in peril on the sea."

In the early chapters of his gospel, Mark tells a series of stories about Jesus and the disciples crossing the Sea of Galilee, several times rowing through terrifying storms. The Sea of Galilee is actually a huge lake—fourteen miles long, three miles wide at the narrow point, and seven miles across at the widest place. On a calm day it doesn't take long for experienced fishermen to cross it, but in a fierce storm, a stretch of water that size is a dangerous place to be. Mark's writing style is a bit like live TV coverage; he writes in the present continuous tense, giving the sense that he is reporting from a scene that is happening right now. When Mark tells you about a storm, rather than picturing a far distant epic, you actually feel the lurch in your stomach and the spray on your face.

Mark tells of a night when, while the disciples rowed through a fierce storm, Jesus slept undisturbed below deck until, in desperation, they shook him awake. They were unsurprised at his ability to sleep through a violent storm but incredulous that he would seemingly abandon them to its power.^[1] Why, when their lives were in danger, did he do nothing to help? The disciples had run not only into a storm, but into a timeless theological conundrum and one of the biggest stumbling blocks to faith: the unanswered question of why God seems to do nothing when people suffer, to be asleep when the storm is raging, to be curiously absent at our time of deepest need.

Just like God's conversation with Job, however, Jesus offers no explanation, and simply seems surprised at their distress. Their suffering is not explained, and their questions are answered not with a neat theodicy, but only in this: that even though they didn't realize it, he was fully present with them throughout their ordeal.

A couple of chapters later Mark tells of another night when the disciples rowed through a storm.^[2] But this time, when the storm blew up, they could not call on him for help, for Jesus had stayed on shore and gone alone up the mountain to pray. The biblical symbolism of sea and mountains emphasizes the disciples' sense of isolation. Mountains usually represent the revelation of God. The Ten Commandments, the Transfiguration, the Ascension, Moses' personal meeting with God—all of these are literally mountain top moments. But the sea, in biblical imagery, represents the chaos and wickedness of humanity apart from God—hence in heaven there is “no more sea.”^[3] The image is therefore one of extreme alienation: while Jesus is safe in the revealed presence of God, the disciples are at sea, facing the depths of humanity's alienation from themselves and from God.

Dawn was breaking when they looked up and saw Jesus walking towards them across the water. After they had battled the storm for some hours, you might expect them to be relieved and comforted at the sight of Jesus approaching. But just as with Mary on Easter morning^[4] and the disciples on the road to Emmaus,^[5] there was a disruption of perception, and they saw Jesus but did not recognize him. Far from calming them down, his appearance increased their fear, for now they thought that on top of everything else they had to deal with a ghost. Stress and anxiety often impair our perception and our judgment. Sometimes, if we're cast adrift in difficult and alienating circumstances and have to work hard just to stay afloat, we become incapable of recognizing hope when it appears on our horizon. The very thing that is thrown to us as a lifeline initially appears to make matters worse.

This is one of only a few gospel stories in which Jesus seems to step completely outside his human limitations. Each of the gospel writers tells us that Jesus strode across the water. John goes even further and claims that as soon as Jesus was in the boat, they were miraculously transported to the other side of the lake.^[6] It's inconclusive, and not even particularly interesting, to speculate on the historicity of the miracle. Miracles are implausible by nature, and arguing about whether they really happened or whether there is a rational explanation for them is a cul-de-sac—you can never prove it decisively one

way or the other. What is more interesting about this ghostly appearance is that it gives Mark, who doesn't tell any resurrection stories, an opportunity to portray Jesus in an unrecognizable, super-human form. These tough fishermen had bravely faced down wind and waves for several hours, but this strange and ghostly apparition walking across the water strikes fear into their hearts. The moment of recognition comes with Jesus' words: "It is I" But in translation the point can be lost that Jesus is saying something more than just "It's me." The Greek reads *ego eimi*—I am—which clearly connects us back to the stories of naming and identity from Exodus. "Who am I?" asked Moses, but God's reply inverts Moses' question: "I am that I am Say that I am has sent you" [7]

Mark, then, highlights the fact that human and divine are brought together in Jesus. The shimmering figure outside the boat represents the unknowable, unrecognizable presence of God—the God who cannot be grasped, and who creates a storm of fear in our souls. But inside the boat, he becomes recognizable, and everything becomes calm and still. We can't even begin to know God until we accept the paradoxical nature of the encounter—that God is on the one hand limitless and unknowable, and on the other hand made known to us in the practical realities of everyday life. Accepting that we never will understand is, in fact, the beginning of understanding. The knowable and the unknowable have to be held in tension.

Matthew added a postscript to Mark's story, in which he described Peter stepping out of the boat to join Jesus walking on the waves. Matthew gives the impression that Peter was still not completely certain that it was Jesus standing there, but he was prepared to go out on a limb. You might call this a leap of faith—a term coined by Søren Kierkegaard. In the vernacular this is often used to describe a leap into the complete unknown, but Kierkegaard was trying to describe something more like Peter's stepping out of the boat: not an irrational movement into complete darkness, but an attempt to make a connection across the gaps of logic that are inevitable in any system of thought. Kierkegaard's point is that it is futile to try to bridge every gap with logic; instead the connections are made with a leap of faith—a calculated risk based on a probable but unprovable certainty. Peter's hunch was that, despite the mystery that God is to us, God would nonetheless meet him. And so it proved.

These stories of Jesus meeting his disciples in the storm are not the stuff of gentle Sunday School tales. They speak of the worst and most frightening moments in our own lives. When we are in desperate circumstances—threatened with loss of health, shelter, employment, physical safety, or when life itself is being snatched away—the horizon seems to disappear. We long to tie ourselves to something solid in order not to be swept away, yet the most solid thing we can find is as turbulent as a boat on stormy seas.

Faith rests on the promise that, in the worst of life's challenges—when nothing is certain, the transcendent God is unrecognizable, and the familiar Jesus seems to be asleep on the job—God is nonetheless present. We may emerge weather-beaten, but we will discover, eventually, that we have not rowed through the storm alone.



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FOOTNOTES

[1] Mark 4:35-40

[2] Mark 6:45-52

[3] Revelation 21:1

[4] John 20:11-18

[5] Luke 24:13-35

[6] John 6:21

[7] Exodus 3:11,14

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Hope Travels Below Sea Level

By Teresa Berger | Volume 2.1 Fall 2015

This text originally appeared in an interactive multimedia CD-ROM entitled Ocean Psalms: Meditations, Stories, Prayers, Songs and Blessings from the Sea, co-produced by Teresa Berger and Lorna Collingridge (Durham, NC: MysticWaters Media, 2008); reproduced by kind permission of the authors.

*I have learned
in the deep South
that hope travels underground.*

*Gullah Islands
reach into an ocean
that carried slave trading ships
and is forever scarred
by the memory of the agony
below deck.*

Did hope travel westwards at all in the Middle Passage?

*And where,
if not below deck?
Underground,
the slaves seeking freedom would later say.*

*But
where is underground*

in the ocean
traversed by slave ships
if not in the deepest depths of the tortured human soul?

Hope does travel underground,
and below deck,
and deeper than the deepest sea,
yet its whispered promise is always the same:

“When you pass through the waters, I will be with you.”



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Water and the Spirit

By Don E. Saliers | Volume 2.1 Fall 2015

Many years ago, when I was a young boy, I visited a hydroelectric plant beneath a large concrete dam. Outside, the roaring flow of water was impressive; inside, the whine and hum of generators intense. It was amazing, actually, that water flooding a maze of pipes and turbines could release electrical power to so many places, supplying myriad households with energy. I remember thinking, “This is miraculous.”

Then and there the idea of water becoming something immaterial was etched in my grade-school brain. Yes, there were other transformations of water I knew about: snow, ice, rain, vapor, steam; but the thought of a flow of water generating invisible power . . . that was something else.

Much later, when biblical images of water fired my imagination, I began to ponder how water-transformed-into-seemingly-invisible-energy provides analogies with ways Christians talk about the work of the Holy Spirit. In some churches people speak about how the Spirit is “flowing through them.” This was especially so in evangelical Wednesday night prayer services for which I often played piano to accompany the singing. Uncle Frank, as everyone called the preacher, would always intone some formula in his “Spirit-led” prayer like “Lord, let the Spirit come into our hearts and flood our lives!” We would sing, “Come, thou fount of every blessing, tune my heart to sing thy praise,” or sometimes, “. . . when peace like a river . . .” Images of flowing rivers and floods of blessing shaped that singing community, coursing through our emotionally charged prayers. Some nights were “electric”; the whole assembly came alive.

Yet that was only one aspect of the root metaphor connecting water with Holy Spirit talk. I also recall singing Psalm 42 on a church retreat and hearing, as if for the first time, a more gentle connection. “As the deer longs for living water, so my soul longs for you, O God.” Thirst for God emerged as a plea for the life-giving quality of divine presence. This, too, concerns power: the power to live and embrace life, even when our hearts are cast down and disquieted. In this instance, the flow of the Spirit is more subtle and complex than can be pictured as some inner electricity or episodic sensation. The Spirit has also to do with the transformation of time and memory (as in Psalm 42/43).

When theological questions about Baptism and the Church became a focal point for me in seminary, I moved into further explorations of water by discovering a primary ritual place for the linkage between water and the Spirit. In the baptismal act (which can appear so mechanical at times!) our liturgies claim the release of divine power generated “by water and the Spirit.” The Word and prayer of the Church come to the sign of water, making real and powerful the promises of God. What kind of power is this? As once was said, “The waters of Baptism have loosed the foundations of empire.” Yes, baptismal waters can shake an empire, but they begin as a generating current in the community of faith itself. It gradually dawned on me that the renewal of the baptismal covenant—especially at the Easter Vigil—is a surging source of prophetic self-critique. It creates a current of reform and renewal.

When the 1979 *Book of Common Prayer* placed rites of Baptism at the beginning of the prayer book, it signaled a major shift in pneumatology. Christian Initiation signals the primacy of water and Spirit: the enspirited release of an unfailing source of life-giving power that we call “grace.” The sacramentality of water is both Spirit-dependent and Spirit-mediating. All these images deepen over time: the outpouring of divine energies seeks release in and through the humble, yet astounding, polyvalence of water.

The Ecstatic Life of God is poured into the world. Gather we then about living waters of font or baptismal pool. “Shall we gather at the river . . . ” was sung at those prayer meetings and in cathedrals and meeting houses, inviting us to the bath and to the New Creation itself. Here we discover that a central work of the Spirit is to place us in company with saints and angels. We are gathered by what the Eastern traditions have referred to as the “uncreated energies of God.”

In a fit of whimsy it occurs to me that Baptism has to do with divine hydro-pneumatics. This is not to be confused with our having a mechanism that guarantees the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. The power of the Spirit is, rather, sheer gift like a flowing stream, a sudden storm—an unbidden life force. Could it be, after all is said and done, that the Divine Ecstasy is nothing less than the delight God takes in animating human existence and the whole created order by the transforming power of the Holy Spirit? If so, then the whole of baptismal life might be called, in a fit of theological whimsy, a hydro-pneumatic ecstasy.

Herein the personal, the social, and the cosmic work of God the Holy Spirit are bound together. We sing “For All the Saints” by the font and fire of the Paschal candle. And when we get to that final stanza—“from earth’s wide bounds . . . streams in the countless host . . . singing to Father, Son and Holy Ghost: Alleluia!”—it is electric!



Don E. Saliers is Cannon Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Theology and Liturgy at Emory University. He has served as president of the North American Academy of Liturgy and the Society for Christian Spirituality. Among his many publications are *Worship As Theology* and *A Song to Sing*; with his daughter Emily Saliers he coauthored *A Life to Live*. An active musician, he is organist/choirmaster at Emory’s Cannon Chapel, and teaches in the summer sessions at the Yale Institute for Sacred Music, as well as leading seminars and retreats.

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