

“Wade in the Water”

“For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God.”

“Wade in the water, wade in the water, children ... God’s gonna trouble the water.” One of the most important genres of Christian hymnody are African American spirituals, songs that have their origin during the time of enslavement of African people in the American South. The songs proliferated in the last few decades of the 18th Century leading up to the abolition of slavery in the 1860s. The term “spiritual” is derived from the King James Bible translation of Ephesians 5:19: *“Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord.”* The songs have their roots in the informal gathering of African slaves in “praise houses” and outdoor meetings called “bush meetings” or “camp meetings,” in which worshipers would sing, chant, dance, and sometimes enter ecstatic trances. Many of the spirituals that grew out of these gatherings focused on Biblical stories that African slaves saw as paralleling their own lives, such as Daniel and Moses. *“As Africanized Christianity took hold of the slave population, spirituals served as a way to express the community’s new faith, as well as its sorrows and hopes.”* (Library of Congress).

Another way in which spirituals were used among the slave population was as a form of code, embedding messages within the lyrics of the hymns. Songs such as “Steal Away to Jesus” were seen by some as enticements to escape slavery, while Harriett Tubman used “Go Down, Moses” to identify herself to slaves who might want to flee north. Perhaps the best example of a spiritual being used to communicate messages to other slaves without these messages being intercepted by slaveholders is “Wade in the Water,” whose lyrics refer to the Biblical stories of the people of Israel crossing the Red Sea and the Jordan River to enter the Promised Land, but was also a message reminding those seeking freedom to walk in the rivers along their journey, so that tracking dogs and slave catchers could not follow their footprints or their scent:

- “Who’s that yonder dressed in red? Wade in the water, children. Must be the children that Moses led. God’s gonna trouble the water.

- Who's that yonder dressed in white? Wade in the water, children. Must be the children of the Israelites. God's gonna trouble the water.
- Who's that yonder dressed in blue? Wade in the water, children. Must be the children coming through. God's gonna trouble the water."

The image of water as a means of liberation from bondage into freedom is one that is found frequently in Scripture, including in several of today's lessons. Our Gospel returns us to the beginning of Mark's Gospel where Jesus was baptized by John in the same Jordan River which the Israelites crossed centuries earlier. It was after Jesus is baptized and comes out of the waters that the voice from heaven proclaims, "*you are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.*" (Mark 1:11). These baptismal waters mark the beginning of Jesus' ministry that is rooted in his proclamation that "*the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news.*" (1:15). In our first lesson, we hear the familiar story of Noah's Ark and how those on the ark survived the ordeal of the great flood, when "*the rain fell on the earth for forty days and forty nights*" (Genesis 7:12). While the flood resulted in great devastation as God "*blotted out every living thing that was on the face of the ground, human beings and animals and creeping things and birds of the air*" (7:23), the waters were also the means of deliverance for Noah and his family: "*Only Noah was left, and those that were with him on the ark*" It was to these survivors of the great flood that God establishes "*my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth*" (9:11). This covenant with those who were rescued through the waters of the flood is remembered in our service of Holy Baptism: "*Through the waters of the flood you delivered Noah and his family ...*"

Water as the means of salvation and new life is also a theme of our second lesson from the First Letter of Peter. This epistle is addressed "*to the exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, who have been chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit to be obedient to Jesus Christ and to be sprinkled with his blood*" (1 Peter 1:1-2). These are Christians in churches throughout Asia Minor who have endured tremendous suffering because of their faith in Jesus Christ as Lord. It has cost many of them everything that they had known before they became Christians, to the point where their very identity has been called into question. The Apostle writes this letter to encourage them in their suffering, reminding them that they have been "*given a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you*" (1:3-4). It is the basis for his call for the people to rejoice, "*even if for now you have had to suffer various trials*" (1:6). The suffering to which the Apostle refers is not suffering in

general (i.e. illness) but refers specifically to the suffering that results from living according to Christian values amid a culture that looks down on these values. While such suffering is not the Will of God, it is suffering that those who have become Christians share with their Lord; in their suffering, Christians imitate the redemptive suffering of Christ himself:

- “If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, where is the credit in that? But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God’s approval. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps.” – 2:20-21.
- “But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord.” – 3:14-15a.

The suffering that is being experienced by Christians in the first century is in fulfillment of Jesus’ teaching to his disciples that *“if any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”* (Mark 8:34). The example of Christ as suffering servant and his teaching that those who would be his disciples must follow in his footsteps is cited by Peter to remind his readers that their present difficulties are both to be expected and are trivial compared to what Christ has done for them: *“For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God”* (3:18). The passion, resurrection, and exaltation of Christ demonstrates God’s triumph over the powers of the universe, so that *“Christ’s suffering can be an encouragement for each and every Christian undergoing any kind of suffering”* (Jeehei Park).

- “Christ’s suffering, death, resurrection, and ascension comprise the normative narrative that gives courage and significance to the suffering Christians of Asia Minor. Christ’s suffering gives meaning to their suffering, and his victory provides them the promise of eschatological victory as well.” – David Bartlett.

The Apostle’s writing also reflects some of the early creedal statements of faith that will later be codified into the Apostles and Nicene Creeds. He speaks of Jesus being *“put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey”* (3:18b-20a), which is a part of our confession that Jesus was *“crucified, died, and was buried; he descended to the dead.”* This descent to the place of the dead (*“he descended into hell”*) may refer both to Jesus’ human burial along with all who have

died as well as his ministering to those who died before his life-giving Gospel was accomplished. Peter then reaches back to the story of Noah and how *“God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water.”* (3:20b). The passion, resurrection, and exaltation of Christ demonstrate God’s triumph over the powers of the universe; the cosmic reach of that salvation extends back to the beginnings of humankind at the time of the flood. The Apostle recalls the story of Noah to focus on God’s salvation, not God’s judgment (*“a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water”*), emphasizing that they were saved *through*, not *from*, water. *“Water has saving power as it saved those eight righteous from the unrighteous.”* (Park). The story of Noah is used by the Apostle as a type for Christian baptism; the God who was patient in the time of Noah will also be patient in the time of the epistle. This passage underscores the importance of baptism to the exiles suffering in Asia Minor. Like the Christ into whose death, resurrection, and ascension they are baptized, they too will suffer for doing good, not evil. Yet they have nothing to fear from those with the power to put the flesh to death, for they have been made alive in the power of the Spirit. *“In good conscience, then, they may persevere both in living their faith and in proclaiming it, for they are the baptized.”* (Barbara Brown Taylor).

As those on the Ark were saved through the waters of the flood, those who are baptized in Christ Jesus will be saved through the waters of baptism *“not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ”* (3:21). The Apostle’s reference to “conscience” (*syneidesis*) refers not so much to a subjective attitude as to an orientation of the baptized person toward God. Suffering and confession grounded confidently in God show forth a “good conscience” and bear the fruits of faithfulness. As faithful suffering and faithful confession are grounded in God and directed toward God, so also does conscientious baptism cut off what is fleshly and cleaves wholeheartedly to God, who is Spirit. A good conscience *“characterizes a Christian way of living because it helps u discern that ‘it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God’s will, than to suffer for doing evil’ (3:17).”* (Park).

As the ark was the means of salvation for Noah and his family, baptism is a type of an ark because it is the means through which God saves God’s people from *“sin, death, and the power of the devil”* (*Small Catechism*). Amid the flood like conditions of suffering, baptism communicates to believers the sense of their belonging to God and thereby making their ways safely through the floods of the present age.

- “God transforms the flood waters into the means of salvation. Baptism is a sign from God to assure the congregation of God’s continuing providence, even amid the suffering that comes from faithfulness.” – Ronald J. Allen.

While our “wading in the waters” of Baptism is the means through which we are saved from the forces of darkness that seek our destruction, it is not baptism itself that saves us but the resurrection of the Christ into which we are baptized, “*who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him*” (3:22). This statement of faith that is a forerunner of our creedal confession that “*he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father*” (Nicene Creed) reminds us that Jesus Christ is Lord not only for the generation that knew him during his time on earth, but is Lord of all people in all times and in all places.

- “Jesus came to be among us, the Creed sings. Jesus walked the earth and blessed it. Jesus lived the life of the living and grew in ‘wisdom, age, and grace’ here. But Jesus raised our eyes above and beyond the narrow limits of our paltry little lives, showed us other horizons, gives us a world beyond ourselves.” – Joan Chittister.

For Lutherans, baptism is a sacrament in which we are “*reborn children of God and made members of the church which is the body of Christ*” (ELW Holy Baptism). Along with Holy Communion, it is a sacrament that is a means through which God’s grace comes to us. In our understanding of a sacrament, an act must fulfill three criteria that set sacraments apart from other acts in the Christian community:

- It must be according to the command of Christ: “*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*” (Matthew 28:19).
- It must use an earthly element, the water of Baptism and bread and wine of Holy Communion.
- It must include Christ’s word of promise, the fact that we are baptized in the name of our Triune God, and that the body and blood of Christ are “given and shed for you ... for the forgiveness of sins.”

Because we believe that Baptism is God’s gracious act of claiming us as God’s own children, we intentionally baptize infants as well as people of all ages, for it is through God’s gracious sacrament that “*they are received into the grace of God when they are offered to God through baptism*” (Augsburg Confession, Article IX). It is

through water and the Word that we are born anew to a living hope and become heirs of all God's gracious promises as through Baptism we are "*sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the Cross of Christ forever.*"

People sometimes wonder if there is any special water that is necessary for baptism. Some people who have visited the Holy Land bring back water from the Jordan River to use in a baptism; others believe that the water must be "holy" or "blessed" to be worthy of use in the sacrament. But Luther teaches that it is not the water by itself that effects the blessings of baptism, but the way this water is used by God as a means of salvation:

- "Clearly the water does not do it, but the word of God, which is with and alongside the water, and faith, which trusts this word of God in the water. For without the word of God the water is plain water and not a baptism, but with the word of God it is a baptism, that is, a grace-filled water of life and a 'bath of the new birth in the Holy Spirit,' as St. Paul says to Titus in chapter 3, 'through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.'" – *Small Catechism.*

As we gather to celebrate Holy Baptism this morning, the water we use will be from the same source from which we drew water to wash our faces and our dishes. There is nothing special about the water in the font; it is the manner in which God uses the water that makes it the means through which we are born anew to a living hope, in which we have the assurance that "*if we have been baptized by him into a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his*" (Romans 6:5). It is through this blessed sacrament, when we "wade in the waters" that will lead us to salvation and eternal life, that we live every day in the blessed hope that nothing will separate God's beloved children "*from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*" (Romans 8:29).

For people living under the tyranny of slavery, the call to "wade in the water" was a call to liberation, to look upon the waters as a means of escape from oppression into freedom. While we do not live under such dire circumstances, the waters of baptism into which we are invited to wade are our means of liberation from all that would enslave us and lead us away from God's loving presence. As believers whose lives were transformed by the waters of this blessed sacrament, may we continue to "wade in the waters" that will continue to be the path that will lead us out of darkness into God's eternal light.

Amen.