Call to Worship

Liturgy, Music, Preaching, and the Arts

Baptism

Volume 56.2

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Liturgy, Music, Preaching, and the Arts

Continuing the tradition of *Reformed Liturgy & Music*

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Baptism

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Introduction

Sally Ann McKinsey

The story of Philip baptizing the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8 begins when an angel of the Lord calls Philip to set out on "the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza (This is a wilderness road)" (Acts 8:26). Luke does warn us, doesn't he? I can hear the moody background music between the parentheses. This won't be a story about the familiar baptismal font and rehearsed liturgy of Sunday morning. It is a narrative of the unfamiliar, unpredictable, and unknown, far from the baptismal practices some of us may have come to assume: small babies baptized at eleven o'clock at the front of the church from small baptismal bowls.

On the wilderness road, plans are often thwarted and surprises are common. Whether we see ourselves in the eunuch, Philip, or the chariot driver, we find that wilderness roads are not only dangerous places—they are also places to expect an encounter with the divine. Of course, we can also expect to meet God at eleven o'clock at the front of the church. And yet, as many of the articles in this issue recognize, the narrative about Philip baptizing the Ethiopian eunuch teaches that baptism cannot be easily tamed or timed. In Larissa Kwong Abazia's exploration of the relationship between preaching texts and baptism, she reads this narrative as a reminder that God does not adhere to assumed cultural boundaries and that baptism is about what God is doing. Columnist Colleen Cook also wonders what this story has to say about the fences that custom can construct around the font, focusing on the Ethiopian's exclamation to Philip, "What is to prevent me from being baptized?" (Acts 8:37).

These articles and others in this issue investigate nuanced relationships between baptismal theology, Scripture, and tradition, inviting a kind of defamiliarization and reorientation that may risk transforming practice. Many authors invite us to take seriously the unpredictability of the Spirit in the baptismal rite. They remind us that when it comes to baptism, we are always in the theological wild. For Lisa Dahill, language of *wildness* is as physical as it is poetic. She charges communities to consider baptismal practices in relationship with local waters and ecosystems, exploring the biological meaning of *living* water to reframe its theological meaning. How can baptismal practice help heal human estrangement from the earth and renew incarnational understanding? Stephen Fearing offers further dialogue about reforming sacramental customs in his exploration of baptism by submersion through conversations with communities that have celebrated more collaborative baptismal practices. Engaging the deep history of immersion in Christian practice may find some of us traveling on a wilderness road, right where we need to be.

Some of the articles in this issue discuss the implications of baptismal theology in social and political life as we yearn towards God's just kindom. Claudia Aguilar Rubalcava explores theological meanings of baptism through the lens of racism in history, society, and everyday lived experiences. Gail Ramshaw offers a detailed consideration of words for the divine in baptismal liturgies, wondering what we might hold onto from ages past and claim anew from the diverse language of Scripture. How are we to speak of God-with-us in the midst of our contemporary longings for wholeness and multiplicity? David Batchelder explores what it might mean to infuse our daily living with baptismal imagination, inviting us to claim the serious wonder of baptism that calls us to resistance and risk.

As these articles converse about matters of theology and practice from various perspectives, they share a concern for materials in dialogues about baptism. Be prepared for enough water puns and metaphors to quench your thirst! Attention to materials runs deeper than language about water, though. Ann Laird Jones thinks about baptismal history, theology, and liturgy as choreography, and she and columnist David VanderMeer consider baptismal imagery in visual art history as a lens through which to explore Scripture and tradition. David Bjorlin explores hymnody as a foundational

and vital part of baptismal liturgies, and columnist Meg Flannagan offers an image of music as revelatory material. Columnist Alexandra Jacob reflects on the challenges and gifts of revised baptismal practice in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, a time that has impacted material practice in countless ways. Jennifer Bunge offers a new series exploring story and illustration in *The Work of Our Hands* section, teaching us that proclamation can take many forms.

As I introduce this issue and begin my work as managing editor of this journal, I am grateful for those whose efforts have made this a space for dialogue and discernment about liturgical theology and practice. One of those individuals, Kimberly Bracken Long, chose the topics for this year's thematic issues because we are celebrating forty years of the *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* document produced by the Faith and Order division of the World Council of Churches in 1982. But I have a feeling this is not the only reason Kim chose these topics for volume 56. The authors whose work is represented here show us why continued conversation about the baptismal rite is so necessary. As the *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* document celebrates Christian unity through the ages, it also invites us to deepen our practice in every new generation. Baptism may be a one-time event in the life of each of the baptized, but it is (perhaps more importantly) a lifelong vocation, indeed, a practice, a cycle of formation and re-formation. May this issue foster reflection on our baptismal vocation along each new wilderness road.

Sally Ann McKinsey, Managing Editor

Feature Articles

Naming God at Baptism

Gail Ramshaw

The Hospitality of Abraham and Sarah, 1375–1400,
unknown artist, Benaki Museum, Athens

Naming God

We want to know the name of God. It makes sense that religious people try to ensure that when they address their God in praise or petition, whether during rituals in the assembly or in the personal prayer of their hearts, they are calling on God using the right name. We want to honor the deity of our choice; we wish to stand within a hallowed tradition; we are glad to unite with others of our faith community. We train our children in how to address their prayers, in the hopes that their focus is firmly on the God in whom we believe and trust. No, our deity is not named Isis or Jupiter. No, we are not appealing to our nation's president, to a cultural heroine or an ethnic hero, or to a power that we like to think is in the Self. Our God is deeper, wider, than these.

Our God is named . . . what? What does a character made up by James Joyce say about this?

> God was God's name just as his name was Stephen. *Dieu* was the French for God and that was God's name too; and when anyone prayed to God and said *Dieu* then God knew at once that it was a French person that was praying. But though there were different names for God in all the different languages in the world and God understood what all the people who prayed said in their different language still God remained always the same God and God's real name was God.[1]

So reasons the eight-year-old Stephen about the real divine name. But for better or for worse, we are no longer children. We want our worship to say more than "God," especially in a culture in which those three letters constitute a commonplace expletive. When we assemble on Sunday, what name shall unite us?

And more: Christians speak countless languages, and perhaps around the globe we hope to agree on at least the primary name of the God whom we all address. In this way, it would be as if the prayers in all languages would be bundled together to be presented to the God of the globe. And despite that even Moses was granted only a circumlocution for divine unknowability, each thanksgiving and every petition will strengthen the others, the billions of prayers providing weight to my little request. Our words will carry one another, all of us joining with those of centuries past and with today's countless assemblies, my voice supported by the folks around

Gail Ramshaw, a retired professor of religion, studies and crafts liturgical language from her home outside of Washington, D.C.

me and by those I will never encounter. Addressing the same God, we are bound together with all the baptized. Our common speech makes of us a community of care, which is one of the primary goals of all the religions of humankind.

Our search for God's name seems especially intense these days, given our time of cultural disruption and creative expansion—despite what in the second century the Christian martyr Justin wrote:

> No one can utter the name of the ineffable God: and any one who dares to say that there is a name raves with a hopeless madness.[2]

Yes, we hear you, Justin, a philosopher of religion warning us about religious arrogance. But we are assembling each Sunday, century after century, and we are not all raving mad, and we wish to pray together, some of us wholly content with the tradition and others questioning whether our words of address are the best that they can be. While our God is before all time, heard through the ages, God is also with us in this moment. How can we trust that ancient words are sturdy enough to carry contemporary distress? How can we remain formed by the past and yet reform it for a future that does not care about the past?

While our God is before all time, heard through the ages, God is also with us in this moment. How can we trust that ancient words are sturdy enough to carry contemporary distress?

The Christian pattern has been to retain old formulations and surround them with new. At weekly worship, for example, Christians proclaim old Hebrew and Greek texts about God, albeit each decade suggesting a better translation into our vernacular. We delight in singing hymns composed centuries ago, being grateful that the latest hymnal has updated their archaisms. We ponder that "Jesus" bore the same name as Joshua: the memories of a first-century healer are now superimposed on the tales of the conqueror of Jericho. We trust that in our time this layering of mercy, new onto old, will continue to speak rightly of God.

But we know that the religious task of naming God that is set before Christians is extraordinarily complex, since our God is both divine and human. Like other deities, our God bears traditional titles worthy of worship—creator, warrior, savior—but, unlike other deities, these classic names are incongruously bound up with the name of a Jewish man. How can we name our God around the mystery of the incarnation? Who is God, given Jesus Christ?

What is "the name" that identifies the power we seek for life that is worthy of living? What is the name of the one we can trust, who welcomes us and offers us salvation, the one with the mercy to hear us and the power to meet our needs? The religion and mythology sections of our bookstores are loaded with wonderfully illustrated books that narrate lots of past and present gods and goddesses who beckon our adoration, and from whom at least some people seek aid. The story goes that in the last century in a small midwestern town, the two brides in a double wedding were sisters, and the pastor, who was their father, named the wrong husband for the older daughter, and she yelled out, "No, Papa, no!" Which is the name we are to invoke, the name to which we are bound in baptism? Which text ought to accompany our pouring water over the candidate? Not that name, but this one?

The Church's Answer

During the first four centuries of the Christian tradition, the fundamental question facing the theologians and bishops of the church was this: who was God in the face of Christ? Ought we to stand with Thomas, who when encountering the risen Christ said, "My Lord and my God"? What words can say best that the inner life of the almighty God became one with an executed human? Avoiding one heresy after another, the church's authorities acclaimed Jesus as not lesser than God, not merely a stunning example of a human servant of the immortal sovereign God. Rather, in the mystery of the incarnation, God became the human named Jesus; the ancient hope for a messiah gets directed toward the one whom we title Christ. Jesus is the very Word proceeding from the mouth of God—spoken, of course, in metaphor, as if God has a mouth.

Out of those theological discussions arose the judgment that Christians are to name God as God is in God's very self. The biblical texts said it this way: Jesus Christ was related to God as if they were Son and Father, just as global myths for millennia

had told stories of a father god and a hero son. The naming of God needed to be articulated in both Latin and Greek, the church's foremost languages, and this made the linguistic task of describing the very being of the Trinity complicated. Although other more philosophical categories were seriously considered, Christianity adopted these metaphors: father, son, spirit—preferred as being biblical.

In contemporary American English, we can say it this way: God's name is God-as-God-is.

Thus a naming of God's Trinitarian self was developed, authorized, spoken, sung.[3] Christ Jesus was the Son of the Father. Thus, the Father is the Father of the Son, and, at least in the Western church, the Spirit is the Spirit of the Son. In contemporary American English, we can say it this way: God's name is God-as-God-is. The circle of God's name included the Son; and Father, Son, and Spirit became the perennial name that clarified the relationship between God and Jesus. For Christians, the key to God is Christ, and the name of God-as-God-is tries to say this. Cyril of Jerusalem, an early explicator of the rite of baptism, wrote that when we douse the candidate in the water three times, we are entering with Christ in his tomb for three days, to arise with him in his resurrection.[4] Baptism incorporates us into the embrace of the God known in Jesus Christ.

So when we inaugurate persons into the Christian community, when we confer on them the divine power hidden in the name, the text we have come to use is 'in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." Contemporary biblical scholars question when in history this phrase in Matthew 28:19 became the baptismal text of choice, and indeed, there have been since the very beginning some Christians, perhaps even our neighbors across the street, who abbreviate this name of God-as-God-is by baptizing in the name of Jesus. But even as orthodox a theologian as Thomas Aquinas wrote that baptism in the name of Jesus is the same thing as baptism in the name of the Trinity.[5] Furthermore, to solidify Christian identity, and in many Christian countries to stipulate which persons were legal citizens, church authorities came to require the use of the name of God-as-God-is at baptism. It was as if this text was the only set of words that worked, a formulation that must be articulated, as if the church's judgment was a law promulgated throughout the Roman Empire. It is this name that blesses the community as it exits the liturgy for a week in the world.

Christians over the centuries have continued to suggest ways to name God-as-God-is. Using biblical texts, we can call God "Abba, Servant, and Paraclete," the first and third persons gathered together in Christ, the servant.[6] Augustine's famous description of the Trinity as the Lover, the Beloved, and Love forms a circle thanks to Christ, the beloved of God.[7] Catherine of Siena, in one of her ecstatic prayers after taking communion, praises God as the Table, the Food, and the Server,[8] her imaginative picture of God centering on Christ, the food she has just received. In our time, David Cunningham's proposal of God as Source, Wellspring, and Living Water also depicts God as related to Christ, the Wellspring.[9] In each of these suggestions, who and what God is hinges on who and what we have come to know in Jesus.

Two Current Dilemmas

One difficulty is that most Christians who are busy praying are primarily concerned not with the name of God-as-God-is, but rather with the qualities of God-for-us, or even God-for-me. What do I hope that God will do for me? As I pray, I am not breaking my brain to articulate the divine mystery in theologically objective categories. Instead, I am subjectively calling upon God to hear us and help us. "Father" is not only the way that Christians designate the source of the messiah, but also is a primordial address cited by worshipers in the New Testament and invoked in religious traditions throughout time and place. The Roman head-god Jupiter, for example, is a shortening of the Greek Zeus Pater, "father Zeus." Although first-century Jews did not normally address God as Father, and although as a name for God "Father" is rare in the Hebrew Scriptures, pagans in the Roman Empire regularly worshiped Jupiter as the Father of fathers. One metaphor, "Father," has come to function as both God-as-God-is and God-for-us.

Yet for many of us in the twenty-first century, "Father" is an insufficient way to say God-for-us. In our culture we have rightly asked why we must be limited to these male terms. When we learn that in the early centuries of the church, the human fetus

was thought to originate wholly from the father's sperm, with the mother's womb merely the flowerpot for the seed, we may feel even more alienated from the tradition than we were before. How are we to honor the historic name of God-as-God-is if we find it too narrow, too metaphorically male?

A second dilemma rests in our wrestling with "the church." How much is our century of baptized believers to be determined by the church of the past, and how much ought our assembly or denomination care about what other worshiping Christians in our own time say and sing? It has come to be for many readers of this journal that persons are not only allowed to alter in essential ways their identity and the name once given to them, they are even applauded for their expressions of individuality. I get to say who I am, and I may perhaps not answer to any other name. During a Quaker meeting, if persons feel strongly that an opinion being expressed is wrong, they rise to stand in silence. How large ought a community of the baptized who can "stand aside" when others baptize "in the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit" be? Or does my community have the right, perhaps even the obligation, to speak the name of God as we see it?

One Current Proposal

I judge that I have no authority to alter the church's credal designation of God-as-God-is, and I believe that as part of the body of Christ I am called to attend with respect to the remainder of that body. And I so urge us all to continue to baptize in that classic name, to teach what it means, to honor the mystery of the Trinity, to appreciate the role of metaphoric language, to join with Christians around the globe to acknowledge a God whose name dances around Jesus Christ.

We might think of our historic ritual text "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" as a placeholder in our baptismal rite:

> A word is put down as a placeholder for
> something that cannot be communicated,
> no matter what anyone tries, no matter how
> many words accumulate, there is always that
> absence.[10]

Justin was correct that we cannot speak the ultimate name of God. Perhaps we Christians have become too comfortable with immortal transcendence, sitting there peacefully next to our God, all of us on a first-name basis. Centuries of Christian mystics suggest that finally we be mute before the merciful might of God. But now in the church let us agree on a placeholder for that unutterable name. Christianity is a communal religion, and we need words that the community can speak, words that stand before the Burning Bush, the Cross, and the Tree of Life at the End of Time, sacred speech that fills up the space left by what cannot be fully spoken. So we might think of "Father, Son, Spirit" as a placeholder for the mystery.

And what about those Christians for whom the historical naming of God-as-God-is is a pathway lost in the forest of the past? Wishing to provide an obligato—God-for-us—to our canonical cantus firmus—God-as-God-is—I urge us to surround that classic name with other biblical and creative terms, both God-as-God-is and God-for-us, other images of a God of grace and justice functioning like fruit on our tree, both innovative and faithful. We can do it.

One possibility for this proposal, the new amplifying the old, is cited in the worship book of my denomination. After the classic text is spoken, the entire assembly joins to affirm our devotion to God-as-God-is with complementary words that dress our creed in our favorite images. Following the baptism, the assembly is invited to call or sing out, "Blessed be God, the source of all life, the word of salvation, the spirit of mercy."[11] Or, recalling the tradition of seeing in the legend of Noah's flood an image of the triune God at work, we might join with the cantor in this picture of God-for-us:

> Rainbow of promise, blessed be God.
> Ark of salvation, blessed be God.
> Dove of peace, blessed be God.

We might follow the baptismal text with a prayer to God-as-God-is with the following: "Praise to the Holy One, praise to the Word of God, praise to the Power of mercy." In some such way, the contemporary church binds itself to the root of the tradition, and yet also celebrates its flowering by adorning the traditional words with ones of our time and sensibility. We see this intention in the baptismal text made famous by Riverside Church in New York City: "I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, One God, Mother of us all."[12] The classic text is embellished with words that our community chooses.

A second possibility for this layering of the

divine name is to follow the text of baptism with communal song that includes alternate imagery for the Trinity. For example, in the Presbyterian hymnal *Glory to God*,[13] the assembly might sing hymn #1, "Holy, Holy, Holy!" the triple holies cited in the book of Isaiah now employed by Christians to praise the triune God. In #2, the eighteenth-century hymn "Come, Thou Almighty King," God is called Ancient of Days, incarnate Word, and Comforter, Spirit of power. By the way, American hymnals used "king" as a divine title less than did British books—one wonders whether mostly to rhyme with "sing." In hymn #3, Ruth Duck's "Womb of Life and Source of Being," God-as-God-is is met with God-for-us. Evoking God as womb, source, and home, and as Mother, Brother, holy Partner, are ways welcoming to many to envision how God connects with us.

"Mothering God," #7, the hymn composed by Jean Janzen and inspired by the writings of Julian of Norwich, holds the image of mother next to that of creator, source, rain, wind, sun, grain, and grape, the one who nurtures and holds us close. Hymn #9, Mary Louise Bringle's "The Play of the Godhead," revives an image from the early church: the interrelationship within God, thus God-as-God-is, is described as participants in a dance, which in the third stanza, believers are invited to join in the dance. Hymn #10, David Gambrell's "Sing Glory to the Name of God," provides a gloss on "the name of God." Hymn #11, Thomas Troeger's tour de force, lists thirty-nine images of God-for-us, all together the I AM. The first person of the Trinity is celebrated in stanza one, the second person in stanza two, and the third person in stanza three. Hymn #303, Carl Daw's "God the Spirit, Guide and Guardian," names the triune God-for-us with over two dozen biblical images and could well serve as the basis of a Bible study session. Hymn #434, Daw's "Restore in Us, O God," praises the Trinity's love, power, joy, and grace. I suggest that the assembly singing such a hymn either just before or immediately following the rite of baptism is like celebrating leaves and fruits on the tree, multiple ways to envision the Trinity who is blessing us in the water.

A third possibility for enlarging our welcome of the classic God-as-God-is is to provide our eyes a biblical image of the Trinity, via print on the worship folder or projection onto a screen. I would, however, register a caveat: for some periods of Christian history, depictions of the Trinity featured the first person as an old white bearded man, or, to my mind worse, the triune God as a set of identical triplets with their feet resting on the globe. Christians who were concerned about the power of visual images to sear themselves into our consciousness preferred instead geometric designs, such as three interlaced circles. But over the centuries many Christians lauded the story in Genesis 18:1–8 of the three mysterious visitors to Abraham and Sarah. The biblical tale comes without gender or ethnic preference, and for Trinitarian Christians, the Hebrew text leaves open the question as to whether we hear three voices or one. Many Christians admire the mystical fifteenth-century depiction by Andrei Rublev, although I prefer the icons that are titled "the Hospitality of Abraham," which include Sarah and Abraham—thus the community at the meal—with food set on the table, and a white tablecloth, and perhaps a carrot in front of each visitor. Perhaps one such image can present a backdrop for our ritual text.

In closing, let me say this. Although I am grateful to be a worshiping Christian during this time of critical thinking about male imagery and terminology for God, I know that there is a downside when we stare down our religion. I trust that you remember in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* the dinner at the house of the Beavers, when the children first hear the name Aslan, and "a very curious thing happened."[14]

> None of the children knew who Aslan was any more than you do; but the moment the Beaver had spoken these words everyone felt quite different. . . . At the name of Aslan each one of the children felt something hum in his inside. Peter felt suddenly brave and adventurous. . . . Lucy got the feeling you have when you wake up in the morning and realize that it is the beginning of the holidays or the beginning of summer.

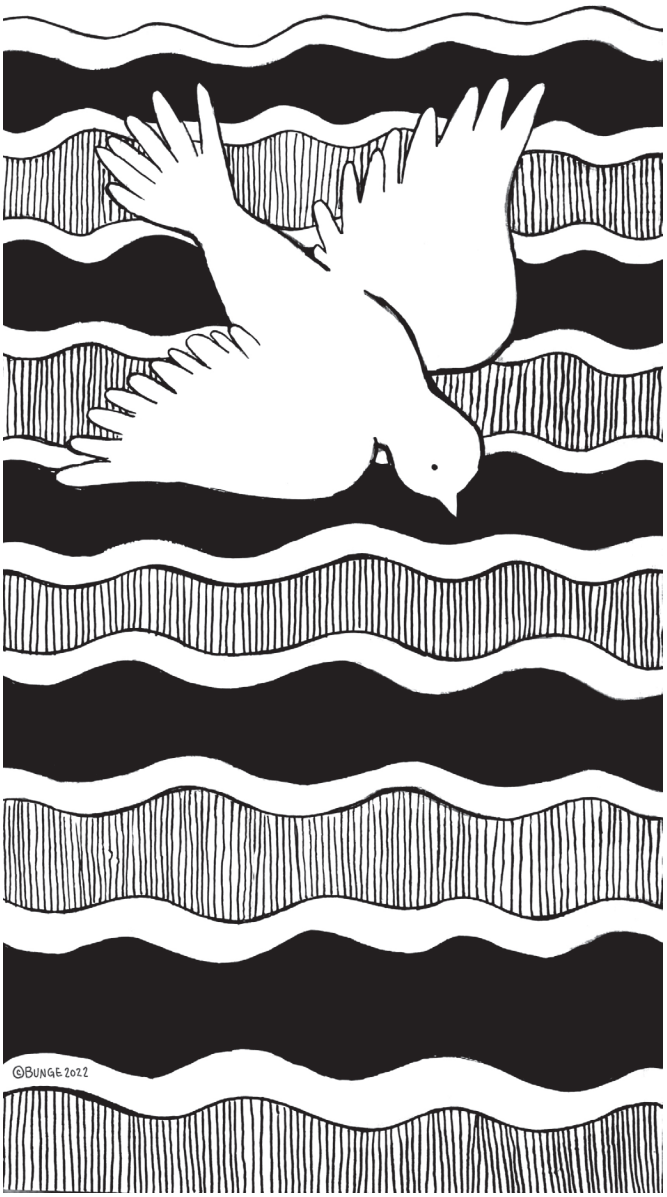
In this charming, albeit sexist, description of the Pevensey siblings first encountering the name of the Lion, the Christian author Lewis calls to me to respond with courage and joy when hearing the name Father, Son, and Spirit. I hope that by enhancing the church's placeholder with metaphors, songs, and depictions, we can continue to stand with and under the classic Trinitarian naming. Perhaps in future decades a substantial part of the body of Christ will agree on alternate wording, but that has not yet happened.

As a laywoman with no authority to design even my own parish worship, I wonder whether we are called to practice forbearance with the traditional naming at baptism of God-as-God-is. Admittedly, our society has become adept at destroying monuments and deleting classics from reading lists if this history offends our sensibilities and contradicts our values, and I for one am glad to be rid of glorious statues of the traitor Robert E. Lee. Yet there is not one of our progenitors who is blameless, as neither are we. And so we do not agree on when the past must be expunged, when it ought to be gently set aside in a distant museum, or when it is to be honored throughout our lives with our forgiving hearts.

Tradition is what from the past is carried on to the next generation. What in our tradition can continue to inspire a mission alive for our time? When are words that we hesitate to say actually open doors to the mystery of the divine? May the Spirit of the living Word of the Source of all life assist us, as we work together to throw out the trash and yet reverence the treasures of our inherited identity.

Notes

1. James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (New York: Viking Press, 1964), 16.
2. Justin, "The First Apology," in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), 1:183.
3. For a full theological discussion of what has been termed the immanent Trinity and the economic Trinity, see Catherine Mowry Lacugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: Harper, 1973).
4. Cyril of Jerusalem, "On the Rites of Baptism," par. 4, *Lectures on the Christian Sacraments* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1977), 60.
5. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 3a.66.6.
6. Gail Ramshaw, "Naming the Trinity: Orthodoxy and Inclusivity," *Worship* 60 (1986): 491–98.
7. Augustine, "On the Holy Trinity," in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff (Buffalo: Christian Literature Company, 1887), 3:204.
8. Catherine of Siena, *The Prayers of Catherine of Siena*, ed. Suzanne Noffke, OP (New York: Paulist Press, 1983), 102.
9. David S. Cunningham, *These Three Are One: The Practice of Trinitarian Theology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998), 347–48.
10. Catherine Lacey, *Pew* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020), 176.
11. *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 230.
12. Ruth C. Duck, *Gender and the Name of God: The Trinitarian Baptismal Formula* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1991), 163.
13. *Glory to God* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), especially 1–11.
14. C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (New York: Macmillan, 1950), 54–55.



Over the Waters
acrylic and ink on wood
Jennifer Bunge

Why Baptism Matters for the Work of Dismantling Racism

Claudia Aguilar Rubalcava

Like the water
of a deep stream,
love is always too much.[1]
—Wendell Berry

Perhaps my favorite definition of the word *sacrament* is "the visible sign of an invisible grace."[2] Coined during the Council of Trent by Augustine of Hippo, the North African theologian on whose theology much of Western Christianity laid its foundations, it remains one of the most used definitions in both the Roman Catholic and mainline Protestant traditions. God's grace was poured out in the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, but like Thomas, we need sensorial evidence to seal it in our bones. With elements common to every person—fermented grain, fermented fruit, and water—Jesus makes this grace tangible to all.

Witnesses of the same event can interpret it very differently. The same piece of art may elicit a myriad of interpretations. Furthermore, one object can carry various meanings for the same person at different times in their life. This is why we can read our favorite book over and over again and still find new meaning. Baptism works in a similar way. The "Baptism and Reaffirmation" section of the *Book of Common Worship* of the PC(USA) tells us that baptism "holds a deep reservoir of theological meaning, including dying and rising with Jesus Christ; pardon, cleansing, and renewal; the gift of the Holy Spirit; incorporation into the body of Christ; and a sign of the realm of God."[3] Depending on our individual contexts and perspectives, these meanings can function in different ways throughout our lives. We may also find new meanings to add to the list as we explore the theological breadth of baptism. In this article I add the following to the *Book of Common Worship*'s list: baptism as invitation to a life of chaos, remembrance, and renunciation of sin and evil.

As we explore the relationship between baptism and racism, we will dive into the well of theological meanings associated with baptism and see how each of them compels us to dismantle racism.

Baptism as Pardon, Cleansing, and Renewal

He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.
—Luke 3:3

Jewish first-century culture understood baptism as cleansing, so it is logical that this was one of the first meanings attached to baptism by early Christians. The etymological meaning of the word *sin* in both Hebrew and Greek means something like "missing the mark" in archery. Racism misses the mark of loving our neighbors. American society missed the mark in the genocide of First Nations peoples, in the institution of slavery as a source of labor and the main force behind economic prosperity, in the illegal settlement of lands that belonged to other people, in the enforcement of Jim Crow laws, in the prohibition to speak Spanish in public schools, and much more. We continue to miss the mark: Black and Brown siblings are incarcerated at a disproportionate rate, the public school system behaves similarly to a caste system where people are assigned a place in society at birth, access to healthcare and nutritious food is limited in communities of color, and the people in Flint, Michigan, still don't have access to clean water.

To be pardoned is to be invited to choose a different path, not as a precondition for receiving forgiveness, but a response to it. Pardon frees us

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"I Am A Man" detail, Marcellous (with BLK75) Lovelace, 2014, mural in Memphis, Tennessee, photo by Joshua J. Cotten

from the burdens we carry that keep us immobilized and charges us to "go and sin no more." In baptism, we are forgiven not only from our racism, but also from the racism of our ancestors and the institutions that have nurtured us, including the church. As the heavy load of ancestral sin is removed from us, our hands and feet move freely again in the direction of liberation for all people. It is this forgiveness, unearned grace, that enabled both the apostle Paul and Archbishop Oscar Romero to work tirelessly for the people they once persecuted or ignored. Paul, who once persecuted and killed Christians, became a missionary, spreading the good news in Asia Minor and Europe. Oscar Romero used his position as archbishop to advocate for people living in poverty in El Salvador, rebuking the state-sponsored violence that kept Salvadorans living in fear for decades.

Baptism as Incorporation into the Body of Christ

> *I rejoiced the day you were baptized, to see your life unfold.*[4]
>
> —John Ylvisaker

For those of us who affirm infant baptism, there is much to say about this particular meaning associated with baptism. Before we can utter a word, grace and love are already there. Not just the grace and love of God, but of the whole community who pledges to care for the baptized and nurture their faith until they can confirm this covenant on their own.

The community claims that from that moment forward, no one can separate us from the love of God, and that in our baptism, "there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female" (Gal. 3:28), for all are one in Christ Jesus. This passage does not intend to erase our differences but to remind us that our differences should not be an obstacle for us to gain full citizenship in the kingdom of God. Because we have been claimed as children of the Divine Creator, we are worthy of a life in which our existence is not threatened because of the color of our skin or our place of birth. I imagine that is what our siblings who participated in the civil rights movement meant with the picket signs that read "I am a man."

Every time we administer the sacrament of baptism, we claim that the baptized become children of God, members of the family of God. We are also vowing to care for each person in our midst as our own. Racism breaks the sacred family ties we share with our fellow humans. When we participate in racist systems or act out of bias, we fail to live into the promises we've made to each other. It is as though we are adding exclusive clauses in tiny print at the bottom of our "All Are Welcome" signs.

I wonder how policies and budgets might change if every time we recognized our implicit bias, when we suddenly became afraid of walking by a Black man or caught ourselves suspecting the Latina browsing the supermarket aisles was shoplifting, we remembered the congregational promises we make to every child who comes to the baptismal font. I wonder what would happen if we considered a child crossing the border or a mother applying for food stamps not as strangers or issues but as members of our community, part of the great family of God. I wonder what would happen if we thought of every person as a sibling in Christ.

Baptism as the Gift of the Holy Spirit

> *I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.*
>
> —Matthew 3:11

Early Christians sought to resist and disrupt the status quo imposed by imperial Rome. They were regularly accused of being drunk. They were persecuted and often put to death. I can imagine that such individuals may have been loud, joyful, fiery, and defiant, since few are put to death for being quiet or polite. It turns out that disruptive joy and defiant resistance can be gifts of the Holy Spirit. John, in the book of Revelation, wrote to the church in Laodicea: "I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth" (Rev. 3:15–16). He called for early Christians to be hot—fierce and bold in defending and living out their faith. Heat was deemed a positive attribute by early Christians. This heat manifested in sharing all their possessions; practicing radical welcome, even against their personal preferences; and celebrating the Eucharist by feeding the hungry. They learned the languages of their neighboring communities to share the good news with them. When the uncircumcised Gentiles like Cornelius wanted to join the community, they fought their own biases, following the voice of the Spirit that told them "not to make a distinction between them and us" (Acts 11:12b). The practices of the early church reflect their transformation by the Holy Spirit. They lived their prayers with abandon: "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

I can imagine that lukewarmness spread when Christianity became the state religion in 323. This marked the beginning of Christianity as mainstream and state sponsored, which meant it became easier for the church to forget its once boisterous and countercultural way of existing in the world as it assimilated to dominant politics and culture. The Christianity of empires and kingdoms prefers homogeneity over diversity, because it is easier to control those who act the same and think the same. Without diversity, people learn to seek individual well-being over communal well-being. Empires "divide and conquer" because many individuals seeking their own well-being are not as strong as a diverse, united community working for one another, however small it may be.

Baptism unites us with the first believers, the ones who learned one another's languages, confronted their biases, and shared table kinship with the unpopular and unlikely. When we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit in baptism, we remember the charge to early Christians to be hot, not lukewarm, because that is God's will. The Holy Spirit compels us to seek the well-being of our community even when the members of the community do not look like us, think like us, or believe like us.

Baptism as Death and Resurrection with Christ

We enter,
willing to die,
into the commonwealth of its joy.[5]
—Wendell Berry

I was baptized as an infant in the Roman Catholic tradition. It was a significant event, though I cannot remember it. As an adolescent, I decided that I did not want to commit to a life in a faith tradition that had not convinced me quite yet. As a young adult, I became increasingly involved in a campus ministry. I was struck by love—love that was like the water of a deep stream—and needed to do something about it, the same way two lovers decide to scream to the world they want to be together for the rest of their lives in marriage. I decided to be baptized again—in my defense, I made this decision years before listening to the copious lectures that made me feel guilty about this decision.

My (second) baptism took place in the Gulf of Mexico, in waters disturbed by a tropical storm that had hit a few days before our arrival. I am not a great swimmer; I do not even like the ocean. But the waters of baptism called me. I was dunked by my campus minister. And in both literal and metaphorical ways, it felt like death: for a second, I felt the current was taking me away, but I also died to myself as the sole source of trust. Someone else, my campus minister, was holding my life in her hands.

If we die to ourselves and trust our lives into the hands of our community, then we, as members of the community, can make sure that we live lives that our siblings can trust. We are holding in our hands the lives of our siblings, which means we are responsible for protecting their lives when they are threatened by the police, by the neighborhood watch, by dictatorships, by walls in the desert, by polluted water, by oil spills and nuclear waste.

Poet and activist Julia Esquivel once wrote:

"I am afraid rather of that life
Which does not come out of death,
Which cramps our hands
And slows our march."[6]

Resurrection is a muscle. It must be exercised or it suffers atrophy. When we have lived a life of comfort, we are afraid of losing status, of being judged, of losing our country to strangers, and of seeing our traditions and language and food disappear. We are afraid of picking up our protest signs and singing for justice. We are afraid of joining the march. When we die to ourselves, we are free from fear of being judged by others and free from fear of repercussions. We remember that the march is led by the cloud of witnesses who marched before us. We remember, like Julia Esquivel, that life is worth living because we do not fear death anymore.

Baptism as a Renunciation of Sin and Evil

The sacraments call us to reject and resist evil whenever we encounter it. As instituted in the *Book of Worship*, the person administering the sacrament of baptism in the United Methodist Church asks the candidates for baptism or their parents: "Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves?"[7] Similarly, Presbyterians ask: "Do you turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world?"[8] Our baptismal vows call us to resist evil. When taken seriously, this call shapes our whole lives and defines our priorities, allegiances, and actions.

Racism is one of the evils we witness and engage in day after day. It is all-pervading as it infuses with its sting every sphere of our lives: education, politics, economics, the arts, and our relationships. It is individual and systemic, and much like sin, racism is expressed in word, thought, and deed, by what we have done and what we have left undone.

In baptism, we are renouncing the sin and evil that surround us in our individual lives and in the world. We are called to resist injustice and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves, not just when they affect us directly and not just when they come from individuals we can identify.

This means that we are called to confront and unlearn the prejudices and phobias we have inherited from our ancestors in order to resist racism at a societal and cultural level. We are compelled to resist with our ballots, to advocate for those on the margins, and to engage in political action with our purchases, social media posts, and artistic expressions. We are to name and renounce the evil from which we benefit day in and day out, the evil on whose shoulders our society was built.

Baptism as a Sign of the Realm of God

The vision of the realm of God for the first believers, as expressed in the books of Acts and Revelation, included people from every nation joining the feast of the Lamb. This vision was not imperialistic, as it was not seeking to impose the faith of the first believers on other peoples, but rather, it emerged from a desire to share good news—the news of God-with-us—with those who had been living under bad news for so long.

As Christianity became politically and socially mainstream, these messages fizzled out: grace became something to be earned, the love of the three persons of the Trinity became the love of the male parent, and the vision of people from every nation coming to the feast of the Lamb morphed into an excuse for conquest. Baptism became a tool to "civilize the savages" that ignored the personhood of the baptized, stripping them of their own faith traditions. Baptismal vows were used to keep people in their place, obedient to their masters. Baptism became a tool of white supremacy and colonialism.

We have made a relic out of the sacraments, which have become old-fashioned rituals meant to fill time during worship or serve as an excuse for enjoying some hors d'oeuvres and cake after the joyous occasion. I find it fascinating that many of us Protestants spend more time making sure marriages and confirmations—which are not sacraments to us—take place under careful consideration, with regard to the profound consequences of engaging in such activity. But we do not spend much time exploring the profound, life-changing consequences of engaging in communion and baptism with those who want to partake.

Every time persons come willingly, with their whole selves, to the waters to be baptized, a new crack appears in the ceiling racism makes because in the sacraments, we are covered in grace and invited to live into grace. In baptism, we see glimpses of the life our Heavenly Parent intended for the whole creation. The love of the triune God is modeled for us, teaching us a new way of living in a never-ending dance that respects the uniqueness of each person and in unity that embraces the distinctiveness of each person. That includes every aspect of one's identity: race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, cultural expressions, and

language. In baptism, we hear: "This is my beloved child in whom I rejoice."

We are enough. Our neighbors are enough. In baptism, we recognize that *shalom*, the flourishing of all creation, is possible. We recognize that *shalom* is not just a promise but a charge. Justice, then, becomes more than an item in a liberal agenda, but something we pursue as we try to live into the reign of God that our ancestors tasted on the day of Pentecost.

Baptism as Invitation to a Life of Chaos

Every Sunday at Mercy Community Church, an Atlanta congregation made up mostly of people experiencing homelessness, pastor Maggie walks towards the center of the room with a plastic pitcher full of water and dumps it violently into a cheap salad bowl that sits on a stool. Water spills everywhere, splashing everyone and making a mess as Maggie says the words, "Remember your baptism." Despite the chaos, I always notice people sitting deliberately near the makeshift baptismal font, as if holy chaos invites them.

The Christian journey is not a walk in a pumpkin patch. Jesus never promised that life would be easy for the early believers, but he did promise he would be with them until the very end. I would dare to say that life is more chaotic for those who choose to follow Jesus: feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, releasing the prisoners, visiting the sick—all are counterintuitive and countercultural, but irresistible, as if holy chaos is inviting us.

Dismantling racism involves those very same actions, but on a large scale: making sure everyone has access to healthy food, paying fair wages so that people can afford clothing and shelter, questioning policies that disproportionately keep Black and Brown men in prison, advocating for equitable access to healthcare. Holy chaos invites us again to live into the baptismal tides that may require us to do what we would never imagine possible.

Baptism as Remembrance

Wade in the water
Wade in the water children
Wade in the water
Don't you know that
God's gonna trouble the water
Don't you know that
God's gonna trouble the water[9]

In the movie series *Frozen*, the character Olaf is a wise theologian of a snowman. In the sequel of the movie, he declares that water has memory. Some scientists agree with this claim. The waters of baptism contain the stories of our ancestors, the waters of freedom, and the waters of their tears of oppression.

We remember Jesus in the sacraments. In baptism, we remember how his ministry started, and in the Eucharist we remember the end of his ministry. In baptism, we also remember God's creative, redeeming, and sustaining work throughout history: the separation of the waters from the dry lands during creation, the splitting of the sea to create a path for liberation from oppression, the streams of nourishing water that came from rocks as the Israelites braved the wilderness, the water that becomes wine, the river of the water of life, bright as a crystal. We remember that God has been pouring God's love on us time and time again, making a channel of grace with life-giving water.

But we also remember the destructive power of water in biblical narratives. We remember the flood that nearly wiped out all life on earth, the waters that fell on the Egyptian soldiers and killed them. Water, like grace and love, is mysterious and awe-inspiring, but also powerful and capable of destruction. We remember that yes, water is life-giving, but also life-taking. The waters of baptism instill love and grace in our souls, but they can also destroy systems of oppression, no matter how ancient they are. The waters of liberation are as ancient as the universe.

In baptism we remember both the creative and the destructive power of God's grace. We remember Harriet Tubman singing "Wade in the Water" as she instructed slaves into freedom, for those held captive would rather be swallowed by the ocean than to live in slavery. We remember that our call is to build up bridges and tear down walls, to build up honest education and tear down rose-colored views of history.

Conclusion

In the vastness of space
your words disappear
and you feel like swimming in an ocean
of love,
and the current is strong.[10]

—Paul Simon

Baptism is the joyful celebration of grace poured on us. Grace that transforms us, invites us to a life of fullness, and changes our lives to the point of no return. Cesar Chavez, Roman Catholic activist, said:

> Once social change begins, it cannot be reversed. You cannot un-educate the person who has learned to read. You cannot humiliate the person who feels pride. You cannot oppress the people who are not afraid anymore.[11]

Once grace is poured on us, it cannot be reversed. You cannot un-love the person in whom God delights. You cannot hate the person who has been formed by the Creator. You cannot oppress people who are your siblings. You cannot take oppression because you know your worth. Once we have been touched by grace, nothing is the same, for we have seen glimpses of the reign of God.

"Theologian Karl Barth said that it's not the wrath of God we should fear, but rather the love of God, . . . because 'the love of God will strip away everything that stands between us and God.'"[12] Racism separates us from God, creation, and each other. Racism destroys everything it touches, including the people and institutions that perpetuate it. Racism keeps us from loving each other completely, which keeps us from loving God completely. We can guilt-trip each other for eternity. We can threaten each other with the fires of hell for either resisting or being complicit with racism. But this is no way to achieve the oneness promised to the first believers, because wrath will not take us there. Only love can do that. The water of baptism is a symbol of that love, inviting us to swim, play, drink, and get carried away by an ocean of grace.

Notes

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2. James Donovan, *Catechism of the Council of Trent* (Dublin: Duffy, 1829), 100.
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4. John Ylvisaker, "I Was There to Hear Your Borning Cry," *Glory to God: The Presbyterian Hymnal* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 488.
5. Berry, "Like the Water," http://famouspoetsandpoems.com/poets/wendell_berry/poems/134.html/.
6. Julia Esquivel, "I Am Not Afraid of Death," in *Threatened with Resurrection: Prayers and Poems from an Exiled Guatemalan* (Elgin, IL: Brethren Press, 1994), 67.
7. "The Baptismal Covenant I," *Book of Worship*, accessed April 29, 2022, www.umcdiscipleship.org/book-of-worship/the-baptismal-covenant-i/.
8. *Book of Common Worship*, 409.
9. "Wade in the Water," Spotify, track 3 on The Blind Boys of Alabama, *Higher Ground*, Omnivore Recordings, 2002.
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Preaching and Baptism: The Power of Living Water

Larissa Kwong Abazia

I received the opportunity to baptize a baby during my first call as an associate pastor in a growing, vibrant congregation. I was both excited and anxious because such opportunities are rare while working under a well-established head of staff. I was encouraged to focus on connecting with the parents, holding the child in order to determine "how they might *do* during the sacrament," and creating a mutual understanding should things not go as planned. Baptisms in this particular congregation always happened earlier in worship, assuming the baby would be less fussy and easier to handle at the beginning of the service rather than at the recommended liturgical placement following proclamation of the Word. I learned, directly and indirectly, that baptism was about comfort. The family should be theologically knowledgeable and eagerly awaiting the special day *for their child*. The child *shouldn't* cry as the Trinitarian formula accompanied the dripping water on their forehead and as we walked through the congregation for an initial welcome to the community. The congregation *should enjoy* the sacred, joyful moment unfolding before them. Everyone was supposed to engage in a moment of baptismal bliss as the giggling baby gleefully received the blessed water on their forehead, the perfect image of a sacred, holy moment.

Years later I was called to serve at a multiethnic congregation in the heart of Queens, New York. I followed the same approach by meeting with the family, placing the baptism early in the service, and eagerly anticipating the special day. Several portions of worship came and went, but the family was yet to arrive. Scripture read, sermon preached, and second hymn sung, yet we were still waiting. Elders and worship leaders looked at me with curiosity as to what would happen if the family did not arrive before the conclusion of the service. Right before the organist hit the opening notes of the final hymn, the family came through the sanctuary doors. I walked down the aisle, welcomed them, and accompanied everyone to the baptismal font. All of our well-made plans had to make room for the unexpected nature of the circumstances that unfolded right in our midst.

The sacramental moment creates and expands the space for the gathered faith community to affirm its commitment to nurture, equip, and empower the newly baptized on behalf of the whole church. Focusing primarily on the moment of baptism misses the opportunity to participate in this commitment from the very beginning. The preaching moment and surrounding liturgy provide a powerful, tangible occasion for worship leadership and participants to explore the significance of their promises and live into them. And yet the teaching and practice of this commitment do not need to be limited only to services in which a baptism occurs. Scripture is rich with stories and imagery that point toward the promises of the sacrament, both individual and communal.

Preaching on texts about water cracks open opportunities for the gathered congregation to more deeply understand the human and divine commitments that we affirm in our practice of baptism. While the preacher should always proclaim the abundant love of God for humanity, they also cannot miss the potential to invite us to take risks. A faith life lived out loud involves disruption. Pondering the expansiveness of living water in Scripture allows the preacher to consider the deep well of stories that challenge us to ask:

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- What is living water?
- What is its power? It's potential?
- What are the earthly barriers we place on the living water (so freely given by God)?
- How might we share living water with others?
- What are the ways God transcends our boundaries and limitations to provide living water? How can we practice being more attuned to God's overflowing presence in order to engage in breaking open God's reign before us?

The Power of (Living) Water

The baptismal font testifies to the living water freely offered to God's people. Water is central to humanity's ability to live and thrive in creation. It also possesses the ability to shape terrain, create oases, and steadily flow toward and through destinations. Water can quench as well as destroy. Understanding the power of water illustrates the depths of the living water provided to people of faith.

Water Possesses the Power to Shape and Transform Landscapes: The Samaritan Woman at the Well (John 4:1–15)

In John's historical period, the well was a central gathering space for women. Yet here is the Samaritan woman, walking on her own in the heat of the day toward the depths of refreshment. We can speculate about the circumstances: Is she fleeing someone or something? Does she seek a respite from the discomfort within her community, feeling out of place rather than connected to the people who surround her each day? Is she weary from conditions requiring her to face all odds with resilience, doing whatever it takes to make it to another day? How are the burdens on her whole being embodied in her walk to the well that day?

The Samaritan's vessel always stands out to me in this narrative. The unnamed woman comes to the well bearing a water jar. Her initial task is clear: she needs water. Yet by the conclusion of her engagement with Jesus, she leaves the jar behind and runs eagerly back to town. Without a thought to its necessity, she so easily leaves behind the object she carried with determination to meet her needs in the heat of the day.

The woman becomes the vessel, bearing living water as she shares the transformational story of her time with Jesus. Her witness is boundless, its impact exponential, like a wellspring that cannot be contained.

Water possesses the ability to carve out new spaces and places that we may never have imagined possible. Consider the billion-years-old alteration of the rock formations that eventually became the Grand Canyon. Flooding, down-cutting, and gradual erosion led to one of the most beautiful natural settings in the United States. Sometimes the shifts take time and slow transformation. Sometimes, like in the case of the unnamed Samaritan woman, water finds a space to dwell and spring forth with immediacy.

Water Is on the Move: Let Justic Roll Down Like Waters (Amos 5:24)

The prophet Amos speaks truth to people in the midst of a season of prosperity and peace. Over and over again, he reminds the nation they are not beyond reproach, lifting up the tension between the oppression of the poor and their comfortable circumstances. His words are reminders that the nations, too, will be judged for any empty acts of supposed faithfulness. Amos 5:24 is all too familiar: "But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."

As a person of color, I find the words of Amos to be deeply comforting. There are moments both inside and outside the church walls where I am made to feel as though I do not belong. Preaching in predominantly white contexts, I hear repeatedly, "You speak English so well," or "I can hear you clearly." These seemingly innocent comments testify that my body is foreign, my voice assumed to possess an accent, and my life experience to be "other." I acknowledge that I have responded to the call to serve as a minister in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), but I do not hide the impact a 92 percent white denomination requires of me to navigate systems and structures that were never made for me. Many people of color have employed techniques of code-switching to navigate these experiences. Our awareness of the predominant norms and ways of being cause us to exist in places that were not created with us in mind, systems and structures that function to maintain the status quo. Disruption comes at a cost to us. And yet Amos's words boldly proclaim the movement of justice and righteousness to preserve bodies that are overlooked, ignored, abused, or exploited.

Often, the bias in predominately white spaces while reading this passage is the assumption they are on the side of justice and righteousness. These communities of faith often celebrate their engagement

"on the right side of history" at the expense of the internal work necessary to acknowledge how far they actually have to go. Amos warns the people that their senseless adherence to ritual, ties to familiar practices, and the marginalization of certain groups are, in fact, idolatrous. The contemporary church, too, has idolatries to uncover, familiar practices that keep us from recognizing our participation in injustice.

How does an adherence to niceness create dams that stave off the deeper, harder conversations which must be had? Do we worship a God of polite comfort or transformation? Present limitations do not stave off the flowing water of justice and righteousness. Aspects of the church's life which become normative and the elements believed to be immovable or unchangeable are human-made bodies of water for our own pleasure, earthly aberrations of God's presence.

How can we find ways to become more malleable where our practice has gotten in the way of our call to seek justice and inclusion?

Water Allows Us to Remember: The Israelites Cross the Jordan (Joshua 3:1—4:24)

I'm guessing the Israelites are feeling fear and uncertainty as they stand at the edge of the Jordan River and move ever closer to the Promised Land. It's flood season, when the river is ten to twelve feet deep, 140 feet wide, and boasts a current that can carry your whole body downstream. Crossing the Jordan at this time is absolutely risky. On top of this, it is Joshua giving them directions, an unfamiliar voice of authority with whom they may have doubts.

There's so much riding on what happens next. Each decision and action plays out to take the Israelites to the Promised Land (or not). Joshua must be obedient to fulfill what the Lord has promised. He has to first tell the crowd what will be required of them in order to cross safely to the other side. The Jordan will recede only when the priests dip their toes into the turbulent, deep current. Then the people have to step in themselves as their rational minds warn that the flood waters could sweep them away at any moment.

Following God is all about movement, trust, and remembrance. It is about getting our feet wet and dirty in depths that no one would think we could survive.

The narrative anticipates a question from the next generation of Israelites, "What do these stones mean?" The stones to be placed in their camp aren't to be forgotten. Instead, they are markers to remember who brought them through the wilderness and what hopes they bore into the Promised Land.

In the narrative, it's the children who help them remember where they have come from when they ask "in times to come, 'What do these stones mean to you?'" (Joshua 4: 6). Then and now, the children are the ones who will inevitably ask us to tell our stories. Baptism is a tangible moment when the gathered community can point back and recall the sacred story when the living water laid its claim on their life. In order to be inspired witnesses, everyone within the gathered community must consider for themselves what the stones mean. We learn the stories, practice telling our own, and deeply listen to the narratives of others. Wading through the waters together contributes to the grand story of faith with words as encompassing as the waters that wash over us.

Water Is Necessary: The Life-giving Spring (Revelation 21:1–8)

Can we fathom the radical potential of a new heaven and a new earth? In the proclamation of Revelation 21, the faithful are told this new space will become the dwelling for the human and divine *together*. Mourning, death, dysfunction, difference, and brokenness will have no place there. God becomes the comforter and healer through which all things are brought to completion. The Lord says, "To the thirsty I will freely give water from the life-giving spring" (Rev. 21:6).

Freely-given, thirst-quenching water may sound unfamiliar in our current capitalist American context. Very few things come for free here; strings are always attached; bodies are commodified, devalued, and abused. We are tethered to obligation, debt, and oppressive colonial histories. In contrast, the flowing waters in Revelation are accessible to all living beings. All parched bodies will be hydrated and enlivened through the abundance of this new heaven and new earth.

Here is the opportunity to expand the vision of the listener, allowing them to dream of an abundant creation where everyone is cared for by God, the divine being who lives alongside us. This is the tension of the already and the not yet. While we know that this world is far from the new heaven and new earth, we can acknowledge the radical hope that God possesses for creation. The triune God shows up over and over again reminding us that,

despite our humanness, a new sacred dwelling will one day be possible.

Barriers, Danger, and Anticipation

Living water is meant to be boundless and ever flowing; however, there are biblical stories in which human-created barriers impact the movement of water. Such blockages continue today as congregations and responsible leaders attempt to control living water. Then and now, Scripture and lived experience bear witness to God's interventions that open the floodgates of healing, restoration, and hope, regardless of the people's ability to comprehend such abounding grace.

What Do We Do with the Thirst Before Us?: Phillip and the Ethiopian Eunuch (Acts 8:26–39)

One of my favorite baptism stories is Phillip's encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch on the desert road. The unnamed man is reading the prophet Isaiah when Philip comes toward his carriage, initially led to the desert road by the direction of the Lord. Philip begins instructing the Ethiopian official concerning all which he has read as a testimony to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Something in this teaching stirs the eunuch's spirit and he is overcome with eagerness. "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?"

The carriage is stopped, Philip and the eunuch walk toward the pool of water, and the baptism takes place. When both resurface, the Spirit immediately sends Philip on his way, and the Ethiopian eunuch rejoices as he reenters the carriage.

I am curious about the conversation that transpired in the time between the Ethiopian man's question and the baptism itself. There are two very clear reasons why this curious listener may have received a negative response to his innocent question. First, as an Ethiopian, the man lived far from the holy temple and sacred rituals of the faith. His proclamation of faith following the teaching of Scripture would be met with challenges if he sought a community of which to be a part. Second, even if he were to find a gathered assembly, in this period the eunuch's castration made him a sexual minority. Religious rules would have kept him outside of any sacred spaces. I wonder about Philip's mental calculations in the moment. Any hesitation he may have had quickly transformed to abundant welcome of this Ethiopian eunuch, with whom he would never cross paths again. In this encounter, Philip had to let go of some of the conventions and policies he may have previously held and be open to God's surprising presence in his midst.

Denominational polity and local church governance provides countless examples of the ways the church seeks to maintain order in the midst of God's unwieldy, free-flowing living water. Most recently, debates around LGBTQAI+ ordination and marriage illustrated decision-making by those in power to give access (or not) to those kept at the margins of the church, similar to the discernment Phillip was engaging in within this story. In the practice of baptism, we have processes to adhere to and checklists to follow that help us maintain baptismal responsibility. But these processes can keep us gazing at our navels, preventing us from being open to God's outward-focused abundance before, during, and after the sacrament.

Too often we understand baptism as a commitment to *the local church congregation*. I have had many conversations with church leaders who desire assurance of the baptized one's regular attendance and participation in the life of the community before performing a baptism. The impulse toward relationship and the desire for opportunities to nurture the spiritual life of the newly baptized is important, yet the relationship is not transactional. The baptismal waters are freely given as a witness to the abundant love of God. Such love is not limited to our own sanctuaries and church buildings but extends outside these walls to acts of compassion and care in the world. The boundless, transcendent power of the baptismal waters is that God is dedicated to finding and meeting each one of us whenever we are.

How Do We Fall Short?: The Pool of Bethesda (John 5:1–15)

The power of the waters stirred up in the pool of Bethesda at the Sheep Gate in Jerusalem was well known by the faith community. At the edge of these waters, between hope and uncertainty, we encounter a man who has been ill for thirty-eight years. Jesus sees him lying there, knows that he has been there a long time, and asks, "Do you want to be made well?" I find this question somewhat offensive; why would the man be lying there if not to be made well? The man's response is crushing. "Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me."

Day after day and year after year, despite all odds, the man still comes to the healing oasis in Jerusalem. His own efforts are consistently thwarted. The individual and communal investment in his marginalization was so apparent that even *he* assumed community members would ignore his needs and others would do whatever they could to take his place in order to reach the lapping water before them.

Where are our churches in this narrative? Are we the gatekeepers around the healing waters of baptism, missing the opportunity to provide access to all who desire to enter the pool? Are we those that step over others, seeking our own healing and wholeness first?

We have developed a practice over the last years of including reaffirmation of baptism in many of our churches' services. While it is a celebratory invitation to remember one's own movement through living waters, there are often some present in the worshiping congregation who have never been baptized. Even as we celebrate God's loving claim in baptism, we exclude when we assume that everyone experienced the sacrament of baptism or was told stories about their baptism in a positive way. Instead of assuming and excluding, exploring what it means to provide access and connection to baptismal waters, no matter one's baptismal status, will expand the theological and homiletical possibilities of the preaching moment and the enacted liturgy.

While it takes a long time for him to experience it for himself, the man knows the power of the water simply by being present to the healing of others. He knows that there would be healing for him, too, if only he can make it to the water's edge. Maybe this is why he remains by the pool for so long. What would it look like for even one member of the community to accompany him to the water's edge? How can a gathered community live into the anticipatory posture of those in its midst and meet their yearnings with resurrection hope?

The marginalization from the community does not end once the man is healed. Religious leaders question and challenge his actions as he carries his mat and walks through the streets. Jesus heals the man physically, yet the crowds lack the courage to trust his story and offer him social healing. He is still separated from those around him. This can be a lesson for us. Once healing happens, in whatever form it takes, it is our responsibility to listen deeply and trust the words of others. Our skepticism, doubt, and confusion in the midst of a healing encounter cannot close us off from the living water springing forth in new places.

Like baptism, healing is more than a one-time event. God defines the baptismal community as a life-long covenant relationship without margins or boundaries. Jesus' healing the man may not bring him back to his immediate surrounding community, but it incorporates him into a new form of communal life which transcends the individual-focused, rule-abiding, culture of his society.

When Can We Release Control?: Pentecost (Acts 2:1–47)

The unwieldy power of the Spirit's movement on Pentecost causes people to respond with exuberant faith, eager to engage in the faith-filled movement before them. Their spontaneous multilingual speech causes others to seek an explanation. The skeptics begin to say that wine is all that could cause such raucous behavior. Peter's prophetic sermon assures the skeptics, and anyone in earshot, that the commotion is part of the continuing ministry of Jesus Christ, in whose name they are invited to be baptized. This young preacher and eleven other apostles bring three thousand people through the waters of baptism in a moment!

Can any of us fathom welcoming three thousand new members into the life of our own congregation in a day?! Even with our most expert efficiency and orderliness, it would be a disruptive scene. Our well-placed patterns of welcoming persons into active participation by building connections and deepening relationships over time would no longer work in such a large crowd of unfamiliar faces.

The passage immediately following the baptisms on Pentecost invites us to trust in the movement of the Holy Spirit in the way we organize our church communities: "The believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to the community, to their shared meals, and to their prayers. A sense of awe came over everyone. . . . All believers were united and shared everything" (Acts 2:42–44, CEB). This image of the church as a community in which resources are freely shared and everyone's needs are met looks different from current models of programmatic engagement and member retention. Shared meals, prayer, and religious teachings were central to life together for the early church. Might they be for us, as well?

Each time I welcome visitors at the beginning of a worship service, I say, "Today we are different because you are here. For that we are blessed and thankful." I truly believe these words, and yet their implications can be difficult to swallow when we recognize that this means we change as a community when we welcome difference. We can be tempted to seek unity by finding commonalities rather than courageously making spaces to explore difference as transformational. There is no doubt that the early church community felt unwieldy and unfamiliar as thousands of newly baptized believers joined the small group of followers once scared and hiding in an upper room. Yet they maintained the commitment Jesus gave to them: being in community by learning, living, and eating together. Their communal faith was embodied in their practice.

How Do We Face Our Yearning for Predictability?: Jesus Calms the Storm (Mark 4:35–41)

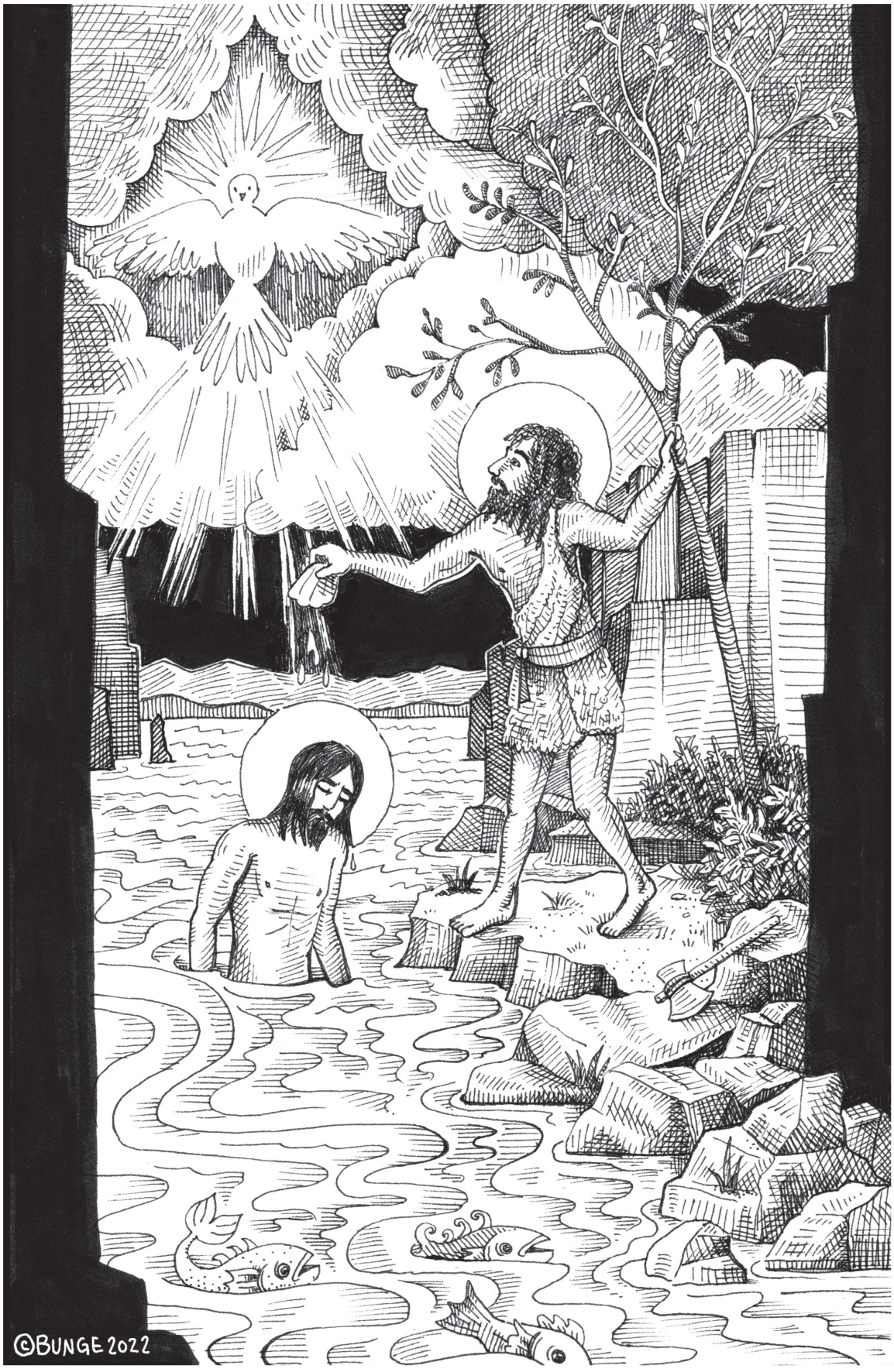
The waters are choppy and Jesus is sleeping in the boat. This is a perfect storm to create conflict between the teacher and his followers. It is Christ who invites them to get into the boat and cross to the other side of the lake, leaving behind some crowds that were pressing in on them. Jesus takes his place at the stern, where a captain would usually sit to guide the ship's direction, while the disciples crowd in. I can imagine they are eager for breathing space. The boat is not only a vessel to take them from one place to the next, but also a space for restoration and connection with their dynamic leader before the next teaching or healing opportunity.

It becomes clear that, as the high winds begin, the disciples do not trust they will arrive safely to the shore. They become frightened by the storm surrounding them and worry they will soon die. It is no wonder that their fear turns to anger when they see their guide, Jesus, sleeping on a pillow at the stern of the boat. Actions speak louder than words, and his peaceful sleep seems to say he does not care about their lives. He seems to them a lackluster captain, sleeping on the job and leading them to disaster rather than safety. But in their panic-stricken accusations, they miss the obvious*: Jesus is with them in the boat*. This very clear reality should inspire them to imitate Jesus' calm demeanor at the stern of the boat. His ability to remain asleep as the waves surround them is the calm in the storm. There are things to worry about, but right now, this raging storm is not one of them. Christ intends for his disciples to do and believe the same.

Much like the disciples, many of us do not like choppy waters and stormy conditions. Few want to face conflict, discomfort, or fear. Instead, we desire a comfortable, predictable, and familiar communal life together. If only this was the way things could be! Instead, stories about God's living water often lead us to choppy waters and challenge us to experience just how transformative (and dangerous) such baptismal waters can be. God's claim on our lives in baptism means we are equipped and empowered to try new things, learn from what we thought might be failures, face our fears, and step into unfamiliar places. When we foster ways to live into this kind of discipleship, we may find ourselves challenging the norms that have become systemic cycles of exclusion, both inside and outside our walls. This is a way for our faith communities to become truly comforting and radically familiar for everyone present, even if it means we can't always predict what will happen next.

Possibilities Ahead

We would do well to consider access to baptism as God's domain rather than our own. Over and over, Scripture provides stories of well-intentioned people of faith and God's expansive, abundant movement in their midst. Baptisms and biblical narratives around water provide a steady stream overflowing with opportunities to uncover the richness of God's call, both individually and communally. Our role is to immerse ourselves in the Living Water, not bottling it up, but allowing it to spring forth; because no matter what, God will find a way to create floodwaters of new life.



The Baptism of Christ After Tintoretto
ink on paper
Jennifer Bunge

This Creek Is the Baptismal River: Baptism as Immersion into Reality

Lisa Dahill

It was a wild joy to slide with my canoe into the Connecticut River in the late afternoon of Pentecost Sunday, June 4, 2017, just downriver from Colebrook, New Hampshire—this river called Kwanitekw ("Long River") to the Abenaki people native here. With a guide and another participant, I was setting out on the second stage of a visionary forty-day River of Life Pilgrimage traversing the entire length of that iconic river, an event sponsored by the Episcopal Churches of New England and the New England Synod of the ELCA, in partnership with Kairos Earth and Metanoia of Vermont, two New England organizations fostering Christian land-based spiritual practice. Over the course of four and a half days, we would be traveling through this far northern section of the river, not far from its headwaters in the Connecticut Lakes region of Maine and northern New Hampshire. Here the river is relatively narrow, fast-moving with regular low rapids, too wild and shallow for motorized boats; these stretches are for waders, kayaks, and canoes. The land on either side is forested and rocky, with tremendous beauty and abundance of wildlife. My notes recorded sightings of a young bull moose, a pair of mink, a fox, diverse duck species, herons, adorable sets of goslings with their parents, a water-skating silver and gold insect, and fish of a range of sizes. Along the river's banks and surrounding hills we saw thriving maple, birch, alders, conifers, and occasional catalpas among many other species I didn't recognize. We also encountered evidence of the human past in Native American holy places like Brunswick Springs and in various markers of the early European settlement of the region. Though we began with two full days and nights of rain, low temperatures, and more challenging river conditions, we ended up with sunnier, warmer daytime hours in the last two full days of travel as the river gradually broadened and slowed, the terrain opening up into more frequent towns and farmlands. Over the course of this stage of the pilgrimage we traveled around twelve to fifteen river miles per day and camped each night in campgrounds on the Vermont side of the river, emerging on June 8 just above Lancaster, New Hampshire, still in the far northern part of the state. Each morning and evening was marked with prayer developed from various monastic and eco-contemplative sources by Mark Kutolowski, who with his wife, Lisa Hershey Kutolowski, was one of the guides on the journey. It was a thrilling, exhilarating, gorgeous ride.

All was not sweetness and beauty, however; part of what made the adventure so powerful was its edge. These are dangerous waters in a season marked by high flow and rapids, through forests with real predators, in rainy, cold conditions that opened us, for at least the first two days, to possibilities of hypothermia. At Brunswick Springs, the second day of canoeing, I was so cold in the forty-five-degree rain, my feet soaked from the morning on the river, that my whole body was shaking as I jumped up and down, unable to get warm. The project's logistics director, Jo Brooks, had arrived with supplies and took pity on me, giving me the boots and socks off her own feet, dry and blissfully warm from her body heat. Taking my cold wet water shoes onto her skin, she entrusted me with her boots for the rest of my piece of the journey. Our guide, Mark, lent me his fleece, similarly pre-warmed. A local priest was watching for our coming and joined us for prayer a couple of times, kindly bringing me ibuprofen and zinc for my sore throat. But the most memorable

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point of risk, which went beyond discomfort and into outright danger, came as we approached Lyman Falls, a breached low-head dam, toward the end of our first and longest day on the river. Experienced boaters know the dangers of low-head dams; the unwary or overly confident who go over the top can end up caught in the churn below, whose hydraulics create a powerful downward suction from which one can't readily escape (nor easily be pulled out). Between 2018 and 2020, 111 reported deaths occurred in low-head dam churn in the United States. We knew of this dam and were watching for it as we approached. Our guide told us we would be crossing the dam area very carefully, heading as far over to river left (the New Hampshire side) as we could, since there the dam had crumbled almost completely, leaving merely a set of easy rapids to cross. Only toward the Vermont side was it still dangerous.

But a tall tree had fallen from the New Hampshire side of the river at a point we didn't realize was just above the dam area, forcing us to move all the way over to the Vermont bank to go around it. When we got clear of the tree, the dam suddenly surged, seemingly out of nowhere. Behind me in our canoe Mark yelled, "Backpaddle!" and he and I backpaddled for our lives, initially not at all sure this would make any difference as the river pushed us powerfully along. We strained with all our strength against this huge force of the water to slow our forward motion. I have a visual memory of peering with horror from the front of the canoe over the edge of the dam as we approached, seeing my/our possible graves in that violent churn below, the river pouring inexorably, deafeningly, over the lip of the dam on either side of our canoe and pulling us with it, before our collective strength managed at the last possible moment to stop our forward motion and ferry us sideways a few crucial yards. We didn't get anywhere near the safer section still far to our left where we had intended to cross, but freed ourselves from the most dangerous portion where we had first approached, and with a jolt we went over what amounted to a class 3 drop into a huge but mercifully brief set of chaotic waves which we managed to navigate into the calmer water beyond. We slid over to our campground for the night on the Vermont side just a few hundred yards beyond the dam, my legs still shaking so badly from the fright that I could hardly climb out of the canoe. That night I didn't take my breathing for granted.

Immersion in Real Water

In baptism we are immersed into real water. This is the observable fact of the sacrament (its immersive nature may be less obvious in places that use the minimum amount of water possible). We use real water, and yet we linger theologically much longer over the words we use to name abstract ideas, like the significance of the human community, the shape of the ethics and discipleship baptism invites initiates into, or the precise way/s the Holy Spirit might be active in relation to initiates' own faith or confession. Yet in our ecologically endangered world, we are finally learning to attend to the spiritual and theological significance of gifts we had perhaps taken for granted, the very functioning of Earth's incomprehensibly complex, interwoven systems of water, air, soil, fire, membranes, flesh, photosynthesis, and predation. These are the miracles of life into which the life of God is enfolded sacramentally and, through Jesus' incarnation, biologically. In baptism we know we are immersed and claimed by the Triune Name, incorporated into the (human) body of Christ in this place and throughout time and space, invited into the way and story and vision and discipleship of Jesus Christ. In baptism, the grace of God embraces us personally and communally and endlessly. But we are now realizing much more fully—or need to be realizing—that in baptism we are also immersed into Earth's hydrology in a particular watershed, and into that divine life in, with, and under the water and all the life held in and made possible by it.

This essay will assert that the forms of baptism we use—and the forms of baptismal life flowing from the sacrament—need to reflect as fully as possible the ecological, ethical, and spiritual breadth and depth of this immersion into Earth's waters. I will trace various dimensions of baptismal practice, both outdoors and in, before moving further into these ecological, ethical, and spiritual implications of the sacrament.

Baptizing in Local Waters

I have been advocating since 2015 for a return to the practice of the early church of baptism taking place in local waters, aligned with the baptism of Jesus himself into the Jordan River.[1] Such practice immerses initiates in the "living water" the *Didache* calls for. It also provides the most powerful possible experiential richness toward claiming ecological kinship and discipleship at the heart of the Christian faith. That is,

> I have come to recognize that the ecological conversion to which we are summoned requires not only brilliant scholarship, new theologies, even papal encyclicals. Restoring 2.2 billion Christians to the passionate and intimate love of Earth requires Christians' literal re-immersion, through baptism the primal sacrament, back into the wild life of Earth's hydrologic system. And so my first and primary proposal is to restore the normative practice of Christian baptism into local waters.[2]

The constantly perpetuated perceptual split between realms we consciously or unconsciously privilege as "sacred" versus the rest of the "profane" world is at the heart of the ecological devastation threatening our planet's and species' future. We are fatally estranged from the rest of the natural world, and forms of religious practice that ignore, assume, or perpetuate this alienation are in fact complicit with it. Indoor baptism using chlorinated (i.e., dead) water in a ceremony meant for and consisting of humans only, in a special holy room to which only humans are invited, in relation to a god too often viewed as the validation of human superiority, does not challenge the ecological and perceptual/symbolic alienation threatening all life but actively reinforces it, regardless of the words that may be spoken in the rite. Returning the practice of Christian baptism instead to the actual creeks, rivers, lakes, or seas near one's home enacts the opposite: it is the proclamation that the divine imagination and life fills all that is, that the body of Christ permeates all creation (as the advocates of Deep Incarnation have been pointing out for some time and creation mystics for millennia longer), that the Spirit of life breathes through all that is.[3]

Treating and experiencing the natural world as the sanctuary, the local creek as the baptismal river, and the creatures who fill this place as our kin in Christ as fully—if differently—than our human Christian co-congregants: these flow from outdoor baptismal practice intrinsically, prior to any actual words being spoken.

Treating and experiencing the natural world as the sanctuary, the local creek as the baptismal river, and the creatures who fill this place as our kin in Christ as fully—if differently—than our human Christian co-congregants: these flow from outdoor baptismal practice intrinsically, prior to any actual words being spoken.[4] This shift in practice makes possible the forms of common life we so desperately need today, such as spiritualities of interspecies attention and relationship, ethics of advocacy and restoration, a politics that bridges human divisions in service of our common baptismal home. In fact, it makes these *necessary:* if we are to baptize in the creek, we need to "know the local scientists who monitor pollution levels, to learn what is safe and what isn't, and to join the activists fighting to defend and restore this creek, this river, this lake or ocean. We will need to know the watershed more intimately than we ever imagined if we are to baptize out here."[5] Baptizing in local waters is the core ecological Christian practice because the grace flowing through the enactment of the sacrament heals that perceptual splitting underlying so many layers of the alienation we suffer and inflict. It is a whole new experience of what the Christian life actually means and is. Most forms of indoor baptism are in relation to this outdoor immersion as the forty-five-minute scenic drive down Highway 3 from Colebridge to Lancaster, New Hampshire, is to our four days on the river in a canoe.

Which is to say: moving baptism outdoors is not easy. Even (or in some cases, especially) if you feel far from the wilds of northern New England, that doesn't mean outdoor baptism where you live is therefore safe. Questions of pollution and access make this practice much more complicated than indoor baptisms in most communities; one would not generally choose this option as a way to increase convenience for participants and community members, and in some places in North America it is simply not safe at this point to baptize in the closest creek or river (what I think of as one's "parish creek"). Yet these challenges do not excuse us from a move outdoors. Rather, they demand our concerted action, in the case of pollution, and the same urgency we would mobilize if our indoor sanctuary proved contaminated. They also demand our creativity, in the case of access.[6] These ideas diverge far from the normative baptismal practices of a typical congregation. If for most Christians such ideas seem far-fetched, then that may be a marker

of just how alienated we are in our faith from the actual life of the larger natural world.

In a moment I will explore implications of this proposed form of baptismal practice to explore the ways it shapes new kinds of Christian faith and discipleship. But first let me note that, of course, I realize most places are not ready to adopt a practice of baptizing in local waters (even as some communities have never left the river, or are indeed going back).[7] In such cases the normativity of outdoor baptism I am calling for does not change, but the intermediate question becomes: how close can we get to this baptismal river for now, as we move toward full immersion? For instance, confirmation and other baptismal affirmations could take place at the local waters, which would give rise to a whole different experience—as well as new forms of catechesis and discipleship—from indoor versions of these rites. If full baptismal immersion in the waterway is not possible, perhaps initiates could wade into it or stand on the shore and have buckets from the creek or lake poured over their head. Water from the creek or lake or ocean could be ceremonially carried through the streets back to the church to fill the font for indoor baptisms, that extended procession becoming part of the baptismal rite itself.[8] If walking that distance is not possible, then a festive ritual blessing of the waters could still take place at the waterway without the procession, with participants bringing the baptismal water back to the church afterwards in their cars or by public transportation. That on-site blessing encompasses not just the water itself but all those, human and not, who live in and near these waters and depend on them for their life. This includes those without permanent homes camped along its shores and those whom pollution or overdevelopment has endangered or stripped of their habitats. If the water is too polluted for any direct ritual use, this very fact can become the focus of regular lament and prayer, research and action. Polluted or not, the creatures, water, climate impacts, and needs of the watershed can be a weekly part of the community's prayers and thanksgiving. We can give attention to nonhuman creatures, their names, their lives, and their needs just as we pray for and act on behalf of the needs of humans.[9] All these are examples of how claiming the normativity of baptism into local waters can shape a community's life, root the Christian life in the larger life of Earth, *and* simultaneously prepare participants for full immersion into their ecosystem, even if actual full immersion into the literal biosphere of one's home is not (yet) possible.

Imagine you were being prepared for baptism into a Christian faith that takes seriously your living relationship with the rest of the biosphere, with the actual creatures of this place who live here with you.

But for a moment imagine a parish near that Connecticut River up in northern New Hampshire or Vermont. Imagine the water is clean enough to swim in, to baptize in; imagine there's a sweet spot with calmer waters where the river bends wide, maybe a little beach, maybe a parking lot and path, a bikeway not too far away. Imagine you were being prepared for baptism into a Christian faith that takes seriously your living relationship with the rest of the biosphere, with the actual creatures of this place who live here with you. Imagine that catechesis involves learning many of those creatures, their names and habitats, needs and distinctive voices and movements; perhaps in preparing for baptism the community invites you to spend time with them, to let one of them mentor and accompany you through this rite into Christian belonging. Now imagine that your baptismal ceremony takes place in this river you are getting to know. The day is brisk, the water cold; it's a little breezy, maybe a storm is approaching. It's late spring, Pentecost: birds are everywhere, calling and flitting and feeding their young; buds and leaves and flowers are bursting out in every direction. You wade in, gasping a little. As you move deeper you can feel the edge of the river's current beyond the baptismal area: tangible, dark, flowing, rich. At waist-high you stop with the pastor, your sponsors, your friends and family who have waded in with you; others remain on the shore within earshot. Here with full voice you renounce the evils that keep you from loving God, the world, yourself, other humans, and all creation with all your heart; here you claim the faith of a creation-saturated triune God, the vision of a world beloved and redeemed in every corner and crevice, the way of passionate, nonviolent, whole-hearted mercy Jesus taught and teaches, and into all of this—the water filled with the Spirit of life oxygenating all the minnows and fry and larvae and nymphs and microbes, algae and mussels and fish and frogs filling this river—you are baptized. You come up dripping with the bodies of these

creatures and into the birdsong of the place, a heron swooping past, a turtle sunning on the rock, your human community in Christ beaming at you and already taking off their warm dry shoes and socks, their body-heated garments and coats, to clothe you in love. This is the baptismal reality. It's exhilarating, totally unforgettable, totally immersive.

If there is more danger involved than in this idealized narration, if it's hard, if unforeseen accidents loom despite our best planning and foresight, if the storm arrives more quickly and we're all drenched, or if not all those can attend who would be able to indoors—do these challenges speak against such a rite?

If there is more danger involved than in this idealized narration, if it's hard, if unforeseen accidents loom despite our best planning and foresight, if the storm arrives more quickly and we're all drenched, or if not all those can attend who would be able to indoors—do these challenges speak against such a rite? How should the ritual enactment of experiential kinship with the whole wildness of God's wild world rank in relation to safety at all costs? Shouldn't Christian baptism make possible an experience of risky immersion into love of the world?

Implications

I close, as promised, with brief examples of ecological, ethical, and spiritual implications of this practice of baptizing outdoors. I was baptized in a church sanctuary, not in a river, but I have had many baptism-like experiences in outdoor waters, including an immersion in the river with prayers of blessing from my canoe partners at the close of that Connecticut River pilgrimage. From these and the reports of others baptized outdoors, I gain a visceral awareness of my creatureliness, my physical and moral and emotional relations with all these kin of countless kinds, as well as my vulnerability to them and to the forces shaping our common life. I experience myself *as* a part of this common home, no longer oblivious to it in our psychic imprisonment of pavement and cars and sanctuaries and screens. When we practice baptism outdoors, the rite itself becomes an enacted invitation out of that "original alienation" and back into the broader, richer, creaturely-kin reality for which we too were created, where health and joy are found. We become able to see the land and the creatures who were both symbolically and literally part of the foundational experience of our Christian lives, and we fall in love with it all. The created radiance of our world is now so heartbreakingly visible in its astonishing beauty and vulnerability. We become Earth people, alive to the divine luminescence of it all.

This moves us into new forms of ethics as well. As Victoria Loorz describes in *Church of the Wild: How Nature Returns Us to the Sacred*, what makes the restoration of a place possible is precisely its re-*story*ing: this is what changes us narrative animals on the deepest levels, in our minds and hearts and vision.[10] Baptism invites us in, and we live the Christian life, this way of Jesus Christ, as increasingly mature and responsible participation together in this vast divine ecology we have been baptized into. Ethics includes attention to ecological questions and environmental justice for humans affected by ecological damage (including climate displacement and the needs of future generations) as well as for nonhuman parts of creation. Because we fight for what we love, we will protect from harm places we experience as holy. If all the world's Christians were being baptized into their watersheds and knew the more-than-human world as part of their faith experience and community; if all the world's Christians were experiencing the re-storying that comes of immersion into a world filled with God, we would be a powerful political force for new ways of living on Earth.

For those in the Americas, as well as other places colonialism has ravaged, ethical attention to one's watershed (the place of one's baptismal relations) includes attention to the humans who have been here long before my European ancestors' arrival. Dismantling my unconscious white entitlement, challenging expressions of white supremacy when I recognize them, learning to see my heritage and history through the eyes of those whose cultures and lives it destroyed, and acknowledging their primacy in the place both formally and informally—these are examples of how I am attempting to take seriously my relationships with those who are indigenous to this land.[11] I learn from their leadership even as I attempt to grow into my own respectful relationships

with the creatures of my place and in peaceful relations with other humans. These Water Protectors are finding spiritual and political power in calling for the ethics of experiencing and treating waters and waterways as holy: see, for instance, the ceremonial and political energy expanding globally from the 2016 Standing Rock protests in South Dakota and the emerging practice of *nibi* walks along major waterways and lakes of the Upper Midwest.[12]

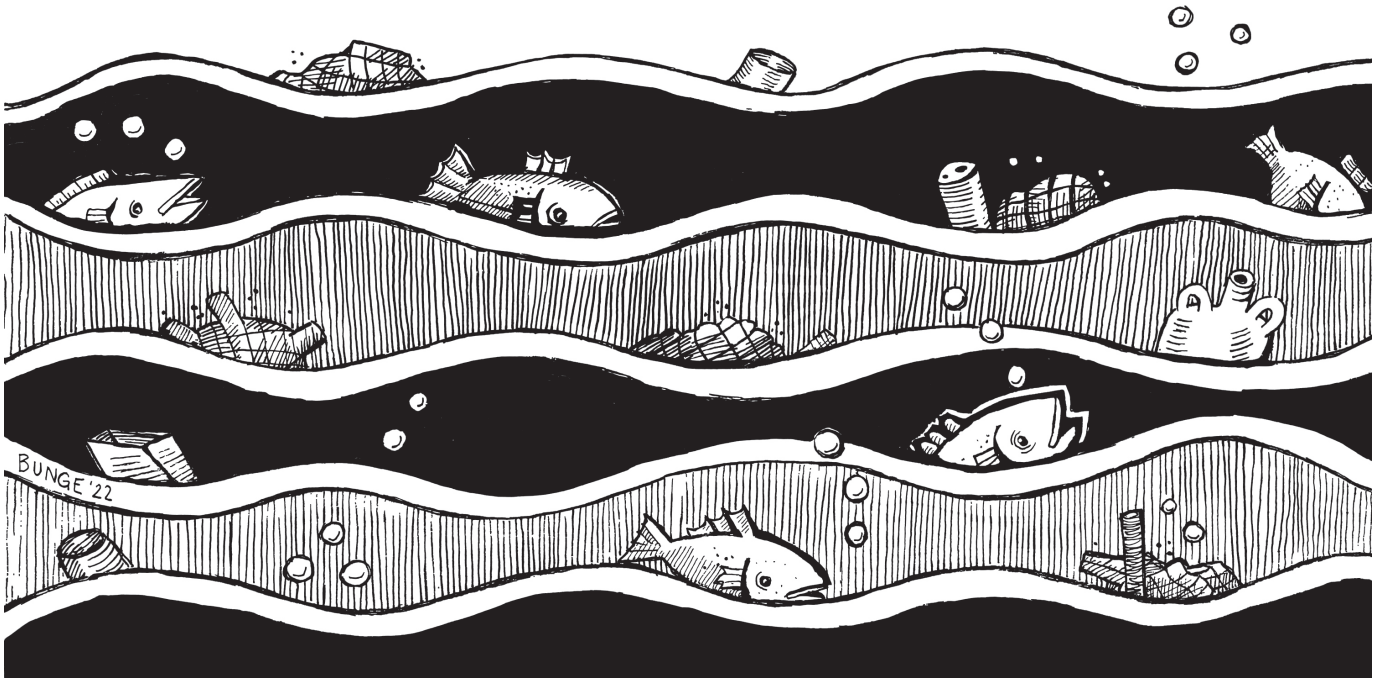
One final ethical dimension of the baptismal practice I invite us to is the encouragement it would provide to efforts all over the world to grant legal standing (or rights) to nature. Laws granting legal rights to waterways and ecosystems are not a perfect solution to our current ecological crises, but they make profound sense, and they would provide far greater levels of protection than we presently have.[13] We must protect the needs of the river, lake, and creek into which we hope to baptize our vulnerable loved ones—and from which we drink and draw food—if life is to continue. I am grateful that in this summer of 2022, I return to the Connecticut River watershed to begin a new faculty position on its banks, teaching transformative spirituality and learning from my students and colleagues, from those indigenous to the place, and from the river itself and its creatures, about what it means to live ethically in relation to all these other lives.

Finally, I would like to point here at the end to the vision Dietrich Bonhoeffer articulated shortly before his imprisonment. In the first chapter of *Ethics*, he writes, "In Christ we are invited to participate in the reality of God and the reality of the world at the same time, the one not without the other . . . there are not two realities, but only *one reality*."[14] This is a statement as ecologically revolutionary as it is theologically and incarnationally straightforward. Ultimately, baptism into local waters makes possible initiates' experience of this one reality in their own flesh as they rise up out of those waters blessed in the triune God and incorporated into the largest possible body of Christ, snorting out the insects and plant life they may have inhaled in the water of this place. Divine life and the world's life, font and river: these are not separate things but are *one reality*. This creek is the baptismal font; this world is the flesh and heartbeat of God incarnate. This is a spirituality one can live into with joy and passion, that expands to hold the young person's fiery need to make a difference, enfolds the child and sparks her/his imagination, and grounds adults and the aging in the larger beauty of being creatures together with God through death and life. The water's waiting, to receive and redeem us all: let's dive in!

Notes

1. Lisa E. Dahill, "Rewilding Christian Spirituality: Outdoor Sacraments and the Life of the World," in *Eco-Reformation: Grace and Hope for a Planet in Peril*, ed. Lisa E. Dahill and James B. Martin-Schramm (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2016), 177–96. An earlier reflection published in the *Christian Century* in 2014 opened these questions beautifully as well: cf. Steven Thorngate, "Holy Water Everywhere," https://www.christiancentury.org/article/cover-story/holy-water-everywhere. Ched Myers has been working for over a decade now in spearheading the "watershed discipleship" movement, which anchors Christian faith and action in the broader place-based community of life that is one's watershed; see the volume he edited, *Watershed Discipleship: Reinhabiting Bioregional Faith and Practice* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2016).
2. Dahill, "Rewilding Christian Spirituality," 182. This quote refers to the "ecological conversion" to which Pope Francis summons all believers in *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015), ¶14–15, 216–21.
3. On Deep Incarnation, see *Incarnation: On the Scope and Depth of Christology*, ed. Niels Henrik Gregersen (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015); and Denis Edwards, *Deep Incarnation: God's Redemptive Suffering with Creatures* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2019). A foundational text in making possible the baptismal experience of all Earth's waters as holy is Martin Luther's "Flood Prayer," composed for his 1523 revision of the Christian rite of baptism. This prayer, still used in new variations in many Lutheran contexts and picked up by other Protestant traditions, shifts the focus of the central baptismal prayer away from converting the "ordinary" water to be used in baptism *into* "holy" water; instead it celebrates the fact that by Jesus' baptism in the Jordan River all water is *already* holy water. Jesus' presence in Earth's waters means that "the Jordan and all water [are] sanctified . . . for a saving flood" (Martin Luther, "Order of Baptism," 1523; see the translation in Frank Senn, *Christian Liturgy: Catholic and Evangelical* [Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1997], 289).
4. Benjamin Stewart has demonstrated how powerfully the form of baptismal experience—full immersion or sprinkling—shapes in formative ways participants' spontaneous, untutored articulation of what their baptism means: cf. *The Role of Baptismal Water at the Vigil of Easter in the Liturgical Generation of Eco-Theology*, unpublished dissertation (Atlanta: Emory University, 2009).
5. Dahill, "Rewilding Christian Spirituality," 185.

6. Questions of access are complicated in moving the practice of baptism outdoors, and doing so requires special attention to questions of safety, assistance to those with mobility challenges, and/or alternate means of participation. However, what constitutes access varies considerably. For instance, people with neurodivergent forms of perception sometimes find indoor worship intolerable. Recent research with parents of neurodivergent children and young adults reports that many of these parents describe being outdoors as preferable for their children, and outdoor worship and sacramental rites may paradoxically provide *increased* access for families unable to worship indoors (even as they make participation more challenging for others). See Laura MacGregor and Allen Jorgenson, "Beyond Saints and Superheroes: A Phenomenological Study of the Spiritual Care Needs of Parents Raising Children with Disabilities," (paper presented at Louisville Institute Winter Seminar, Louisville, KY, January 20, 2022).
7. Many U.S. rural African-American communities baptize in rivers as they have done for centuries. Russian Orthodox Christians around the world bless their local waters at the Baptism of Jesus in early January; cf. Nicholas E. Denysenko, *The Blessing of the Waters and Epiphany: The Eastern Liturgical Tradition* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2012). Ruth Graham documents a contemporary spin on practices of outdoor baptism, including natural waterways, among U.S. evangelicals in "Horse Troughs, Hot Tubs and Hashtags: Baptism Is Getting Wild," *New York Times* (November 29, 2021), https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/29/us/evangelical-churches-baptism.html (accessed April 22, 2022).
8. Paul Galbreath describes such a process he helped develop at First Presbyterian Church, Newport, Oregon, incorporating blessing of the wild waters (here, of the Pacific Ocean) followed by a procession along Nye Creek back to the sanctuary and pouring the water into the church's font—the whole process including moments of contemplative presence and ritual. See "In Praise of Living Water: Ritual Experimentation in Times of Ecological Crisis," *Call to Worship* 54, no. 2 (2020): 52–57. And, collaborating with ECHO-Leahy Center for Lake Champlain, and the Lake Champlain Maritime Museum, Dr. Nancy Wright led Ascension Lutheran Church, Burlington, Vermont, into study, worship, testing for pollution, and an art show focused on the Lake Champlain watershed over seven months. The watershed stewardship handbook she created ("Congregational Watershed Discipleship Manuals," available at https://vtipl.org/556-2/, accessed May 2, 2022) as well as an interfaith Sacred Waters event she designed for the community with hiking, kayaking and worship on the water widened her congregation's efforts in the community and created potential for replication by others.
9. See Benjamin Stewart, "The Stream, the Flood, the Spring: The Liturgical Role of Flowing Waters in Eco-Reformation," in Dahill and Martin-Schramm, ed., *Eco-Reformation*, 160–76.
10. Victoria Loorz, *Church of the Wild: How Nature Returns Us to the Sacred* (Minneapolis, MN: Broadleaf Books, 2021), 89–93 and throughout. In fact, "re-storying" on every level is precisely what Christian baptism does as it invites us into the divine story and reality permeating all that is.
11. Two very different examples of Euro-settler descendants' journeys toward humility and honesty in relationship with those indigenous to their places and history are Elaine Enns and Ched Myers, *Healing Haunted Histories: A Settler Discipleship of Decolonization* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2021); and Allen Jorgenson, *Indigenous and Christian Perspectives in Dialogue: Kairotic Place and Borders* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2021).
12. The term "Water Protectors" came to national awareness as a title for the Standing Rock Sioux and allies protesting the Dakota Access Pipeline in North Dakota; it has since been used also for those, generally indigenous people and often women, working to protect other waterways in North America and around the world. On *nibi* walks, see the resources, protocols, and history gathered at the "Nibi Walks—Every Step Is a Prayer" website, www.nibiwalk.org, accessed April 22, 2022; see also the Galbreath paper cited in note 8 and Kiara Jorgenson, "'I Speak for the Water': Anishinaabe Nibi Grandmothers and Watershed Discipleship in Northern Midwestern Protestant Communities," *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 20/2 (Fall 2020): 194–207.
13. See the work of the Global Alliance of the Rights of Nature, https://www.garn.org/, accessed April 22, 2022, and the Community Environmental Legal Defense Fund, https://celdf.org/about-celdf/, accessed April 22, 2022. Legal approaches are not the only strategy toward changing our destructive ways; we need changes in how economies value natural systems as well, and ultimately the experiential shared sense of kinship and love for waters and creatures described above is a greater form of protection.
14. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, ed. Clifford J. Green, trans. Reinhard Krauss, et al., Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works (hereafter DBWE), vol. 6 (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005), 54–55, 58. The full chapter expanding these insights is "Christ, Reality, and Good," the first and most encompassing chapter of *Ethics*, DBWE 6:47–75, especially up through p. 68. Fleshing out this paradigmatic assertion of "one reality" in Christ is the heart of my current book project, provisionally titled *One Reality: Reading Bonhoeffer Ecologically*.



Dirty Water
acrylic and ink on wood
Jennifer *Bunge*

Holy Envy

Stephen Fearing

I was baptized on June 28, 1992, by the people of First Presbyterian Church of Dalton, Georgia. Rev. Jim Holderness, whom I would later remember as the kind man who would embrace me in his arms each Sunday and tell me I was loved, presided. I was four at the time, so I depend on others for the details. I'm told it was a sunny day and a bit cool for that time of year. The worship service was a typical one; upon the sermon's conclusion, my parents brought me forward. After saying yes to all the prescribed questions from the *Book of Order*, they gave me to Rev. Holderness, who then thrice anointed my head with a measured and modest amount of water, baptizing me in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. After Rev. Holderness walked me up and down the aisle to a liturgy of "oohs" and "ahhs," we took our seats and it was done.

Since I was raised a Presbyterian in the thick of the Bible Belt, the vast majority of my friends were Baptist. And they told me a different story of their baptisms. Unlike me, of course, they could remember theirs. And there was nothing measured and modest about the amount of water used. They were dunked, submerged, swallowed by the water; entombed and then raised to new life, soaked in the promises of God from head to toe. The whole experience sounded wild, abundant, and expansive to me. My baptism felt a little too . . . decent and orderly . . . next to theirs. I must admit, I've always held a holy envy for my Christian siblings who have been baptized by submersion.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not trying to make a case against infant baptism. Infant baptism makes a beautiful theological statement: that God's love finds us long before we could ever find it ourselves. I cherish the fact that I depend on my faith community to remind me of my baptism because I literally can't do that for myself. I can't help but wonder, though, what we could learn from revisiting our baptismal theology to see what the practice of full immersion baptism has to teach. Maybe it's time for those of us for whom sprinkling is the norm to take a dive off the deep end.

A few months ago, the former editor of this journal, Rev. Dr. Kimberly Bracken Long, did an informal poll on social media to find PC(USA) leaders who had experience with full immersion baptisms. She passed along the names of a few of them to me, and these stories are the result of our conversations.

Open Waters

Rev. Andy Chambers is the pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Cornelia, Georgia. His congregation partners in ministry with a Laotian community, the Backyard Ministry, pastored by Rev. Souvanh Touralack. The congregation is one of the 1001 New Worshiping Communities movement sponsored by the PC(USA). The two pastors have baptized members of both congregations in the waters of the nearby Chattahoochee River.

When Rev. Chambers described to me what a typical submersion baptism looks like, I couldn't help but smile. He showed me a picture of one of the persons who had been baptized. The joy on that face and the faces of the beloved community that surrounded them were proof of an unbridled celebration. There is a clear sense as they are gathered by the river that this is not just the community's duty but their gladsome opportunity to give gratitude for what God is doing in their midst.

Imagine a warm, sunny day in Northeast Georgia. Dozens of congregants gather by the

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I can't help but wonder if it's time to reclaim baptism as the nonviolent protest that is needed so desperately these days in a world that tells us we owe our allegiance to everything else but God.

waters of the Chattahoochee River, singing, praying, and preparing for the ritual. Rev. Touralack and Rev. Chambers guide the baptismal candidate into the waters. The water is blessed and gratitude given for the stories of Scripture that remind us of our baptism. No physical script can be taken into the water because both hands are needed to guide the congregant on their journey. So the words flow from the heart and Scripture is spoken from memory. The candidate is submerged and entombed, swallowed by the flowing waters of that winding river. The newly baptized one emerges as a new creation, smiling from ear to ear, as the people clap and sing and celebrate. And having been helped out of the water, the newly baptized is greeted on land—as Peter himself was after he swam to Jesus—with an abundant meal. Portable tables are set with a bountiful feast of traditional Laotian dishes: fried rice, egg rolls, noodles, and all things curry. "We stuff ourselves until we all get tired and go home," Rev. Touralack tells me with a chuckle.

They are a gospel people on the loose, released from the four walls of their sanctuary. Both Rev. Chambers and Rev. Touralack described the river baptisms by repeatedly using two words: open and free. There is no need here for restraint because God's grace isn't interested in that concept. In a world that preaches a narrative of scarcity and greed, there's something countercultural—subversive, even—in the way they describe the baptismal experiences.

There is also something about the submersion baptism that reminds us of our dependency on God. "When I'm in the water, when I lay them down, I feel like I'm dying with them," Rev. Touralack says. "You feel, 'What does it mean for me to be up and alive and to be a new creation?'" Together, in a beautiful liturgical dance, both pastor and congregant die and rise together, saved from the jaws of death—a choreographed but simultaneously unpredictable ritual declaring our dependence upon God in all things.

I can't help but wonder if it's time to reclaim baptism as the nonviolent protest that is needed so desperately these days in a world that tells us we owe our allegiance to everything else but God. By the Chattahoochee River there is no American flag to conflate our allegiance to God with our allegiance to the stars and stripes. By the waters of the "Hooch," there is no brick-and-mortar sanctuary to trick us into thinking that the body of Christ is somehow more the place where we worship than the blessed bodies that are gathered there. By the flowing waters of that local river, there is nothing more or less than an endless font found in nature and some portable tables full of traditional Laotian food to celebrate the fact that God's love always wins. Between an unending natural font and folding tables full of bounty, God's people utter, shout, sing, and pray a redeeming word.

Baptism as Hospitality

Rev. Karen Ware Jackson co-pastors First Presbyterian Church of Greenville, North Carolina, with her husband, Rob. Before this call, however, she was the pastor of Faith Presbyterian Church in Greensboro. At the time, that congregation partnered in ministry with a new worshiping community called El Shaddai Vision Church, pastored by Rev. Prince Mundeke Mushunju and comprised of immigrants from Rwanda, Uganda, Burundi, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Together, Jackson and Mushunju baptized congregants by full submersion. Unlike for the folks in Cornelia, there was no convenient body of water close to the church building, so they relied on the hospitality of a local Disciples of Christ congregation to facilitate their baptismal celebrations.

Jackson was effusive in her praise of the Disciples of Christ church's hospitality. When it was time to baptize a member of First Presbyterian Church or the El Shaddai Vision Church, the Disciples congregation invited them to use the indoor baptismal pool in the rear of their chancel. When Jackson and Mushunju celebrated joint baptisms, their hosts would make sure that everything was prepared. The water was comfortably heated. They made available their white, weighted baptismal gowns. They laid towels out for participants to

dry themselves after the ritual. All this meant that Mushunju and Jackson, leading the service either in English, French, or Swahili, could be fully present with God's people. This ecumenical partnership reminds us that the sacraments offer an opportunity for a mutual practice of Christian hospitality.

During our conversation, Jackson and I spoke of our shared appreciation for the full-bodied sensory experience of being fully submerged. I was glad to know that I wasn't the only Presbyterian willing to admit my holy envy of those who have celebrated the sacrament in that manner. We wondered together what it might look like for us "sprinkled" Presbyterians to reaffirm our baptisms in a fully immersive manner. I use the baptismal font in my congregation's sanctuary on a weekly basis, most often during the confession and assurance of pardon. On special occasions, such as Baptism of the Lord Sunday, I invite the people forward to make the sign of the cross on their foreheads with water. All this is well and good, but Jackson and I imagined what a reaffirmation might look like outside the sanctuary in a natural body of water. "Not in the sanctuary of the church, but in the sanctuary of the world," as she put it.

Imagine a group of adults, all baptized as infants, gathered by a river. The words of "Come, Thou Fount" are gently sung as the people, in pairs, descend into the water. A blessing is given for the water, a liturgy of gratitude for the eternal river of God's mercy. The story of Peter's post-resurrection plunge into the waters is read and the congregation reminded that on the other side of that sacramental swim were both a promise and a charge: forgiveness for our shortcomings and a call to be renewed to serve others in Christ's name. Then, the pairs that entered together take turns submerging each other in the water, each reminding their partner that they are beloved children of God, never so broken to be withheld from the "streams of mercy, never ceasing."

Now for the ordination exam question! Where does one draw the line between remembering one's baptism and being rebaptized? Presbyterians do not condone rebaptizing (to quote Thoreau, "What is once well done is done forever"). But Jackson and I both agreed that, in the interest of a robust and expansive baptismal theology, the longer we find ourselves in this wild thing called ministry, the more willing we are to flirt with that line. One could make the case that as long as one avoids the phrase "I baptize you in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost," everything else is on the table (or in the water). However we choose to define that liturgical boundary, I feel it is our responsibility as practitioners of the sacraments to err on the side of letting the Holy Spirit have the room she needs to stir our hearts and renew our souls in these difficult times.

All Hands on Deck!

Rev. Christopher J. Holland II is the executive pastor of Salt and Light, a merger of two congregations (PC(USA) and UCC) in Southwest Philadelphia. In addition to his responsibilities as a minister and father to six children, he somehow finds the time to run a nonprofit called The Common Place, a community that serves children and their families through educational programs, social service, collaboration, and faith formation. It isn't surprising, then, that we only managed to find time to connect while Holland was in the car driving between engagements.

Salt and Light is a relatively new church merger. Since 2014, Holland has pastored New Spirit Community Church, a PC(USA) church. New Spirit began to collaborate with a nearby UCC congregation, Grace Christian Fellowship, and the Spirit nudged them together to form a new congregation in 2020, Salt and Light, a predominantly African American community. For practical reasons, their baptisms take place at the top of the service. After the baptism, the praise and worship team takes over to lead the congregation in song to allow everyone to dry off and change clothes before rejoining the service.

Unlike the folks in Cornelia, the people who are Salt and Light have little access to an outdoor body of water (consider the difference in climate). And unlike the folks in Greenville, they do not have access to a sanctuary with a permanent baptismal pool. The people who are Salt and Light use a portable pool instead. This came in handy during the worst of COVID-19 when the pandemic forced them and so many others to have outdoor worship services. The pool has no built-in heater, so it is filled with warm water immediately before the service.

At the beginning of the hour, the pastor and the candidate are already in the font-pool. Another elder stands to the rear and the other side to assist if necessary. Questions are asked of the baptismal candidate and the congregation. The water is blessed. And then the candidate descends into their watery grave and rises in new life in Christ as the congregation gently sings "Take Me to the Water."

Holland describes it as a very emotional moment. As the water streams down the robes of the renewed child of God, tears stream down the faces of those gathered. There is no rush; they take their time to let the Spirit soak in. The singing continues as the newest member of the kingdom of God is ushered off to change into dry clothes and return to worship cleansed and called, blessed and born anew.

What strikes me the most about Salt and Light's celebration of baptism is that it takes so many people to pull it off. One person assembles the font. Another heats the water to the correct temperature and then pours it in (but not too soon lest the water get chilly!). Robes must be dry-cleaned and then laid out for the candidates. Fresh towels are made available to dry off afterwards. Assistants are needed on each side of the candidate during the moment of baptism to support and guide. People lay out rugs to soak up the water as the candidate departs the pool for the changing room. A team of people clean and disassemble the font at the conclusion. Holland assures me that it takes no less than eight to ten people to make sure everything goes smoothly.

What a beautiful thing: a literal embodiment of liturgy, the ***work*** of the people. There is intentionality to it: the choreography is nothing less than a joyful offering to a God who knows what it feels like to be buried and raised and calls us to do the same.

What a beautiful thing: a literal embodiment of liturgy, the *work* of the people. There is intentionality to it: the choreography is nothing less than a joyful offering to a God who knows what it feels like to be buried and raised and calls us to do the same. There's a communal ownership of the liturgy, a sacramental buy-in, as congregants are not passive observers but active participants in the moment when a beloved child of God is given a wide welcome into a new kind of community. This community is not like the rest of the world, where worth is dispersed to idols like money, or privilege, or status. The people that are Salt and Light are the preachers of God's grace, and a few drops of water aren't sufficient to proclaim their gospel message. One person alone can't do it; a team is blessed with the work of the people to disperse God's grace in abundant measure.

A Call for a New Immersive Baptismal Theology

My own experience in ministry is evidence of the aging demographics of our denomination. I have served as solo pastor of two relatively small congregations, one in New York and the other in Kentucky, over the past eight years. And in those eight years, I've only baptized two people (and one of them none other than my own child!). By contrast, I've presided at the Lord's Table well over a hundred times since my ordination. I suspect the congregations I've served are not the only ones experiencing such a dramatic disparity between the frequency with which they celebrate the two sacraments.

My response to this situation has been to infuse baptismal theology and liturgy into worship whenever possible. I take it as my responsibility as a worship leader to make up for the infrequency of baptism in any way I can. The *Book of Order* mandates that the Lord's Supper be celebrated at least quarterly, though most congregations I know celebrate monthly if not more frequently.[1] But, for obvious reasons, there is no mechanism to ensure that baptisms are celebrated as often. This means it's up to us as preachers, music ministers, liturgists, Christian educators, and artists to make up for that deficit.

This year marks the fortieth anniversary of "Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry," a statement written by the World Council of Churches in 1982. Also known as the "Lima Document" or simply BEM, it explores the theological threads that different Christian traditions hold in common regarding the sacraments and practices of ministry. Since I was introduced to this document in seminary, I have revisited it frequently to clarify and express my sacramental theology both inside and outside the pulpit.

Congregants have often playfully teased me because of the fact that I speak of baptismal theology so much. "Pastor Stephen, you talk about baptism a lot!" My response is often, "Well, without it, what have we got?" Baptism is the foundation of our lives as Christian disciples. It is simultaneously where we come from and where we are called to every day of our lives. To emphasize this point, every year on Baptism of the Lord Sunday I use the

BEM as an example of how important it is for us to have a robust and immersive baptismal theology.

The BEM reminds us that our baptism represents five truths: (1) participation in Christ's death and resurrection; (2) conversion, pardoning, and cleansing; (3) the gift of the Spirit; (4) incorporation into the body of Christ; and (5) the sign of the kingdom. This serves as a reminder that baptism is no appetizer; it's a five-course meal in and of itself! We need this reminder because we are a forgetful people and it's all too easy to settle into a simplistic baptismal theology where it means nothing more than a moment to express our liturgical "oohs" and "ahhs" at a cute baby in a white gown. For the record, there's nothing wrong with our "oohs" and "ahhs" when we see the beauty of a child of God welcomed into the beloved community. But we must take care not to have our baptismal theology stop there! Those of us who practice infant baptism can sometimes forget that the commitment the congregation makes to nurture and guide the child in the faith as they grow up is just as important, if not more so, than the commitment the parents make on their child's behalf. All three of the pastoral leaders I interviewed for this article expressed that congregations can fall short if they are not careful; we baptize the child and then we think our job is over when it has just begun!

For those of us who sprinkle infants in our baptismal practices, I believe the holy envy of our siblings who practice submersion baptisms can inform a new immersive baptismal theology to guide us in these complex times.

For those of us who sprinkle infants in our baptismal practices, I believe the holy envy of our siblings who practice submersion baptisms can inform a new immersive baptismal theology to guide us in these complex times. My conversations with Revs. Chambers, Touralack, Jackson, and Holland offer us the following reminders of what it means to embrace an immersive baptismal theology.

An immersive baptismal theology comes from the margins. It comes as no surprise that submersion baptisms in all three of these communities come from immigrant congregations and/or communities of color. The congregations of First Presbyterian Church of Cornelia and First Presbyterian Church of Greensboro are blessed by the baptismal practices of the immigrant communities they partner with in ministry. As our country becomes more culturally diverse, such partnerships are ripe places to explore the movement of the Holy Spirit. Could it be that cross-cultural baptismal practices serve as an act of resistance to ideologies that express fear at the increasing diversity of this nation? Could it be that such partnerships are, in and of themselves, forms of nonviolent protest to the forces of racism that are tearing apart our country, our communities, and our congregations? Collaborations between predominantly white congregations and immigrant communities can be a beautiful sign of the kingdom of heaven, where all parts of the body of Christ have an equal place and bless one another in their Christian witness.

An immersive baptismal theology is a group project. These conversations reminded this pastor that we all need reminding that baptism is not something the pastor does alone. The participatory aspect of the Lord's Supper is rather straight forward; we get up, walk to the table, receive and partake of the elements, and walk back to our seat. But baptisms, if done without intention, can feel more like something we watch instead of something we do. The people who are Salt and Light know that when it's time to baptize, it's time to get to work! Everyone has their role to play, and the result of their work—the work of the people—is a sensory-filled embodiment of resurrection in action. I wonder how those of us who practice infant baptism can make the sacrament more collaborative. What would it look like if each congregant was handed a glass of water and, prior to the baptism, was invited to come forward to fill the font? What if more of our congregations took baptism outside the walls of the church? What other rituals might the congregation you serve embody to explore the gift of baptism?

An immersive baptismal theology is an untethered celebration of God's abundance. The BEM reminds us that baptism is simultaneously a gift from God and our collective response to that gift. But the weightiness of these times can feel like a barrier to our joyful embodiment of the sacrament. Many of our congregations feel buried these days. They are buried by the weight of the pandemic, navigating the wilderness of identity crisis because the church they are now doesn't resemble the

church they were before March 2020. They are buried by the weight of the decline of mainline Christianity, struggling to see hope and resurrection as older generations join the church triumphant. They're buried by the weight of racism and white Christian nationalism, wrestling with the fact that it is our responsibility to inoculate ourselves from a pandemic of a different kind that threatens the unity of the church and the welfare of our neighbors. In the midst of this widespread disorientation, an immersive baptismal theology is necessary to keep us grounded in who God is calling us to be and how we can respond faithfully in a world fraught with uncertainty. In interviewing these three pastoral leaders, I began to see a pattern in the language they used to describe their baptismal rituals, which included freedom, openness, wildness, unpredictable, untethered, abundance, and joy. This language reflects the idea that the practice of baptism can invite us to a communal catharsis, a releasing of sin and injustice and a reclaiming of our identities as children of God, baptized, beloved, and blessed. Perhaps the congregations we lead need a catharsis like that right now. Who knows what kind of space an immersive baptismal practice might break open to make room for the Holy Spirit to stir our hearts and compel us towards an ever more faithful discipleship of the risen Christ!

Last year, the congregation I serve baptized my eldest daughter on her first birthday. I say *the congregation* did because, while I presided and thrice anointed my daughter's head with a generous amount of water, her baptism was an act of the congregation and the Holy Spirit. The process of writing this article has reminded me of the beauty of that truth. My spouse and I welcomed our second daughter to the world a few months ago. The tentative plan is to have her baptized on the occasion of her first birthday which, as it turns out, will be only a few days from Baptism of the Lord Sunday next year. In anticipation of that celebration, the communities I've learned from in this journey challenge me to holy curiosity about how we can cultivate an immersive baptismal theology while practicing infant baptism by sprinkling. I am stubbornly determined that the two need not be mutually exclusive. The practice of full immersion baptism need not diminish the importance or holiness of baptism by sprinkling. Baptism is no zero sum game, thanks be to God!

These communities have taught me that I can return to the waters of my baptism whenever I need. The water of the Chattahoochee River is the water of my baptism. The water in a Disciples of Christ Church in Greensboro, North Carolina, is the water of my baptism. The water in a portable font in Philadelphia is the water of my baptism. Every lap I swim, every shower I take, every drop of rain that blesses the parched places of the earth, those are the waters of my baptism.[2] I may have been baptized on June 28, 1992, but that sacrament isn't over. The disciples of these three congregations have cleansed me anew through the re-living of their baptisms. And in their stories I see the future of the church: a community unbound by the walls of a building, manifested from the margins, and collaborative by nature.

We Presbyterians love being decent and orderly. But sometimes I wonder if we are at times guilty of assuming the Holy Spirit to be decent and orderly, too, keeping the unpredictability of immersion by the Spirit at a safe distance.

We Presbyterians love being decent and orderly. But sometimes I wonder if we are at times guilty of assuming the Holy Spirit to be decent and orderly, too, keeping the unpredictability of immersion by the Spirit at a safe distance. But it doesn't have to be that way. An immersive baptismal theology could be a tremendous blessing to our congregations for the living of these days. So together, let's take a deep dive; the wild and wide waters of our baptism beckon!

Notes

1. *Book of Order*, The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Part 2 (Louisville, KY: Office of the General Assembly, PC(USA), 2019), W-3.0409.
2. An immersive baptismal theology is mindful that not everyone has access to clean, abundant water and seeks a world where that is no longer the case.

Clean Feet
acrylic and ink on wood
Jennifer Bunge

Walking Wet in a Troubled World

David B. Batchelder

How do you see the world? With all that is happening around the world, it is tempting to speak of events in apocalyptic terms. I believe we must resist this temptation without looking away from the suffering and trauma afflicting the planet. By virtue of our dying and rising with Christ in baptism, we are sent into the world with a grace-filled way of seeing and being. More colloquially, we are sent into the world "walking wet."

This article aspires to entice readers to a more robust baptismal imagination through which we can engage a suffering world where the Spirit is working to fulfill God's promised newness. The baptismal imagination I have in mind prepares us to *resist* as much as it prepares us to *embrace and engage*. Indeed, without resistance we cannot engage the world with the Christ whose body and worldly purpose is ours to share.

Being baptized plunges us into a messy life insofar as it takes us "where humanity is most at risk, where humanity is most disordered, disfigured and needy."[1] I wonder what people are thinking when asked at baptism (and every reaffirmation of baptism thereafter), "Do you renounce evil and all the forces that defy God, the powers of this world that rebel against God, and the ways of sin that draw you from God?"[2] Are people thinking that this would be a one-and-done question rather than a call to continually resist corrosive influences that contest our loyalty to God's reign of justice and love? Given these serious implications, Rowan Williams suggests that baptism really ought to come with some "health warnings to it: 'If you take this step, if you go into these depths, it will be transfiguring, exhilarating, life-giving and very, very dangerous.' To be baptized into Jesus is not to be in what the world thinks of as a safe place."[3]

Rowan Williams suggests that baptism really ought to come with some "health warnings to it: 'If you take this step, if you go into these depths, it will be transfiguring, exhilarating, life-giving and very, very dangerous.'"

Let us try to imagine what such "health warnings" might look like if churches decided to follow this counsel. Of what, exactly, would people be warned? Who would issue the warnings? Would such warnings be accompanied by the equivalent of medical proper care instructions as we are so accustomed to receiving when released from the hospital?[4] These questions nudge our imaginations in the direction of ministries that recognize the church has a responsibility to form and instruct persons *before* baptism as well as walk alongside them providing ongoing formation *following* baptism.

What Rowan Williams suggests is that the church should not make assumptions. Williams is also hinting at a kind of ministry that existed at another time in the church's history. One of the characteristics marking the first four centuries of the church was pre- and post-baptism teaching (catechesis) that recognized the many challenges the newly baptized would face as they began new life in Christ. This ministry, called the catechumenate, is gradually being reimagined and appropriated by churches of many different traditions. These churches are realizing that better preparation is needed for those birthed to new life with Christ.[5]

David B. Batchelder is recently retired after serving nearly twenty years at West Plano Presbyterian Church (Plano, Texas), a remarkable congregation whose life and mission is deeply formed from font, pulpit, and table.

At the time of this writing, churches are beginning to recover an in-person communal life that was severely impacted by the pandemic. What this life will look like in the coming years is yet to be known. During the pandemic, much educational and formational ministry was necessarily transferred to Zoom and other online technologies. Reports from the field indicate new creativity with varying degrees of success. Many have discovered that these online tools, while quite useful, cannot substitute for the power of personal presence that comes with people being in the same space, breathing the same air, fully visible to one another, sharing a common experience. All we are in our full material creaturehood continues to matter for a faith where being and doing are inextricably bound together to express the meaning of "through Christ, in Christ, with Christ." As James Farwell writes:

> Liturgy is an embodied practice. Movement, gesture, sound, silence, color, and pageantry are all a part of liturgy and not add-ons, even though there is diversity of such practices in evidence. . . . [We] are embodied persons—even our cognition is embodied, as today's neuroscience increasingly demonstrates—and the ritual enactment of belief incarnates theology, reshapes our desires, and enacts our transformations at every level of our embodied nature.[6]

This means that the vast majority of churches continues to desire and need an in-person life as they celebrate the liturgy of Word and Sacrament and live out their communal identity as the body of Christ.

The rest of this article speaks from the understanding that the church as "assembly" embodies itself (in the body, mind, and spirit of its members) to do the liturgy through which the church "signs the presence of Jesus Christ in the world and for the world."[7] In its "doing," the sacramental liturgy both seeds and expresses—thereby deepening—the church's baptismal imagination. As the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy reminds us, worship is both the summit of the church's life together and the fountain from which the church's power flows.[8]

Imagination and Hope

One of the most well-known street art works by the artist Banksy is titled *Balloon Girl*. The mural first appeared at the site of London's Waterloo Bridge in 2002 and shows a young girl with a red heart-shaped balloon that has just left her hand.[9] The girl's hair and dress are blowing from right to left, as if by the wind. Behind the girl are the words "There is always hope."

I have thought a great deal about this image. In it, a red balloon has left the girl's hand. Was it wrenched from her fingers by a gust of wind? We know the power of strong winds that have brought much chaos to our world, so this option may seem likely. Or did she let the balloon go? Maybe she is giving it away, sending it to sail as a symbol of the words of hope written behind her. We could read sarcasm and irony in the image: the girl has lost control of the balloon, and yet "there is always hope."

Read through a theological lens, for me the child represents who we all must become to enter the reign of God, the kin-dom of human flourishing. Interpreted theologically, her failure to hold onto the balloon is also a place of hope in the image. It calls us to renewed trust, vulnerability, and a willingness to open ourselves up to change and growth. It also calls us to allow others to make a difference in how we live our lives. In this respect, Banksy's image invites us to think of other children, perhaps our own, those we see in our neighborhoods, and those appearing in news reports.

"No change for the good ever happens without being imagined first," said poet Martin Espada to a graduating class in 2007 at Hampshire College.[10] For me, Banksy's image represents the power and potential of a vibrant baptismal imagination that works with the wind of the Spirit bringing a fecundity of new life and hope.

The church's sacramental life has the potential to seed the imagination with new insight and wisdom because it offers a spiritually dense (and intense) experience of bodily encounter with the mystery of the incarnation.

The church's sacramental life has the potential to seed the imagination with new insight and wisdom because it offers a spiritually dense (and intense) experience of bodily encounter with the mystery of the incarnation. Through baptism, we are born into

the mystery of God's solidarity with us in our full creaturehood. This baptismal mystery is planetary. Indeed, it is cosmic. Catherine Vincie writes,

> A community that is initiated into Christ is a community committed to participation in Christ, not just in the sacramental life of the church . . . but also in a cosmos. There is no dichotomy between matter and spirit, secular and religious; conversion and transformation of all in Christ is the goal of a truly sacramental life.[11]

One of the great blessings of the past half-century has been the church's recovery of a fuller baptismal theology. There was a time that baptism seemed "tiny" in its meaning, concerned about individuals getting spiritual passports to a life beyond death. Various editions of the *Book of Common Worship* and the Directory for Worship have given us an expanded list of baptismal meanings steeped in ideas of Divine gift and call.[12] The connections between baptism and Christ's mission are being taught to all ages, but Vincie urges us to wider imaginations. Living as we do in a time of planetary peril, we must add both breadth and depth to our understanding and practice of sacramental life. As Mary McGann writes, "Baptismal identity in the incarnate Christ corroborates, deepens, expands, and strengthens the earthly identity of the baptized—their call to co-responsibility as protectors of the Earth-commons and as servants of the web-of-planetary-good."[13]

Meaning, Metaphor, and Mystery

Aidan Kavanagh once observed, "It was a Presence, not faith, which drew Moses to the burning bush, and what happened there was a revelation, not a seminar."[14] What metaphor and symbols both provide is such an encounter. What they ask from us is to pay attention. The sacraments teach and form us with a new vision, expectation, openness, and readiness to the holy Other. We learn to be receptive however and through whomever the Divine presence might come.

I have learned that paying attention means enlarging our capacities for wonder, silence, stillness, and contemplation. It involves a new way of seeing the world, relationships, and a certain hiddenness lying beneath the obvious.[15] A faith community committed to the pattern and ritual practice of Word and Sacrament helps us to pay attention to what we might otherwise brush past. Such careful attention-giving pertains to metaphor wherever it is found, but especially in Scripture and the liturgy.

Metaphor has the power to awaken and enliven. It speaks meaning with words the way symbols communicate to the eyes, ears, touch, and taste. Metaphor is not literary embellishment. Metaphor achieves a bit of magic with words. Once a reader or listener receives a metaphor, an image is implanted in the imagination. That image may linger however long, playfully, perhaps hauntingly, but most certainly enticingly, calling us to be and do in ways we would not consider if not first stirred by what we received. This is because metaphor can provide a portal to the mystery of God's truth in ways religious dogma cannot.

Without metaphor, we cannot avoid flattening God's saving mystery to a kind of stagnant literalism that fosters dangerous forms of fundamentalism. The Scripture bids us to commune with God while cautioning that we cannot know the mind of God. While we ponder and wonder at the ways of God, faith calls us to trust and be apprehended by God.

For this reason, "the best way to begin to understand Christian liturgy," writes Gordon Lathrop, "is to see that it has been made up of a fabric of interwoven, mutually reinterpreting, mostly biblical, always engaging, almost always metaphoric, saved and saving, verbal and enacted and then sometimes visual images."[16] Baptism and the Lord's Supper make extravagant use of both metaphor and symbol, flooding the imaginations of the baptized for faithful living and providing the church with a rich resource for the church's ministry of faith formation.

Metaphor is the Spirit's tool for mystagogy, an ancient spiritual pedagogy rooted in ritual experience by which the church "[tells] the truth about mystery: that a mystery can be pointed to, hinted at, even glimpsed, but it cannot be defined or exhausted."[17] Contemplating faith's mysteries through metaphor will help churches "unmask idolatries in church and culture"[18] and resist ideologies masquerading as Christian in competition for our allegiance. When it was necessary to challenge the powers at work against God's justice and mercy, the prophets found metaphor to be the preferred and necessary form of speech. Walter Brueggemann notes that the prophets

> proceeded by image, metaphor, and allusion that could not be reduced to a program and

> that could not be co-opted by the dominant theology. At best prophetic testimony is not didactic or instructional; it is rather a bid for emancipatory faithful imagination, in the conviction that imagining outside the ideology will evoke fresh waves of energy and courage and generative obedience.[19]

Making Connections

We are living in a time when political ideologies are putting the Christian imaginations of some in a chokehold. We grieve the enmity that sets neighbor against neighbor, divides neighborhoods, fans hatreds, and Christianizes white supremacy. Ours is not the first era in history to witness the church held captive to culture and co-opted by powers in high places.

In the late twentieth century, Sri Lankan theologian Tissa Balasuriya wrote a book asking questions that continue to haunt us about the disconnect between the church's sacramental practice and Christ's mission in the world.

> Why is it that in spite of hundreds of thousands of eucharistic celebrations, Christians continue as selfish as before? Why have the "Christian" peoples been the most cruel colonizers of human history? Why is the gap of income, wealth, knowledge, and power growing in the world today—and that in favor of the "Christian" peoples? Why is it that person and people who proclaim eucharistic love and sharing deprive the poor people of the world of food, capital, employment, and even land?[20]

Both the ethical and missional dimensions of the church's sacramental life deepen our baptismal imagination. "Christian liturgy begins as ritual practice but ends as ethical performance. Liturgy of the neighbor verifies liturgy of the church, much as a composer's score makes *music* only though the risk of performance."[21]

The last several decades have seen a renewed interest in the life, theology, and writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer with new translations of his monumental works. Many recognize a commonality between our present cultural context and that of Bonhoeffer living at the time of Hitler's rise as a totalitarian leader. Bonhoeffer was distressed by the scandalous divergence of Christians from the ethical life of Jesus in the Gospels. Bonhoeffer felt compelled to re-present a theology rooted in the teachings of Jesus and modeled after his self-emptying life. This theology inevitably led him to grapple with the meaning of baptism.

In 1944, Bonhoeffer was in prison awaiting final judgment and unable to be present for the baptism of the son of his close friend Eberhard Bethge. Written as remarks he would have spoken were he not in prison, Bonhoeffer offered an assessment of the German church's shortcomings and how it must change in the face of the present crisis. He wrote, "Our church has been fighting during these years only for its self-preservation, as if that were an end in itself. It has become incapable of bringing the word of reconciliation and redemption to humankind and to the world."[22]

Bonhoeffer felt himself and the church being thrown "back all the way to the beginnings of our understanding." Circumstances at the time compelled him to ask fundamental questions about the meaning of "reconciliation and redemption," "rebirth and Holy Spirit, love for one's enemies, cross and resurrection," and "what it means to live in Christ and follow Christ."[23] Many of us have felt a similar urgency as a result of the pandemic, political and societal division, and a brutal invasion.

A baptismal imagination requires that we struggle with the challenges and temptations of our present moment. All theology is contextual.

A baptismal imagination requires that we struggle with the challenges and temptations of our present moment. All theology is contextual. It cannot be otherwise since theology is the lived-out experience in real time of a life we share with Christ who is on the front lines of human suffering.

A baptismal imagination is informed by an ongoing practice of spiritual discernment and scrutiny that continually searches for the Spirit of truth as distinct from those other voices that distort, deceive, and falsify.[24] As R. Alan Streett notes, baptism washes us into a life of resistance.

> When Christ-followers submitted to baptism they committed an act of resistance against Rome by becoming part of a movement that

> challenged Roman ideology, its hierarchical social order, and rejected Caesar as the ultimate Lord. For many of the original believers, baptism was the initial step that led to persecution and even death. Hence, baptism was a rite of resistance.[25]

What Streett refers to is a refusal to surrender to any other lordship than Christ because ideologies in competition for allegiance ultimately chart a course for death. Life in fullness is found only through, with, and in Christ.

The ritual vocabulary of "renunciation" introduced in the 1993 *Book of Common Worship* Rite of Baptism sets before the church the *metanoia* necessary for living out the gift and call of baptism. Such baptismal living continually asks us to turn away from all that draws us from God's love in order to turn toward the fullness of life found in Jesus Christ. Is this not the time to revisit this ritual language and ask how our churches might explore what renunciation and resistance might look like in our conflicted time? Such an opportunity could also include exploring ways the church can nurture support and courage for its participation in ministries of justice, solidarity, and peace-making. Alan Kreider reminds us that there was a time when such formation for baptismal living was carefully done. He writes:

> At least from the second century believers were not baptized until they had gone through a lengthy process of catechesis. . . . Teachers and sponsors taught the candidates a new way of living and of viewing the world. The teachers imparted new narratives—the stories of the Bible, which replaced the traditional narratives of the culture, and gave the candidates biblical texts to memorize—key passages that expressed Christianity's beliefs and that reinforced its values of economic sharing and nonviolence. . . . The teachers taught the candidates how Christians live. They taught by their own example; their catechumens were their apprentices in the faith. But they taught also by overseeing the candidates' progress in forms of behavior that were characteristic of the Christian community—care of the poor, works of mercy, nonviolence. . . . Why, we may wonder, all this emphasis upon catechesis? . . . The reason goes to the heart of the early Christian approach to mission. The Christians did not offer the world intellectual formulas; they offered a way of life rooted in Christ.[26]

I conclude with this: Like many readers of this journal, I have been profoundly shaken by the horror of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, but also deeply moved by the stirring witness of Ukrainian courage and communal solidarity. In this regard, I am eager to learn what I can about the living by faith of the Ukrainian people. As weeks became months with this war, a conversation was presented in the Canadian journal *Comment* in which Archbishop-Metropolitan Borys Gudziak offered an insight into the Ukrainian people that resonates with what I hope for with a baptismal imagination. He said,

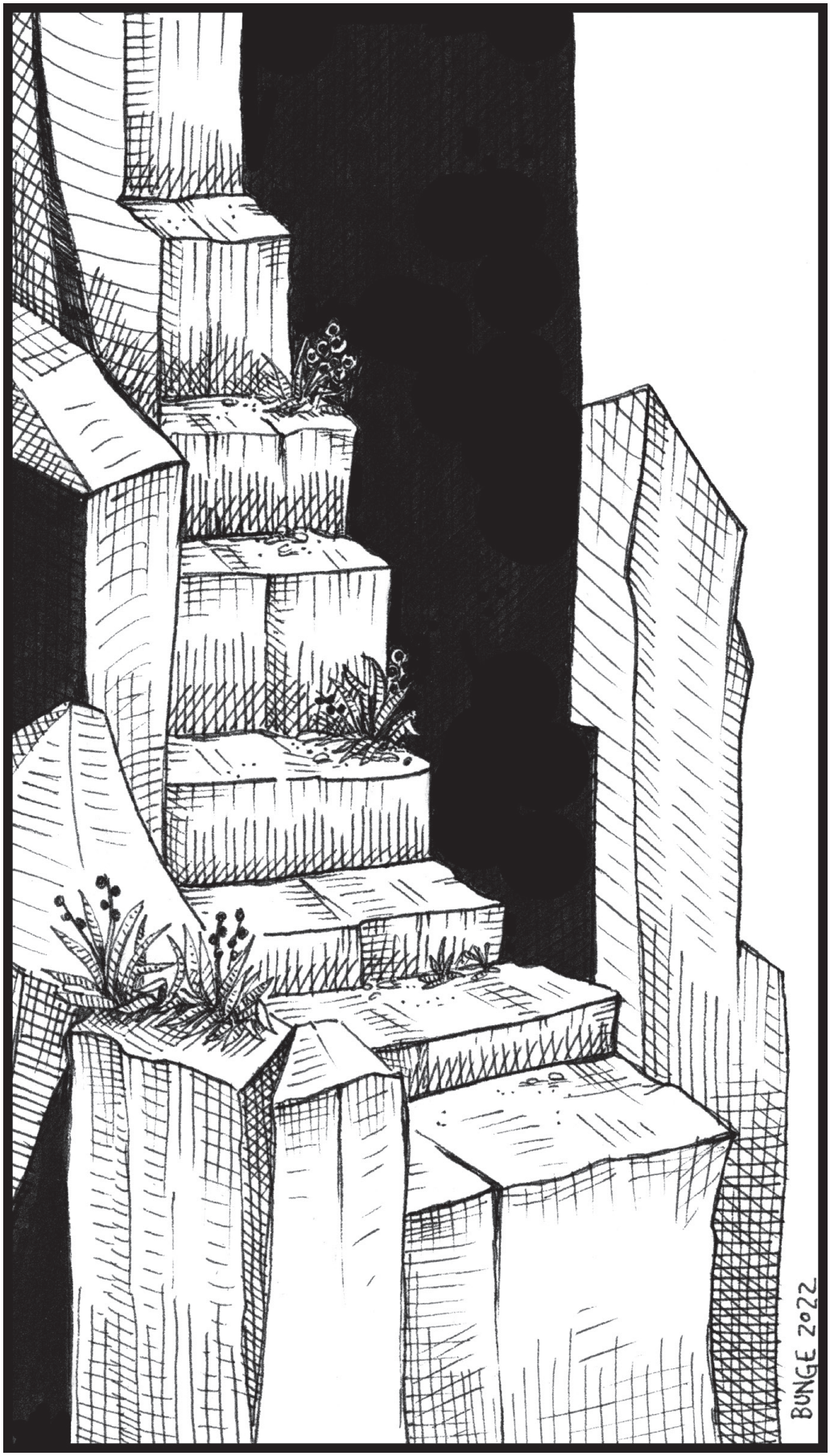
> In Ukraine today, there is a very clear vocation to witness in a social, political, spiritual way, also in a practical military way: the defense of the innocents, the proclamation of the kingdom in the face of the darkness, to carry the light into and through a tunnel, to conquer fear, to be willing to sacrifice and make the ultimate sacrifice for the most important things and for the most important people. And the most important people are the others. "When we lose ourselves," Jesus says, "we find ourselves. When the seed dies, it gives fruit."[27]

Such fruitfulness is what Christ promises to all who in baptism are joined to Christ's dying and rising. This is the blessing of "walking wet." It is a fruit-bearing life that is ours through living daily the ethical dimensions of the Paschal Mystery, the stunning and fathomless realm of grace to which we are joined through the crucified and risen Christ. "The selfish self dies in the baptismal waters and a new self motivated by love (agape) is born, reconciled to God and to others, even the enemy, always dying in Christ in order to give birth to life."[28]

Notes

1. Rowan Williams, B*eing Christian: Baptism, Bible, Eucharist, Prayer* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 4.
2. *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2018), 443.
3. Williams, *Being Christian*, 9.

4. For more, see David Batchelder, "Baptismal Renunciations: Making Promises We Do Not Intend to Keep," *Worship* 81, no. 5 (September, 2007): 409–425.
5. To learn about what Presbyterians have been doing with the catechumenate, see the following articles: Martha Moore-Keish, "The Recovery of the Catechumenate and North American Presbyterianism," *Call to Worship* 38, no. 1 (2004–2005): 63–71; Kim Long, ed., "Reflections on the Catechumenate: Eyewitness Accounts," *Call to Worship* 40, no. 2 (2006–2007): 46–52; and Stanley R. Hall, "Reforming Christian Initiation: The Catechumenate and the Church," *Reformed Liturgy & Music* 29, no. 4 (1995): 247–254. In my book *Pathways to the Waters of Grace: A Guide for a Church's Ministry with Parents Seeking Baptism for their Children* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2017), I present possibilities and resources for what a church's ministry of baptismal preparation might look like.
6. James Farwell, *The Liturgy Explained*, new ed. (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2013), 49.
7. The particular phrasing "signs the presence of Jesus Christ in the world" was offered to me in a conversation with Gordon Lathrop.
8. Harold M. Daniels, "Reformed and Ecumenical—Ecumenical and Reformed," *Call to Worship* 38, no. 4 (2005), citing the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, chapter 1, section 10, 1963.
9. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Girl_with_Balloon/.
10. Martín Espada, "The Republic of Poetry: Martín Espada's Hampshire College Commencement Address," May 22, 2007, http://sarahbrowning.blogspot.com/2007/05/republic-of-poetry-martn-espadas.html. See also my article, "Cultivating a Baptismal Imagination," *Liturgy*, Journal of The Liturgical Conference, vol. 25, no. 3 (2010): 42–48.
11. Catherine Vincie, *Worship and the New Cosmology* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2014), 88.
12. Greatly significant to this work of renewal is the document "Invitation to Christ" prepared by the Sacrament Study Task Force and presented to the PC(USA) General Assembly in 1996. For an overview of this document's influence in the life of the church since that time, see Tom Trinidad's chapter, "A Sacramental Continental Divide: Invitation to Christ as a Watershed Document for the PC(USA)," in *Reshaping the Liturgical Tradition, Ecumenical and Reformed: A Festschrift in Memory of Horace T. Allen, Jr.*, ed. Jonathan Hehn and Martha Moore Keish (Franklin, NJ: OSL Publications, 2021).
13. Mary E. McGann, "Troubled Waters, Troubling Initiation Rites," in *Full of Your Glory: Liturgy, Cosmos, Creation*, ed. Teresa Berger (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press Academic, 2019), 342.
14. Aidan Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press), 92.
15. This turn of phrase borrows from one of my favorite lines: "Never have an experience and miss the meaning," written by William Sloane Coffin Jr. in his book *Letters to a Young Doubter* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 27.
16. Gordon Lathrop, *Saving Images: The Presence of the Bible in Christian Liturgy* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2017), 85.
17. William Harmless, SJ, *Augustine and the Catechumenate* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1995), 365–367.
18. From a Brief Statement of Faith, *Book of Confessions*, (Louisville, KY: Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 2017), p. 312.
19. Walter Brueggemann, *Reality, Grief, Hope: Three Urgent Prophetic Tasks* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2014), 38, 39.
20. Tissa Balasuriya, *The Eucharist and Human Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979), xi, xii.
21. Nathan Mitchell, *Meeting Mystery* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006), 38.
22. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Letters and Papers from Prison,* Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, vol. 8 (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2010), 383–390.
23. Bonhoeffer, *Letter and Papers*, 329.
24. For more, see David Batchelder, "Christian Initiation in a Post-Truth World," *Call to Worship* 51, no. 2 (2018); and David Batchelder, "Baptismal Renunciations: Making Promises We Do Not Intend to Keep," *Worship* 81, no. 5 (September, 2007): 409–425.
25. R. Alan Streett, *Caesar and the Sacrament—Baptism: A Rite of Resistance* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018), 10.
26. Alan Kreider, "'They Alone Know the Right Way to Live': The Early Church and Evangelism," in *Ancient Faith for the Church's Future*, ed. Mark Husbands and Jeffrey P. Greenman (Westmont, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 175.
27. "The Spiritual Dimension of the War in Ukraine: Father Deacon Andrew Bennett in Conversation with Archbishop-Metropolitan Borys Gudziak," *Comment*, https://comment.org/the-spiritual-dimension-of-the-war-in-ukraine/. (*Comment* is one of the core publications of Cardus, a think tank devoted to renewing North American social architecture, rooted in two thousand years of Christian social thought.)
28. Thomas F. Best and Dagmar Heller, ed., *Becoming a Christian: The Ecumenical Implications of Our Common Baptism*, Faith and Order Paper No. 184 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1999), 90.



Upward Journey
ink on paper
Jennifer Bunge

The Work of Our Hands: Art as Story

Jennifer Bunge

I♥MyPhone, watercolor on paper, mounted on wood, waxed, 2017, 18"x24"

Artist Jennifer Bunge has settled in Northern Colorado with her family and her favorite art supplies. She enjoys opportunities to exhibit her art at galleries and in churches along the Colorado Front Range. Jennifer finds the theme of healthy decision-making important; her wish to emphasize this topic led her to her current project: a graphic novel about climbing mountains and making good choices.

My art began out of the rural Canadian prairie of my childhood and the suburban cityscape of my youth. I have always lived inland but am especially moved by the mystery of the sea. Fanciful imaginary scenes, social commentary, faith, and expressionist landscapes are all part of the imagery that connects with and emerges from my work. I often use metaphor, allegory, motif, and archetype to proclaim belief in new, imaginative ways.

While the subjects in my artwork may be diverse, the use of dramatic color contrasts and black outlines are constants. Comic books and graphic novels use black outline and basic blocks of color to create imaginary worlds; I was impressed as a child by the lush yet simple landscapes in the Tintin comic books by artist Hergé. The German expressionist Karl Schmitt-Rotluff uses similar bold color and black outlines in his woodcuts and paintings.

Small, watercolor on paper, 2020, 8"x8"

A Bulwark Never Failing, watercolor on paper, mounted on board, 2016, 18"x18"

I like to tell stories through my work. *I♥MyPhone* is a clear, cautionary tale: get too involved in your electronics and you may become ensnared by them. I tell another straightforward narrative in the work *Small*, where a man surrounded by fancy digital gadgets has lost his grounding and has become oblivious to his environment. The character in both of these pieces possesses an insatiable desire to consume; he is my metaphor for the darker side of our modern consumerist culture. He is a combination of characters, including the gendered trope of the grandfatherly Old Testament God, as portrayed in certain Bible storybooks of my childhood, William Blake's confusing Nobodaddy, and even the powerful female villains in the animated films of Hayao Miyazaki.

The stories I tell through my art can be more nuanced, such as in *A Bulwark Never Failing*. In this piece, I use an unaware yellowfin tuna stuck in tangled, weedy waters to describe the snares and distractions that can steer a church congregation off course. I have experienced conflict and polarization in church communities. I have lost church leaders, friends, and mentors due to church struggle. I use weeds and tangles to symbolize the ways in which church relationships get complicated. In the deepest

Slipstream, watercolor on paper, mounted on wood, waxed, 2017, 18"x24"

days of my experience of church turmoil, I painted this tangled picture and wrote an accompanying song using the prayer of Psalm 42:11 (ESV): "Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God."

Sometimes, my work illustrates an idea. *Slipstream* describes an ideal of the Christian life. The fish in this piece swim freely within the vase-shaped boundary, living out their life in love. Just as the fish swimming within the boundaries of the vase show a sense of colorful freedom, so can there be vibrant and diverse freedom within the healthy boundaries set forth in the Bible. As we love God and are loved by God, we respond by living our beautiful, colorful lives. But we are fish—I love using fish as a metaphor for our humanity. Their wild-eyed expression indicates confusion and bewilderment; the most beautiful part is that God loves us in spite of ourselves.

The fish in *Golden Mean River III* are working hard to follow their path against the relentless current. In this piece, the dangerous current of a mountain river in early spring signifies all the ways we leave the path. Written in the deeper waters below are some of Aristotle's key virtues for the good life: courage, temperance, magnanimity, courage, shame, liberality, magnificence, patience, truthfulness, wittiness, friendliness, and justice. Aristotle says that a person should strive for the correct amount of each virtue—not too much nor too little. This message is conveyed by the fish that strive to keep going and keep their balance between the rocky shores. It is God's love and grace that motivates each of us to seek our personal set of virtues, grow in them and through them, serving those around us.

My aim when making art is to produce something new and worthy of a second look. In some cases, an explanation enhances the work, but it is important to me to make art that is interesting to contemplate even without the explanation. I feel called to use my own unique style to tell these stories, illustrating critical ideas in fresh, innovative ways.

Golden Mean River III, watercolor on treated canvas, 2019, 27"x14"

Singing around the Font

David Bjorlin

If your church is at all like mine, baptisms are one of the most joyous occasions of the Christian liturgical life. It is a profound gift to witness the new life that is birthed from the waters and to be reminded of God's promises to us as we make or renew our promises to God and one another. And, as with so many of our Christian rites, baptism is both solemnized and celebrated with song. If song is indeed an expected component of our baptism rites, it calls pastors, liturgists, and worship leaders to think critically about the liturgical and theological role song plays in the rite. In this article, I will examine the role of congregational song in baptism, particularly in the PC(USA) context. Because of the potential size of such an undertaking, I will limit the scope of my article to three main areas. First, I will examine the baptismal liturgy in the *Book of Common Worship* (*BCW*) and explore where congregational songs are already an expected part of the rite, and where additional songs may be implied and/or liturgically appropriate. Second, I will compare the baptismal theology described in the introductory text of the baptismal rite in the *BCW* to the sung theology of the baptismal section in *Glory to God* (*GTG*) to ascertain which themes are well represented or underrepresented and give possible reasons for these levels of representation. Finally, I will argue that some of the underdeveloped baptismal themes in the hymnal may be bolstered by the utilization of baptismal songs from believer baptist traditions, reminding the baptized of the ethical call that God places on their lives through the waters.

Congregational Song in the *Book of Common Worship* Baptismal Rite

In the baptismal service itself, there are two places where the singing of a congregational song is explicitly encouraged. First, in the transition space between the sermon and the presentation of the candidates, the *Book of Common Worship* states, "Following the sermon, a baptismal hymn or song may be sung while the candidates, sponsors, and parents assemble at the baptismal font or pool."[1] While most baptismal hymns would not be out of place in this transitional space, there are a few contextual and liturgical keys that could help determine the most fitting congregational song. First, and perhaps most obviously, because the song is to be sung as the candidate(s) makes their way forward, songs that emphasize the movement toward the baptismal waters make good liturgical sense. *Glory to God* has several appropriate options, including "Ho, All Who Thirst (Come Now to the Water)" (#479) and "Take Me to the Water" (#480). Other congregational songs that could serve this liturgical movement well include John Foley's "Come to the Water,"[2] the African American spiritual "As I Went Down to the River to Pray,"[3] and Kristian Stanfill and Bret Younker's contemporary praise song "Come to the Water."[4]

Second, the age of the baptismal candidate(s) may make some congregational songs more suitable than others. If the baptizand is an infant, songs like "These Treasured Children" (#487), "Wash, O God, Your Sons and Daughters" (#490), or Thomas Haweis's "Our Children, Lord, in Faith and Prayer"[5] help emphasize the covenantal and communal nature of baptism in which a community of faith brings their children forward to be marked as

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God's own. If the baptizand is an adult, songs like the aforementioned "Ho, All Who Thirst" (#479) or Thomas Kingo's "All Who Believe and Are Baptized"[6] underscore the believer's active response to God's prevenient grace (a theme we will return to later in the paper).

Just as the baptismal rite suggests accompanying the movement toward the font with a hymn, the rubric also encourages a song as the baptized are welcomed into the community with the passing of the peace and communion: "Those who have been baptized are welcomed in a manner appropriate to the particular congregation. The people may sing a refrain such as 'You Have Put On Christ' (GTG 491) or 'You Belong to Christ' (GTG 492), an ascription of praise (GTG 580–91), or a baptismal hymn (GTG 475–93)."[7] As the first two song recommendations suggest, one of the possible functions of this song is to remind the baptized—both those baptized moments ago and those baptized decades ago—of baptism's continued promise and call. So, in addition to the two recommended by the *BCW*, other suitable songs around these themes in *GTG* include "Child of Blessing, Child of Promise" (#486), "Wonder of Wonders, Here Revealed" (#489), and "Now There Is No Male or Female" (#493).

While there are no other explicit references to congregational singing in the baptismal liturgy, *GTG's* Baptism section suggests a few other places where song might be appropriate in the rite.

While there are no other explicit references to congregational singing in the baptismal liturgy, *GTG's* baptism section suggests a few other places where song might be appropriate in the rite. For example, David Gambrell's paraphrase of the Apostles' Creed—"I Believe in God the Father" (#481)—is placed in the baptism section of the hymnal and could be used as part of the Profession of Faith in the baptismal rite. Especially when there are multiple baptisms on a Sunday, a short refrain can also be used between baptisms as both a doxological response and as a functional means of transitioning between the different baptizands. Both "You Have Put On Christ" (#491) and "You Belong to Christ" (#492) serve this purpose well. Indeed, as Carl Daw notes about the former in his brief commentary below the hymn in *GTG*, "In the rite of baptism provided in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* this text appears as one of the

Thanksgiving over the Water	**Crashing Waters at Creation**
"In the beginning of time, your Spirit moved over the watery chaos, calling forth order and life."	"Crashing waters at creation, ordered by the Spirit's breath, first to witness day's beginning from the brightness of night's death."
"You led Israel out of slavery, through the waters of the sea, into the freedom of the promised land."	"Parting waters stood and trembled as the captives passed on through, washing off the chains of bondage, channel to a life made new."
"In the waters of the Jordan Jesus was baptized by John and anointed with your Spirit."[10]	"Cleansing waters once at Jordan closed around the One foretold, opened to reveal the glory, ever new and ever old."[11]

optional congregational responses after each person is baptized."[8] Other doxologies, glorias, alleluias, short refrains/praise choruses, or other cyclical songs of adoration and praise that are well known to the community could serve a similar purpose.

In the commentary to Sylvia Dunstan's "Crashing Waters at Creation" (#476), Daw draws another explicit connection to the baptismal rite, pointing out, "Like the Thanksgiving Over the Water in the rite of Baptism, this text . . . recalls significant events in salvation history involving water."[9] Each of the first three stanzas of the hymn deftly mirror the main subjects of the Thanksgiving over the Water (save the Flood narrative), as can be seen by comparing the corresponding sections on page 44.

As with all liturgical elements, the season of the church year, lectionary texts, sermon theme, and the community's cultural, liturgical, and social context will also play a role in choosing the most appropriate song for these different places in the baptismal liturgy.

This hymn, then—or other congregational songs that emphasize water's role in God's salvific work—could be used as a response to the thanksgiving prayer, perhaps best placed just before the epiclesis ("Send your Spirit to move over this water . . ."[12]). As with all liturgical elements, the season of the church year, lectionary texts, sermon theme, and the community's cultural, liturgical, and social context will also play a role in choosing the most appropriate song for these different places in the baptismal liturgy.

Sung Theology in *Glory to God*

One of the questions that should always be asked by pastors, liturgists, and/or church musicians in congregations is whether the songs we sing truly represent the context's stated theological beliefs. Do we sing all of what we purport to believe, or are there important theological themes that we do not address in our songs?[13] In the context of this article, then, the question is whether and how the songs recommended for the baptismal rite (as presented in the baptism section of *Glory to God*) correspond to the stated baptismal theology of the PC(USA).

While a definitive definition of a Presbyterian baptismal theology is surely debated, the ***Book of Common Worship*** gives a helpfully succinct theological description of baptism that both points to ecumenical convergences and specific Presbyterian characteristics.

While a definitive definition of a Presbyterian baptismal theology is surely debated, the *Book of Common Worship* gives a helpfully succinct theological description of baptism that both points to ecumenical convergences and specific Presbyterian characteristics: "The Sacrament of Baptism holds a deep reservoir of theological meaning, including dying and rising with Jesus Christ; pardon, cleansing, and renewal; the gift of the Holy Spirit; incorporation into the body of Christ; and a sign of the realm of God. The Reformed tradition understands baptism to be a sign of God's covenant."[14] The first sentence of this description demonstrates an almost one-to-one correspondence with the five major theological meanings of baptism given in the World Council of Church's (WCC) influential document *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*: Participation in Christ's Death and Resurrection; Conversion, Pardon, and Cleansing; The Gift of the Spirit; Incorporation into the Body of Christ; and The Sign of the Kingdom.[15] As the *BCW* makes clear, it is the Calvinist emphasis on baptism as a covenantal sign that is a particular Reformed theological characteristic of baptism. This description, then, gives six theological themes that the PC(USA)'s worship book deems central to a Presbyterian understanding of baptism. So, which of these theological images are well represented in the baptism section of *GTG*, and which are perhaps underrepresented?

To answer this question, I analyzed the texts in the baptism section of *GTG* (#475–493) and marked each time one of these six theological images was used in the hymns. I also indicated whether the theme was explicitly mentioned or implicitly alluded to in the text. For example, "Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing" has fairly clear references to pardon, cleansing, and renewal—"he to rescue me from danger, / interposed his precious blood"

(to name just one example)—but the references to God as fount (Joel 2:28–29; Acts 2:16–18) and the sealing of one's heart (Eph. 1:13–14) both imply the work of the Holy Spirit.[16] Obviously, counting allusions is subjective and relies on the theological assumptions of the reader, but it at least gives a close approximation of theological references, listed below in order of total mentions:

For this observer, there are a few surprising discoveries on this list. First, even though the role of the Holy Spirit is clearly demonstrated in baptism through the laying on of hands and anointing, I was surprised to see mentions of the Holy Spirit

Theme	Explicit Mentions	Implicit Mentions	Total Mentions
Pardon, Cleansing, and Renewal	6	4	10
Gift of the Holy Spirit	8	1	9
Dying and Rising with Jesus Christ	6	1	7
Sign of God's Covenant	4	2	6
Incorporation into the Body of Christ	3	1	4
Sign of the Realm of God	3	1	4

surpass references to baptism as covenant promise in the baptismal texts; perhaps I should not have been. As many scholars have noted, there has been a resurgence of interest in the Spirit in both theological and liturgical circles in the Western tradition.[17] Yet, in my own experience as a liturgist, hymn writer, and pastor, I have often found myself struggling to find a body of congregational songs with robust pneumatologies. Yet in these baptismal hymns, the Holy Spirit is all-pervasive. Through the waters of baptism, the baptizands are "Spirit-born,"[18] "sealed by the Spirit,"[19] and "baptized with the Spirit's sign."[20] The power of the Spirit also "shakes the church of God"[21] out of complacency and helps the gathered congregation "be a nurturing community"[22] who will live up to the baptismal vows they made to "guide and nurture N. by word and deed, with love and prayer."[23]

What could account for this revival of Spirit language? In line with some of the reasons given by liturgists Teresa Berger and Bryan Spinks in their introduction to *The Spirit in Worship—Worship in the Spirit,* I believe this resurgence is in part due to the ecumenical influences of the Liturgical Movement and the ensuing liturgical reforms of Vatican II that recovered pneumatological language and images from the shared depository of the early church liturgies (e.g., the recovery of the epiclesis of the Holy Spirit in post-Vatican II Western eucharistic prayers); as well as the ecumenical influence of the Eastern Orthodox and Pentecostal/ charismatic liturgical and theological traditions, both with well-developed pnuematological theologies and praxes.[24] Perhaps the most important liturgical influence on worship resources like the *BCW* and *GTG* to emerge out of this ecumenical milieu was the WCC's aforementioned *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* (*BEM*). This document has not only guided worship book and hymnal committees, but also writers and

editors of congregational songs and liturgical rites.[25] The fact that the baptism section in *BEM* gives pride of place to the Holy Spirit's role in the ritual is no doubt one of the key reasons for the Spirit's prominent place in the songs of *GTG*.

While the Spirit's role is unexpectedly emphasized in these baptismal hymns, it is perhaps more surprising that mentions of the covenantal nature of baptism ranks fourth on the list of theological images, particularly in a denomination firmly rooted in the Reformed tradition.

While the Spirit's role is unexpectedly emphasized in these baptismal hymns, it is perhaps more surprising that mentions of the covenantal nature of baptism ranks fourth on the list of theological images, particularly in a denomination firmly rooted in the Reformed tradition. Yes, baptism is described as the event where "God's covenant with us is sealed,"[26] but this is the only place in the baptism section where the word "covenant" is explicitly used. As is clear from my list, covenantal language can still be employed without using the word "covenant" (e.g., Fred Kaan's description of baptism as a "birthmark of the love of God"[27]), but it is still surprising to see this word so essential to Reformed baptismal theology used so sparingly. Why might this be? First, just as covenantal imagery can be used without also using explicitly covenantal language, so too the image of baptism as incorporation into the body of Christ is by its very nature covenantal, even without direct references. This is, after all, one of Calvin's most basic arguments for infant baptism: just as circumcision was the covenant sign of God that both marked the child as God's own and incorporated Hebrew (male) children into the people of Israel, so too baptism marks a child as God's own and incorporates them into the body of Christ. From a Reformed perspective, incorporation and covenant are inextricably linked. So, in Lynette Miller's "Now There Is No Male or Female," the baptized are "marked" with water as children "born to God," and this water "joins us to those who, before us, / ran the race and fought the fight."[28] While not using covenantal language *per se*, in the Reformed tradition the language of being marked and joined to God and one another is naturally interpreted through a covenantal lens.

Second, if ecumenical influences help explain the preponderance of pneumatological language in these hymns, these same influences might also help explain why covenant language is less pronounced. Hymnals tend to be on the vanguard of ecumenism, bringing songs written from many different traditions and eras into one resource.[29] While hymnal committees are always vigilant to ensure that the theology of songs are in line with the particular theological tradition of their denomination (one has only to remember the debate over whether to include "In Christ Alone" in *GTG*!), it is only natural that the more ecumenical a hymnal is, the less room there is for theological perspectives particular to the theological tradition/denomination. In the case of the baptism section of *GTG*, Reformed hymns are joined by texts written from Baptist, Anglican, Lutheran, and Roman Catholic traditions. It is little wonder that these texts would not highlight the covenantal nature of baptism as explicitly as Fred Kaan's (United Reformed Church) "Out of Deep, Unordered Water" (#484) or Jane Parker Huber's (PCUSA) "Wonder of Wonders, Here Revealed" (#489). Also, if the WCC's *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* did serve as a guiding resource for the PC(USA)'s baptism rites and hymns, including songs from a diversity of traditions would help ensure that the multivalent symbol of baptism described in *BEM* was not boiled down to one or two theological images favored by the Reformed movement in *GTG*. Thus, the surprisingly high number of references to the Holy Spirit and low number of references to God's covenant in the baptism hymns of *GTG* might best be explained by the broadening ecumenical vision of the church's liturgical life.

The Ongoing Ethical Life of Baptism

As the above table shows, the *Glory to God* hymnal committee did an admirable job of including a range of hymns and songs that represent both a generally ecumenical and particularly Presbyterian theology of baptism. Yet, if I were to suggest supplements to this section of the hymnal, my first additions would be songs that emphasize humanity's necessary ethical response to God's work in baptism. Yes, the sacrament of baptism is always first God's promise to us, but in baptism we also commit ourselves (or

our children) to a life of Christian discipleship that is marked by a radically different ethical framework than our broader culture. The introduction to the Profession of Faith in the *BCW* clearly demonstrates this two-way nature of baptism:

> Within this covenant *God gives us* new life,
> *strengthens us* to resist evil,
> and *nurtures us* in love.
>
> Through this covenant, *we choose* whom
> we will serve,
> by turning from evil and turning to Jesus
> Christ.[30]

Through baptism, God gives prevenient grace, but we still must choose to live our lives in faithful response to that grace and in faithfulness to our baptismal vows.[31]

No doubt part of the reason there are fewer hymns on the ethical call of baptism is due to the normativity of paedobaptism in PC(USA) churches. There are, after all, few clearer symbols of God's prevenient grace than God's making covenant with a helpless infant, while the immediate ethical demands made on an infant are minimal. It is quite natural, then, to have a critical mass of songs that fit the particular context of an infant baptism. But perhaps this points to an underlying issue: if a congregation only sings songs about baptism on Sundays when there is a (most often infant) baptism, it is easy to see why these hymns would focus mostly on theological images that are particularly suited to the most common form of baptism. Yet, if baptism is more than just an infant rite of passage—if indeed the waters are a sign of God's reign where people are cleansed, buried in Christ's death and resurrected in his new life, sealed by the Holy Spirit, and made members of Christ's body—then baptism must be a continual source of spiritual renewal and ethical transformation. So, in the same way that the baptismal font or pool serve as a visible symbol of baptism's foundational role in Christian faith week after week, so too singing baptismal hymns, even on those Sundays where there is not a baptism, can serve as an aural/oral symbol that regularly reminds us of baptism's call on our lives.

When baptismal hymns do become a regular part of a congregation's Sunday-to-Sunday worship repertoire, there are naturally more opportunities to broaden the sung baptismal theology to include songs that address the call to countercultural Christian discipleship that baptism places on our lives. Perhaps this is where songs from believer baptist traditions—African American spirituals, Anabaptist hymns, and Evangelical choruses—could help. Since these traditions tend to emphasize baptism's call to conversion, personal commitment to Christ, and ethical transformation, they could help draw out these often underrepresented themes in paedobaptist traditions like the PC(USA). For example, the African American spiritual "Certainly, Lord," makes the connection between baptism and Christian discipleship explicit:

> Have you got good religion,
> Cert'nly, Lord!
> Have you got good religion,
> Cert'nly, Lord!
> Have you got good religion,
> Cert'nly, Lord!
> Cert'nly, cert'nly, cert'nly Lord!
>
> 2. Do you love ev'rybody . . .
>
> 3. Have you been converted . . .
>
> 4. Have you been to the water . . .
>
> 5. Have you been baptized . . .

While one could read the stanzas as the sort of order of the Christian conversion experience (getting religion leads to love leads to conversion leads to baptism), I tend to understand the questions of each stanza as a demonstration of the way conversion, the ethical commitment to love everybody, and baptism are inextricably bound together, each a necessary component of the other. For those who have been baptized, the ethical call of the hymn is a radical one: to love everybody, friends and enemies alike.

In part because of their history of being persecuted for their baptismal beliefs and practices, Anabaptists too have long drawn a connection between the rite of baptism and an ethically transformed life. This can be clearly seen in the first and third stanzas of contemporary Mennonite hymn writer Adam M. L. Tice's "The Water Is Ready":

The water is ready;
how can I be worthy?
Yet God has invited,
so I will step in.
The water is waiting,
and my soul is thirsty—
dried out by my wand'ring,
my striving, my sin.

A calling is ready;
how can I be chosen?
Yet God is more gracious
than I can conceive.
A calling is offered,
and my soul has heard it:
do justice, love kindness,
walk humbly, believe.[33]

In Tice's text, baptism is a gift, yes, but one we must choose to accept, *and* it is a gift that places ethical demands on our life: to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God (Mic. 6:8). In true Anabaptist fashion, this call is not only for ministers or the spiritual elite; it is the basic call of all who would claim the radical way of Jesus Christ.

Finally, while not quite as obvious as the previous two examples, there are even hints of the ethical components of baptism in Hillsong songwriters Brooke and Scott Ligertwood's "Beneath the Waters (I Will Rise)." While much of the song connects baptism to the death and resurrection of Jesus (which fits the major contours of an evangelical soteriology), in the bridge of the text, baptism is also connected to a fundamental shift in allegiance:

I rise as you are risen,
Declare your rule and reign;
My life confess your Lordship,
and glorify your name.[34]

Those raised to new life with Christ in baptism now confess the lordship of Christ and the primacy of Christ's reign, and their ethical lives should be lived in line with this confession. Here we see a shift in allegiance mirroring the renunciation of evil and the profession of faith in the baptismal rite. As it does in this text, developing the ethical implications of baptism may also underscore baptism as a "sign of the realm of God," one of the most underrepresented of baptismal images in *GTG*. While the particular evangelical theological and social imagination represented in the Hillsong movement and its songs might limit their use in PC(USA) contexts, perhaps the emphasis on baptism as a pledge of allegiance to Christ's reign could be employed by PC(USA) songwriters in broader and more inclusive ways.

While I am not a Presbyterian, I can image one of the possible critiques of my argument from those in the Reformed tradition is the way it may seem to uphold a narrow decision theology where salvation is boiled down to a single and decisive conversion moment. When decision theology is overemphasized, I do believe it can erode a covenant theology in which the primary work of salvation is God's. However, perhaps these songs from believer baptist traditions can serve as a helpful counterbalance that does not undermine God's primacy in the work of salvation, but reminds those in paedobaptist traditions that God's covenant does call us to ongoing *decisions*. Maybe it is not one single, dramatic decision to follow Christ (though I do not discount these dramatic conversion moments), but those daily, hourly, minute-by-minute decisions when each of us must "choose this day whom you will serve" (Josh. 24:15) over and over again. And so, over and over again—through word, symbol, and song—we must return to God's promises made at the font and open ourselves up again and again to their transformative power that those of us who have been grafted into the body of Christ through the waters of baptism might truly be the hands and feet of Christ in the world. This is both the great gift and task of God's baptismal waters.

Notes

1. *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2018), 405.
2. John Foley, "Come to the Water," in *Gather*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: GIA, 2011), #583.
3. African American spiritual, "As I Went Down to the River to Pray," in *Voices Together* (Harrisonburg, VA: MennoMedia, 2020), #453.
4. Kristian Stanfill and Bret Younker, "Come to the Water" (2012 sixsteps Music).
5. Thomas Haweis, "Our Children, Lord, in Faith and Prayer," in *Lift Up Your Hearts: Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs* (Grand Rapids, MI: Faith Alive, 2013), #805.
6. Thomas H. Kingo, "All Who Believe and Are Baptized," tr. George T. Rygh, in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), #442.
7. *Book of Common Worship*, 413.
8. *Glory to God: Hymns, Psalms, and Spiritual Songs* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2013), #492.

9. *Glory to God*, #476.
10. *Book of Common Worship*, 410–11.
11. Sylvia Dunstan, "Crashing Waters at Creation," in *Glory to God*, #476.
12. *Book of Common Worship*, 411.
13. For hymn/songwriters, this question can be a fruitful way to find new themes and topics on which to write.
14. *Book of Common Worship*, 403.
15. *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper, no. 111 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982), 2–3.
16. Robert Robinson, "Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing," in *Glory to God*, #475.
17. For a general overview of this resurgence and some of its causes and antecedents, see Teresa Berger and Bryan D. Spinks's introduction in *The Spirit in Worship—Worship in the Spirit*, eds. Teresa Berger and Bryan D. Spinks (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009), xi–xxv.
18. Ruth Duck, "Wash, O God, Your Sons and Daughters," in *Glory to God*, #490.
19. Michael Saward, "Baptized in Water," in *Glory to God*, #482.
20. Ronald S. Cole-Turner, "Child of Blessing, Child of Promise," in *Glory to God*, #486.
21. John Brownlow Geyer, "We Know That Christ Is Raised," in *Glory to God*, #485.
22. Jacque B. Jones, "These Treasured Children," in *Glory to God*, #487.
23. *Book of Common Worship*, 409.
24. Berger and Spinks, introduction to *The Spirit in Worship*, xi–xxv.
25. As Berger and Spinks note about *BEM*, it is "perhaps the most celebrated [ecumenical] document (with practical liturgical implications!)" (xvii).
26. Jane Parker Huber, "Wonder of Wonders, Here Revealed," in *Glory to God*, #489.
27. Fred Kaan, "Out of Deep, Unordered Water," in *Glory to God*, #484.
28. Lynette Miller, "Now There Is No Male or Female," in *Glory to God*, #493.
29. As Methodist liturgical scholar Karen Westerfield Tucker asserts, "The sharing of hymnic repertoire unselfconsciously pushes the work of ecumenism forward as a witness to the churches—and skeptical world." "Have Hymnals Become Dinosaurs?" The *Yale ISM Review* 1, no. 1 (Fall 2014), https://www.ismreview.yale.edu/article/have-hymnals-become-dinosaurs/.
30. *Book of Common Worship*, 409, emphasis added.
31. Or, as the introduction to the baptismal rite states, "The baptism of believers witnesses to the truth that God's gift of grace calls for our grateful response. The baptism of our young children witnesses to the truth that God claims people in love even before they are able to respond in faith. These two forms of witness are one and the same sacrament." B*ook of Common Worship*, 404.
32. "Certainly, Lord," in *One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism* (Chicago: GIA, 2018), #188.
33. Adam M. L. Tice, "The Water Is Ready," in *Pulse and Breath: Fifty More Hymn Texts* (Chicago: GIA, 2019), 107–09.
34. Brooke and Scott Ligertwood, "Beneath the Waters (I Will Rise)" (2011 Hillsong Music Publishing).

New Life
acrylic and ink on wood
Jennifer Bunge

Art and Baptism: The Choreography of Visible and Invisible Grace

Ann Laird Jones

When I think "baptism," the word "choreography" is not the first word I imagine.

Instead I think of my friend Gayden, who says second babies often walk down the aisle to the font because their parents have long given up on making the family baptismal gown fit.

I think of congregations holding their breath to see if the baby will wake up and cry when the water hits their universe, only to find their own faces wet with tears of joy. They can almost feel the spray of water themselves as the baby comes close, carried down the aisle.

I think of little Meri Douglas, who announced to the church as she spoke in a perfect stage whisper to her even littler brother Brooks on the day of her baptism, "I am so happy to be a Christian, because Jesus wants *me* for his child!"

I think of Creeden, baptized on the birthday of Martin Luther King Jr., a man led by faith to dare to speak the truth which cost him his life in a world where too many are held hostage by fear, by poverty, by inequality based on skin color or nationality or sex. Creeden, a young Black child, bears the seal of God's eternal love. Will it be enough to protect him?

I think of Katherine, as she stands at the font exuberantly offering a bold declaration of forgiveness and pardon, as seemingly endless streams of water from a pitcher splash confidently into the awaiting baptismal font. For Katherine this visual corporate response to confession is *the* central act in worship.

I think of Jesus, teacher, healer, lover of justice, and seeker of children. Authority-defying, death-denying, and life-changing against all logic or expectation, Jesus is the one who moves past the darkness of death into the dawn of life, the one who steps into the waters of the river Jordan, feels the water, sees the heavens open, and hears the voice of God, "This is my Beloved Son!" This is the one who reappears at Easter, with love and grace and mercy and forgiveness in those outstretched, scarred hands and broken body. This is the one who makes every Lord's Day the dawn of a new Easter.

I think of grace upon grace, beginning with one drop of water and ending with everlasting love.

But I *don't* think of choreography when I imagine baptism, even though movement is at the very core of memory. A splash of water from the smallest, simplest baptismal font evokes the memory of huge oceans of grace, splashing at our heels and running down our faces. Understanding baptism as movement of Spirit and grace, rather than a list of words, puts history, tradition, ritual, and culture within the embrace of Trinitarian action and promise. Choreography, which means intentional movement, guided direction of movement, or attentiveness to movement, is the opposite of a static tableaux. Seeing and hearing and feeling the water of baptism in this way allows visible memory to yield invisible hope bursting forth in the collaborative grace of forgiveness. Exploring the relationship between baptism and choreography also invites us to a whole new level of engagement with illustrations of the baptism of Jesus throughout art history, which include choreographed, figurative arrangements of Jesus, John the Baptist, crowds, the hand of God, dive-bombing doves, and water, whether from the Jordan River or poured from a shell. Works about baptism also include nonfigurative, abstract portraits of water without end and contemporary, liturgical furniture design. Here, too, we engage these art objects through liturgical and theological choreography.

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Certainly the choreography of baptism begins with three Gospel texts reflecting the baptism of Jesus:

> Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?' But Jesus answered him, 'Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness.' Then he consented. And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased' (Matt. 3:13–17).

> In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased' (Mark 1:9b–11).

> Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased' (Luke 3:21–22).

The Spirit's adaptive choreography continues in accounts of baptism from the epistles. In Acts 8:14–17 Peter and John, who had previously only baptized in the name of Jesus, lay hands on the believers in Samaria, who receive the Holy Spirit. In 1 Peter the baptism of Christ leads to the cleansing of the people, just as Noah was spared death in the flood. In Colossians Paul focuses on the very physical transformative story of God, visible and invisible, very God of very God. The dance between visible and invisible grace in the action of baptism becomes its choreography in the story of Christ and the church:

> [Jesus] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross (Col. 1:15–16, 19–29).

The early, struggling church remembers the words of Isaiah, offering the promise of grace:

> But now thus says the Lord,
> he who created you, O Jacob,
> he who formed you, O Israel:
> Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
> I have called you by name, you are mine.
> When you pass through the waters,
> I will be with you
> and through the rivers, they shall not
> overwhelm you (Isa. 43:1–2b).

They are compelled by Jesus' vision for their ministry:

> All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 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, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you (Matt. 28:18–20a).

"And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:20b). God's love is clear in this baptismal blessing, then and now: "I have called you by name, and you are mine." My feet start moving, and my body feels a dance coming on. Here is the first dance of new identity and new beginning, the entry into the community of faith as God's adopted and beloved children. Baptism says to a roaming people, "I will pour out my spirit upon you . . ." as the water is poured upon us, as the words of God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit are proclaimed, and we are sealed by the mark of forgiveness graciously given through Jesus Christ. The flowing, dancing waters of baptism are a visible sign witnessed and sustained in and by the presence of the community of faith, the body of Christ.

Close your eyes and imagine the way water spins in the air as it is poured or lifted up, a dance of invisible grace with a magnanimous twirl! Water is on the move throughout the Bible, a vital part of many narratives that splash into our sanctuaries as well. In the waters of creation, order and chaos dance a wild tango. Waters swallow up a world encased in disobedience but bring Noah and his troop of paired creatures to dry land. Waters of the sea between Nineveh and Tarshish are vast enough to hold a magnificent creature capable of swallowing Jonah, enabling him to continue his journey to Tarshish and the acceptance of God's grace. Enraged, stormy waters of a usually calm Sea of Galilee threaten to drown the disciples and their boat until Jesus calms the waves with his touch. Water offers new life to an outcast Samaritan woman. Moving, flowing water is ever present in the salvation narrative. As Scott Halderman observes:

> Water appears again and again in the story of our salvation. We come from water. We were made as the world came to be through the separation of waters, beside water teaming with life. . . . Water at the beginning, water in the middle, and water at the very end. Water for us to drink, for all to drink. Come to the waters, all who are thirsty, for the waters of life are a gift for all of us. Such is where this reflection begins—wading through waters towards the throne of God.[1]

With these images in mind, why separate baptism from the wide-open biblical choreography of water and Spirit? Why limit the space for baptism to a singular font, often hidden in a corner, pulled out rarely, only when needed? Why confine the waters of baptism to a little bowl, unseen, unheard, and untouched except by the hand of the one administering the sacrament? Word and Sacrament: one breath, one voice, one vision; reaching out with the waters of life for those who yearn for new life in Christ. Font cannot be severed from table and pulpit, nor can the action and movement of baptism be separated from the joyful whole of worship.

"Choreography" literally means the writing down of the movement, of the action. *Choreo* has to do with the chorus, in the terminology of Greek plays, and *graphy* means writing, or visualizing all the pieces at hand put together. Considering the baptismal act as the choreography of the Spirit helps us *visualize* invisible grace in the movement that brings font, table, pulpit, water, believers, nonbelievers, confession, forgiveness, grace, and identity into the same sentence. Baptism is the antithesis of quiet orderliness. It decries lists of words and incantations. It is alive to all the senses. It is as resoundingly loud as hilarious laughter and joy, as tactile as grace and forgiveness, and as messy as water *showered* upon the whole body. It is the moment in time when our name is sealed forever with the name and identity of Jesus.

For the early church, the celebration of the baptism of Jesus was considered to be even more significant than the celebration of Christmas. The baptism of Jesus was one of the three major feasts of light, along with Epiphany and the wedding feast at Cana. Kathleen Norris writes:

> These are feasts of light because they illuminate God's nature. . . . Baptism, then, is about celebrating the incomparable gift we receive as creatures beloved by God. Baptism is that big. . . . [It offers us] a God who is not limited by our understanding of baptism and what it signifies—a God who created humanity in the divine image and whose love for us is so great that it embraces a people, no exceptions. This God is *beyond* our understanding and our comfort zones.[2]

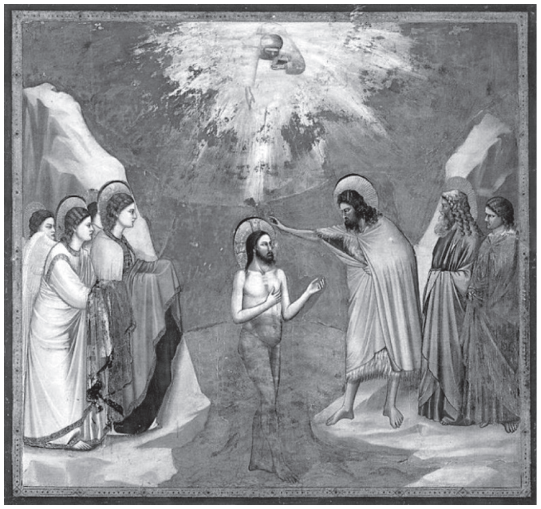
Norris, a poet and theologian, continues, setting the scene:

> Imagine. The scene is set for a huge event. Jesus is about to meet John in the river Jordan, the site where Moses interpreted the Torah, Elisha received the spirit of Elijah, and Israel encountered freedom. Now this is the place where God appears. God's voice rips through the heavens, loud, forceful, and real. Onto this wild, loud, joyful scene the Spirit of God descends in the form of a dove.[3]

Again, Norris says it well, "The baptism of Jesus is the event that allows the story to go forward into the community of those who follow him and become his disciples, those who will be known as Christians. It is that big."[4]

The Italian painter and architect Giotto lived and worked in Florence in the late Middle Ages and is remembered for his stunning frescos (murals painted

into wet plaster). Giotto is known for his techniques for creating depth in a two-dimensional image, which paved the way for perspective techniques developed in the Italian Renaissance. Between 1300 and 1310 Giotto painted a series of large frescoes for the Scrovegni Chapel.[5] His *Baptism of the Lord* fresco, completed in 1305, is one of the very earliest and largest depictions of Jesus' baptism. Gone are flat, stylized, predictable, bodiless figures and shallow perspectives of Byzantine art. Jesus' body is not hidden under draped fabric. He is in fact naked, and looks very real and three-dimensional as he stands in water up to his waist. There are figures on either side of Jesus: three men on one side, and three angels on the other. Both trios seem almost motionless, pointing the eye toward Jesus, who moves in correspondence to a burst of bright light from above. The hand of God reaching down from the top of the picture plane is typical in Jewish and Christian art of this time and place. But Giotto has included the very face of God as well. Jesus, God, and John the Baptist form a striking triangle, moving us through the piece as we experience grace upon grace bestowed in shimmering beauty and wonder. Everything points to Jesus: the sharply contoured rocks and the directional gaze of the onlookers, who are perhaps disciples, focus our attention on the moment of Jesus' baptism. The two men beside John the Baptist are Moses and Elijah, who will appear with Jesus later in the transfiguration, when once again the heavens open and God's voice is heard. Giotto has set up a choreographed scene in which even the rocks participate, moving toward a single significant moment.



Giotto, *Baptism of the Lord*, Scrovegni Chapel, Padua, Italy, fresco.

Giotto's *Baptism of the Lord* is, of course, just one of many interpretations of Jesus' baptism in church history. Theologian and art historian Kinga Lipinska offers further background about artistic renderings of the baptism of Jesus:

> The earliest pictorial representations of the Baptism of the Lord were carved in stone, on Christian sarcophagi. Later, during the long Middle Ages, stone reliefs of this scene are found above church entrances or sometimes in the interior, always carved as fragments of broader Gospel narratives. Monumental paintings on walls, panels, or canvas become more common only in the Renaissance, once painting as a medium gains greater appreciation. A certain degree of parallelism can be drawn between changes in the sacramental practice of the Church and developments in the iconography of the Baptism.[6]

Whereas in the earliest years baptism was always performed outside close to fountains or rivers, later, perhaps because of persecution, baptisms took place in private houses or places of worship.[7] Baptismal fonts started being built inside churches. They typically looked like cruciform pools of water, reminding the catechumen of the tomb and of dying to old life and rising to new life in Christ, as well as connecting baptism to the eschatological hope in the return of Christ. The kind of baptism John practiced, which the early church adopted, carried with it heavy overtones of death. The verb itself, *baptizo*, originally may have meant "to drown."[8] Some of the earliest baptismal fonts were made in the shape of a sarcophagus, symbolizing that the one baptized was being lowered into the grave as he or she went under the water. This cruciform shape allowed the catechumen to enter from the east and exit from the west. Sometimes these early pools were round, to symbolize the womb. Sometimes they were eight-sided, suggesting the eighth day of creation. Water gave the sense of being washed anew. The form of these early baptismal fonts shows the importance of physical and material space for early Christians. The functional objects used in baptism made a liturgical choreography, a dance, through death to life.

The journey from death to life is a clear theme in the film *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* The scene I found most memorable was the baptismal scene.

In this scene hundreds of people of every age and description, all dressed in white robes, stream to the edge of the river to be immersed in the flowing waters. The film is set in 1937 rural Mississippi. The sepia-toned film focuses on the odyssey, the journey of three protagonists, Ulysses Everett McGill, Pete, and Delmar, who escape from a prison chain gang. Soon after their escape, they encounter this baptismal scene at the river. The sight is so incredible they forget all about running and hiding, captivated by the masses lining up to be baptized. Pete is so moved that he runs from his hiding place down into the river and jumps to the head of the line, where he is baptized. He implores Delmar to follow, as we hear this song:

> As I went down in the river to pray
> Studying about that good ol' way
> And who shall wear the starry crown
> Good Lord, show me the way
>
> O sisters, let's go down,
> Let's go down, come on down
> O sisters, let's go down,
> Down in the river to pray.[9]

What an unforgettable image! Who can hear these words and not imagine being part of the choreography with all those people moving toward the river, falling into that water, and being submerged? There is no sign of panic or indecision. All of the parts of this dance make sense. All the parts work together: *active* movement and initiation into eternal participation in the Trinity. Rowan Williams describes this movement: "If we stand where Christ stands, we are looking at the Father and are animated by the Spirit. We're right in the middle of it."[10]

But what does "it" *look* like? And how do we imagine a choreography of moving parts that never ends? Grace flows on forever. What if we dared to imagine, in what we see, hear, taste, and feel, the eternal restoration of the Holy City of God reaching to the heavens in the act of baptism?

The liturgical calendar does not give much space when it comes to the baptism of Jesus. We've only just seen the wise kings off on their way back to the mysterious places they came from when John the Baptist, fully grown after doing handsprings in Elizabeth's womb just a few weeks ago, steps into the picture, telling of the one who will baptize them with the Holy Spirit. And then Jesus is catapulted straight into adulthood twelve days after birth as the heavens open up, the Holy Spirit descends, and God says, "This is my beloved Son! Listen to him." Walter Brueggemann writes this about the timing of the baptism of Jesus:

> It strikes me that these texts, *especially* in the season of Epiphany, are stunningly contemporary for us. . . . The ground for enacting jubilee in our world is baptism, entry into an alternative existence that is not beholden to the old orders of death. . . . [Jesus'] solidarity with humanity defines his ministry among the poor, the needy, the disabled, all those who wait for the gift of God's rule that will override the way the world has been.[11]

The flowing waters of baptism establish the choreography of grace as central to the entire ministry of Jesus, for all the world.

The baptism of Jesus occurs in all four Gospels. Mark's is the simplest. In both Mark and Luke the focus is on the relationship between God and Jesus: God speaks to Jesus with the words "Thou art my beloved Son." While John is remembered as "the Baptist," the one who carried on the old practice of ritual washing as a way to signal commitment to a growing messianic movement, the baptism of Jesus issues in a new dimension. *This is My Beloved Son!* "You are my son," (Ps. 2:7)—these are the words used for the coronation of kings. "Here is my servant, . . . my chosen, in whom my soul delights" (Isa. 42:1)—these are the words that are linked to what it means to be a servant of God.[12] In Jesus' baptism, these are the words used for the moment when the Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus and God's voice proclaims the name and identity now intertwined in the act of baptism: beloved Son, the One who emanates God's complete love forever, the king who will carry a bowl and towel, the servant who will wash the feet of others.

Instantly Jesus is not only connected directly to God but also to the community. Jesus brings God's saving power to our level! Jesus knows God's love exists in the context of community!

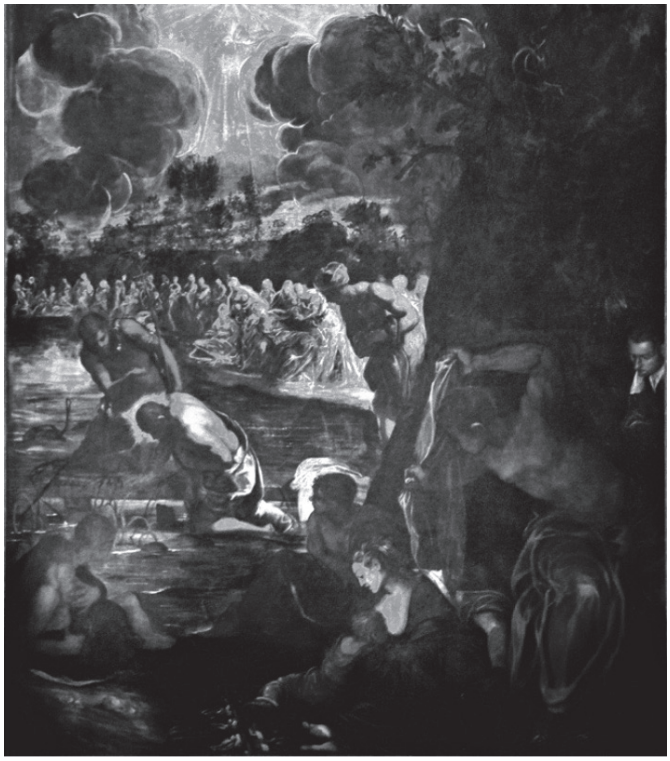
Instantly Jesus is not only connected directly to God but also to the community. Jesus brings God's saving power to our level! Jesus knows God's love exists in the context of community! In baptism Jesus joins himself to all humanity. John is reluctant to baptize his cousin. Not even the disciples are comfortable with the scenario. Yet there is a clear communal focus in this action, as uncomfortable as the crowd of onlookers may be. Jesus was baptized in the presence of community. Barbara Brown Taylor wonders if the church has ever been comfortable with the baptism of Jesus. She writes:

> Nothing we do here is a private matter between us and God. Like Jesus in the river, this is something we do in union—in communion—with all humankind. . . . Whether we were carried in our mother's arms, or arrived under our own steam, we got into the river of life with Jesus and all his flawed kin. There is not a chance we will be mistaken for one of them. Because we *are* them, thanks be to God, as they are us: Christ's own forever.[13]

Our identity is sealed in the context of the body of Christ, the community of faith. By virtue of our baptism, we can no longer count ourselves as anything other than a sibling to the entire human family. We come up out of the water ordained to live fully for others. The water gives us a new vocation. With the baptism of Jesus, God is fully engaged with *all* humankind—not focused on one tribe, one creed, or one country. We follow the choreography beyond the sanctuary into all the world.

The artist Tintoretto was a part of the sixteenth-century Venetian school of painting. He worked in an experimental style of painting, using dynamic figures, bold colors, high contrast, and compositions filled with movement. His dry brush and glazing techniques added texture and depth of color, leaving visible brush strokes that made the painting feel as though it was still in motion or in process, like water flowing. Notable among his masterpieces is the six-year project which resulted in thirty-three major paintings based on biblical subjects in the chapter hall of the Scuola Grande di San Rocco in Venice. Tintoretto's work could have been seen as dance: "His swirling compositions with their sharp chiaroscuro bring to a fever pitch the emotional resonance of these traditional Christian subjects."[14]

In particular, we see this movement in Tintoretto's painting of the baptism of Jesus, one of a grouping of thirty-three biblical paintings. The painting emphasizes the fruits of Christ's baptism: newness of life, faith, hope, and charity. Unlike many other paintings of the baptism of Jesus from this period, which seem staged and more neatly organized, Tintoretto places the figure of Jesus at the center of movement, though not at the center of the composition. Crowds of people, streaming golden light, and billowing clouds twist around Jesus. Light pours from the sky onto the figure of Jesus, just as John pours the water on Jesus' head. Onlookers remove Jesus' old clothes and wrap a gleaming white cloth around him, reminiscent of the shroud he will leave behind in the tomb. The painting references three virtues gained through baptism: hope, charity, and faith. A figure holds a veil in the lower right corner with the words "Hope that is seen is not hope" (Rom. 8:24). A mother nurses her child, referencing the traditional iconographic depiction of charity. Those looking on with a clear view of John baptizing Jesus represent faith.



Tintoretto, *The Baptism of Christ*, Scuola Grande di San Rocco, Venice, Italy, oil on canvas.

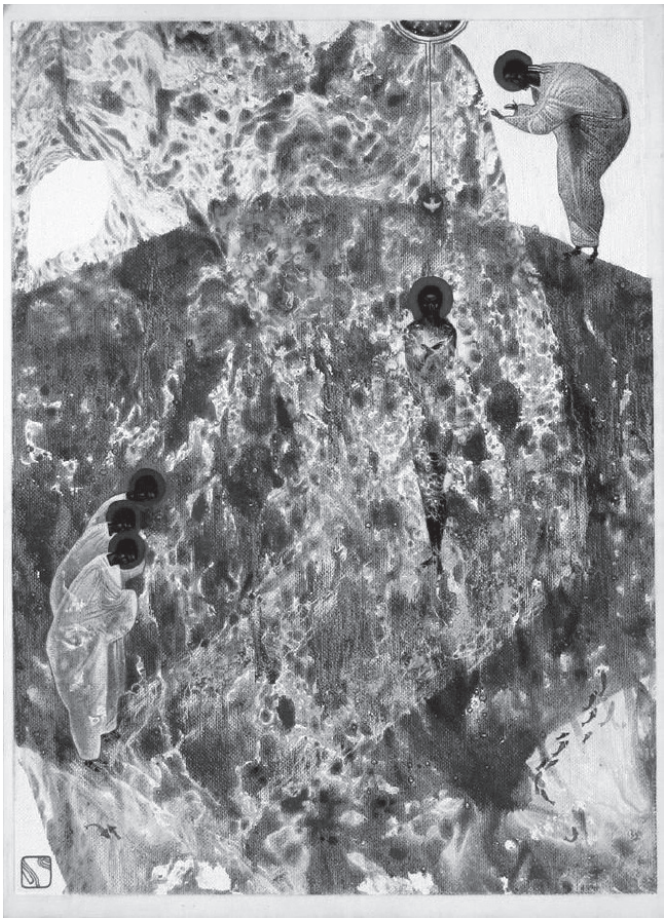
Tintoretto's painting of the baptism of Jesus is about movement. Jesus is moving, the crowds around him are moving, the water is moving, and

even the sky is a tumult of motion. Behind him we see crowds streaming towards him, similar to images from the film *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* Are these people merely curiosity seekers, spectators at an event, or is this a dramatic act of conversion? Tintoretto captures our imagination in this scene with soft, golden tones, through which a singular light shines on Jesus in the moment of his baptism.

How do we imagine the baptism of Jesus in our time? How is the act of Jesus' baptism explored in contemporary art? Theophany is a visible manifestation to humankind of God's presence with us. How do artists in our time visualize the invisible? The act of the baptism of Jesus, and any baptism, is a performative moment. In it, the very agency of God is manifested in the interaction between sign and seal, word and sacrament, confession and forgiveness. Too often we are subjected to images of dive-bombing doves, or a Caucasian Jesus in a nice clean white towel, or a whisper of water, which fail to imagine the complexity and depth of this act.

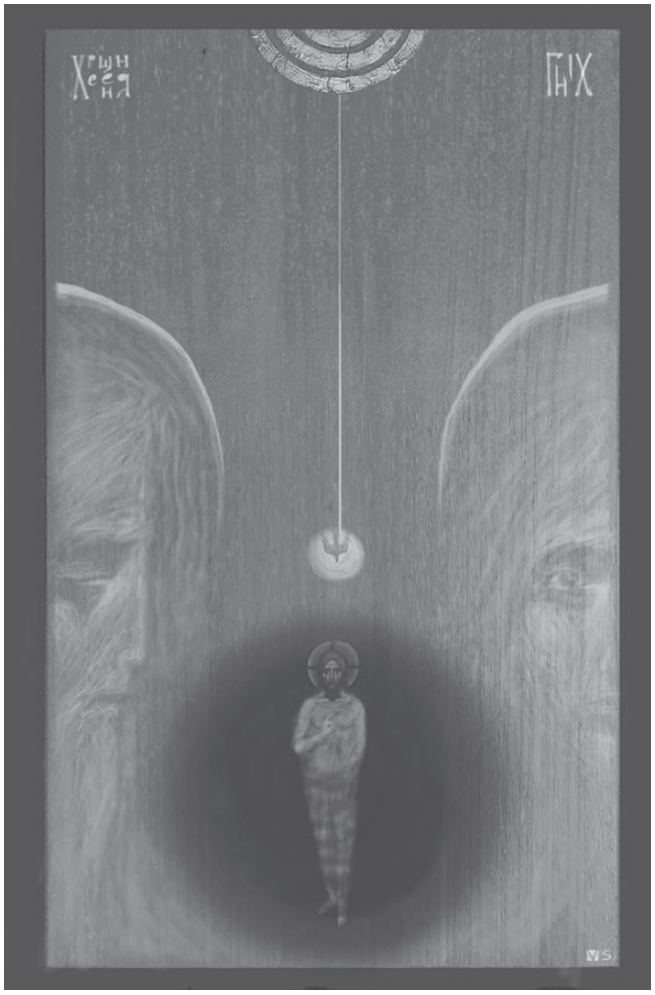
Victoria Emily Jones writes about contemporary icons and paintings portraying the baptism of Christ in her blogpost *Arts and Theology: Revitalizing the Christian Imagination Through Painting, Poetry, Music and More*, lifting up the work of several artists coming from the Orthodox tradition.[15] In the works of three of these artists—Ivanka Demchuk, Sviatoslav Vladyka, and Jerzy Nowosielski—the focus is the moment of the agency of baptism. In addition to John the Baptist, the crowds, and the Holy Spirit, the water seems to be the dominant focus of the work, surrounding, supporting, holding, immersing, lifting up Jesus in the moment of his baptism. Life-giving water showering over us becomes the visualization of God's all-encompassing grace. Moving water leads the eye around the composition in these icons/paintings. Jesus is submerged in the water of grace.

Ivanka Demchuk is a Ukrainian artist born in 1990. In her work entitled *Baptism of Christ* the water bubbles, falls, splashes, and practically jumps out at us. Through her use of ancient and modern technologies, including chalk gesso, the water jumps out of the painting, even as Jesus, John the Baptist, and the three angels/bystanders assume very traditional postures. Jesus in fact looks like one entombed, wrapped in cloth. Yet the water feels so real we almost feel the spray of the water on our skin as the water races around the whole of the scene. The huge waves could be the waters of creation, or the Red Sea crashing down on Pharaoh and his armies: in either case, the water pulls us into something huge taking place. There is no small bowl of water hidden in a font in Demchuk's work.



Ivanka Demchuk, *Baptism of Christ*, 2015, mixed media on canvas and wood.

Sviatoslav Vladyka, also a Ukrainian artist (1975–), is the founder of the Association of Sacred Art, working with artists, priests, scientists, and laypersons to preserve the great tradition of Ukrainian iconography. Vladyka uses tempera and gold leaf on board in his contemporary icons. In *Baptism of Christ*, water forms a blue circle around Jesus, reflecting the heavenly light streaming from the circle at the top of the painting. The face of John and the face of God form a protective embrace around Jesus, while the descending dove appears almost spiderlike, as if lowered toward Jesus' head on a single thread.



Sviatoslav Vladyka, *Baptism of Christ*, 2016, acrylic, tempera and gold on board.

Jerzy Nowosielski, a Polish graphic artist (1923–2011) who painted *The Baptism of Jesus Christ in the Jordan*, uses bold fields of beautiful color to depict the waters of baptism, with orange circles to indicate the presence of divinity. Onlookers stand distantly in the background. The Jordan River runs vertically through the painting, connecting the action of Jesus' baptism to a seemingly endless sea of water at the top of the painting. It is John who baptizes Jesus in the middle of the painting, but it is the luscious watery squares of blues, green, and turquoise that call me into the scene.

Mark Rothko, an American abstract expressionist painter (1903–1970), is certainly famous for his later paintings that feature large squares and rectangles of color moving almost, but not quite, to the very edges of the canvas. Meaning was Rothko's quest. His work reflects his desire for his viewers to connect with his deep emotions as the colors wash over us, spill onto us, and pull us into infinity.

But Rothko didn't just paint large color fields, as we often assume. An earlier watercolor is titled *Baptismal Scene*, a series of doodles and lines that melt in and out of the background to create soft, watery depth. I have long been moved by Rothko's work, and I found myself particularly drawn to this painting. Certainly, it stands out because it is so different from Rothko's later work. But more than that, it captures the artistic choreography of Rothko imagining the baptism of Jesus. The painting twists and moves in lyrical movement and whimsical wonder. Here is not just the water splashing down from above, but continuing on in every direction, particularly under the surface. Here is efficacious grace, both visible and invisible—tumbling, moving, flowing not just above the water but below, where we cannot see it, but only imagine it. The watery depths seem to indicate endless activity. Creatures stretch and collide with one another. There is no distinction to the beginning or ending, surface or floor of the watery universe. Could this be the grasp of infinity, glimpsed in the moment of Jesus' baptism?

Mark Rothko, *Baptismal Scene*, 1945, Whitney Museum of American Art.

What about artists who use color, form, and movement to make work that may evoke the choreography of baptism for us, even if the work is *not* about baptism for the artist? Helen Frankenthaler (1928–2011) discovered that if she poured paint onto an untreated canvas, the material created layers of color that moved out beyond the normal borders, engulfing the picture plane. The many hues of blue in *The Bay* give a sense of water spreading out in every direction. The artist was experimenting with the movement of paint on canvas. In this case the *process* used by the artist offers language about the motion and flow of grace as it happens in the act of baptism, and in the action of forgiveness, just as we see the motion and flow of the materials themselves.

Frankenthaler experimented with thinning the paint, pouring it onto raw and untouched canvas, discovering that the process highlighted the material's fluidity. The movement of water inspired her. Though she isn't directly referencing baptism, *we* might imagine the fluid movement of the waters of baptism as we view her work and imagine her process. Frankenthaler's process recognizes loss of control of the paint as it rushes away from the center in every direction. Read through a theological lens, might this also remind us of the work of the Spirit in baptism?

French painter Henri Matisse spent the final years of his life using *light* as a visual medium to depict invisible grace. The Vence Chapel, his final masterpiece, was designed to be filled intentionally with limitless light. Marcel Billot writes that "it is like the primordial space quickened by the Spirit of God."[16] The light flows like water, giving the space a sense of transcendence through the heart of the worshiping community. The baptismal font, which is attached to the wall, looks like water splashing out into the room. Matisse, the choreographer of the space, figured out how to release light into the worship space that reflects the light of God, the author of the dance. This light reminds us of the light moving over the sparkling waters of creation, light glittering as we lift up the waters of baptism, and light filling every corner of our lives.

Henri Matisse, Chapelle du Rosaire, Vence, France.

Erich Thompson is a master craftsman and theologian in Greensboro, North Carolina, who brings ministry and wood into the same sentence. He is the designer and builder of beautiful liturgical furniture. Thompson designs liturgical pieces that emulate each other. Font, table, and pulpit work together to become a center for sacrament, a dance with water, and a place for forgiveness.

Montreat Conference Center baptismal font, designed and built by Erich Thompson, photo by Ann Jones.

Thompson believes the baptismal font should function on a daily or weekly basis, serving as the center of the action of corporate confession and forgiveness.

> Our worship space must be designed to facilitate worship. In order to move in worship, we must have space in which to move. We have space in which to sit or stand, your choice. Our spaces have to be redesigned in order to accommodate movement. That won't happen until the congregation arrives expecting to move.[17]

Recently Thompson has been designing and making new liturgical furniture for Massanetta Springs, a beloved, one-hundred-year-old Presbyterian camp in Virginia built around bubbling, natural springs. The font, the table, and the pulpit are all designed with imagery of dancing, splashing water. The springs have given life to the ecosystem for all these years, and now Massanetta will celebrate one hundred years living among these springs, as the sound of water outside and the sound of water flowing into the font inside dance together. The choreography of the natural world inspires our liturgical choreography as well. Erich Thompson takes wood, and creates movement, in the same way that liturgy takes words and creates the performative action of grace.

When we pour water into the font at the same moment that we proclaim words of forgiveness, we affirm and celebrate the experience of the good news of forgiveness and salvation through all our senses. Attentiveness to the design of the baptismal font allows for the choreography of the waters of forgiveness even as we are still lost in the language of confession. Cool, clear water poured from glass pitchers splashes and dances in the dance of forgiving wonder.

When I think "baptism," I see people of all ages around the baptismal pool. I hear water poured into and splashing out of the font, and taste the spray of water in the air. And when I feel the spray of water in the air, I imagine Jesus coming out of the Jordan feeling the very same water touching the faces of the world with forgiveness, grace, and eternity. The source of the Jordan River is not a placid, smooth scene, but a series of rapids, water flowing endlessly, not unlike the waters seen in the photograph below. Imagine the baptismal fonts in our churches as the source of the Jordan, flowing on throughout creation, into the streams of grace flowing on forever through our lives. Flowing, natural springs offering the very waters of creation from the earth, dance into the Jordan River itself, and then travel on throughout time. Exploring the choreography of baptism invites us to see and hear and feel and taste the grace that flows through the very heart of our identity. And, as the choreography moves on, I find myself in the crowd around Jesus, hearing the words: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" (Luke 3:21–22). God's words through Isaiah echo as well:

> Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
> I have called you by name, you are mine.
> When you pass through the waters, I will
> be with you;
> and through the rivers, they shall not
> overwhelm you (Isa. 43:1b–2).

Ann Laird Jones, *Montreat Creek after Heavy Rains*, video still, 2022.

Notes

1. Scott Haldeman, "Wading through the Waters toward the Throne of God: A Liturgical Meditation on Baptism, Social Ethics, and the Future of the PC(USA)," *Call to Worship: Liturgy, Music, Preaching and the Arts* 46.2 (2012): 9.
2. Kathleen Norris, "Marked for a Purpose: Isaiah 42:1–9; Acts 10:34–43; Matthew 3:13–17," *The Christian Century*, December 25, 2007, www.christiancentury.org/article/2007-12/marked-purpose/.
3. Norris, "Marked for a Purpose."
4. Norris, "Marked for a Purpose."
5. The Scrovegni Chapel, located in Padua, Veneto, Italy, is now a UNESCO Heritage Site.
6. Kinga Lipinska, *From Giotto to Rubens: The Baptism of the Lord in Painting, Liturgical Arts Journal*, January 9, 2019, www.liturgicalartsjournal.com/2019/01/from-giotto-to-rubens-baptism-of-lord.html/. This article is a part of the Talleres de Arte Granda, a liturgical workshop in Spain. Lipinska is a religious art historian, philosopher, blogger, and theologian.
7. Ignacio Pena, *The Christian Art of Byzantine Syria* (Spain: Garnet Publishing, 1996), 95.
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9. "Down to the River to Pray," traditional, public domain.
10. Rowan Williams, "Eastern Orthodoxy," *Christian Century* 139, no. 9 (May 4, 2022): 26.
11. Walter Brueggemann, "Wondrous, Inexplicable, Demanding Newness," *Sojourners Magazine*, January 2010, italics added.
12. Fred Craddock, *Luke* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1990), 51.
13. Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home by Another Way* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), 35–36.
14. "Art of the Plague Saint: Tintoretto at the Scuola Grande di San Rocco," *Artifacts* (blog), January 12, 2022, https://artifactsblog.com/tintoretto-scuola-grande-di-san-rocco/.
15. Victoria Emily Jones, "Contemporary Icons of the Baptism of Christ, *Arts and Theology: Revitalizing the Christian Imagination Through Painting, Poetry, Music and More*, (blog), January 6, 2018, https://artandtheology.org/2018/01/.
16. Marcel Billot, Introduction, in Marie-Alain Couturier and Louis-Bertrand Rayssiguier, *Henri Matisse: The Vence Chapel: The Archive of a Creation* (Italy; Skira Editore S.P.A., 1999), 29.
17. Erich Thompson, in an initial phone interview with Ann Jones, April 25, 2022, followed by an email exchange on April 26.

Columns

On Liturgy

Alexandra Jacob

One Friday during a recent low point in our community's COVID-19 infection rates, my husband and I bought tickets to a dinner show at an iconic jazz club in our city. The evening's featured performer was a local musician who also happened to be a congregation member—I had not yet had the chance to meet him, and I was eager to hear his music. It was the kind of evening we had yearned for during the early days of the pandemic: good food (not takeout!), live music, and good company. The cherry on top was that I would also get to see a beloved church member "in his element," sharing his music with an audience after so many months of being unable to do so.

The music that evening was wonderful: vibrant, fun, and technically impeccable (which my organist husband appreciated!). As the evening neared its end and we sipped our after-dinner coffee, the performer welcomed a special guest onstage. It was his daughter, an accomplished jazz singer with whom he often performed. It hit me then: I had been the one to coordinate the baptism of her infant son, one of our first COVID-era baptisms and the first baptism I had led at my current congregation. My heart swelled as I remembered the tenderness of that baptism a mere nine months prior. What a gift to see this parent in *her* element, sharing music and joy, offering to us a cross-generational experience of beautiful artistry. I went home that night with gratitude for this surprise encounter, eager to share my gratitude with the evening's performers.

This moment of recognition and memory in the midst of an ordinary week is a bit of a microcosm of what many of us have experienced as a result of so many months apart from one another in body. We finally have a face-to-face conversation with the neighbor who moved into the apartment next door in spring 2020, having only greeted them before with distanced waves. We finally get to visit the family member who welcomed a newborn baby during the Omicron COVID wave, having only smiled at them before through an iPhone screen. We finally share a meal and a hug with a friend who lost a spouse to COVID, having only shared condolences via front-porch flower deliveries and phone calls. We finally meet the parent of the child we baptized via the church livestream, and the new members who joined the church from their living rooms, and the session members whose laying on of hands occurred through hands outstretched to Zoom screen cameras. These past months and years have marked our faith communities in ways that we will continue to discover in the days ahead. How will our liturgical patterns and practices respond to such a reality? How will we mark the experiences that are behind us, and how will those experiences usher us into a new era of ecclesial and liturgical life together?

How will we mark the experiences that are behind us, and how will those experiences usher us into a new era of ecclesial and liturgical life together?

I return again to the memory of my first baptism in my current congregation. We were still worshiping entirely online via livestream, not yet welcoming worshipers into the church building. But we knew it was time to begin celebrating baptisms again. Following the Presbyterian model of mutual discernment, we took time as a staff

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and session to pray and wonder together. We had long since affirmed the Spirit's movement in Holy Communion celebrated across time and space via the livestream; how would that affirmation lead us to a richer understanding of the Spirit's movement in the baptismal waters? We settled on a practice that I believe has enriched our congregation's sacramental life, even upon our return to in-person baptisms. In the week before the baptism via livestream, a pastoral colleague and I recorded ourselves praying over the baptismal waters, giving thanks for God's liberating work in waters across time and space, and asking the Spirit's blessing upon the common water of our baptismal font. The video from that blessing became the prayer over the water during the upcoming livestreamed worship service. After the blessing, we poured some of the water into a small jar, which we took to the home of the baptizand, along with a candle, worship bulletin, and children's Bible. When the baptism day arrived, the baptizand's mother was invited to pour the water from that same jar over her child's head as we spoke aloud the words of baptism from the font at church. Worshipers were invited to share in the baptismal welcome liturgy from their own homes, and I imagined the words echoing across the city: "With joy and thanksgiving we welcome you to Westminster and to the followship of Christ's church, for we are all one in Christ."

This practice of baptism was powerful in ways that we did not anticipate. I've come to associate the practice with the image of a flowing river. The river's source is the baptismal font, but it flows to the homes of the baptizands, and then in streams to congregation members and worshipers all across the city and country. The Spirit's call on that young one's life—and the grace imparted in those baptismal waters—touched each of us, even as we were apart in body. This was the image that again returned to me as I watched that same child's mother and grandfather live into their own baptismal call through music making at the jazz club that evening. I imagined the waters of her baptism pooling at the foot of the stage and trickling out to the audience as we received the gift of this family's music.

Even as our congregation celebrates baptisms in a more traditional manner now, we celebrate with the memory of God's faithfulness in the midst of those difficult pandemic days. We celebrate with gratitude for the Spirit's presence within and among us while we were apart, and with anticipation for how the Spirit will continue to transform us in the season ahead. To where will the river of God's grace lead us next?

On Music: Our Community Pool

Mary Margaret Flannagan

Remembrances of baptism liturgies are becoming more common in Presbyterian congregations. Staff and members who experience them at conferences carry the liturgies home and put them into regular rotation each year. Inviting worshipers to hear the baptismal questions and reaffirm their own answers can be a profound moment in the life of faith, especially when so many members of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) were baptized at too young an age to remember the sacrament for themselves.

The remembrance of baptism liturgy also binds each local community together in that particular time and place. Because our mobile society prompts individuals to move away from their baptizing congregations, it is unlikely that any faith community was present for the baptism of each of their current members. A remembrance of baptism gives each congregation the opportunity to both witness sacramental moments for one another—hearing one another's answers and watching the water roll down their neighbor's face—and also being the body of Christ together. In this font, they are together bathed in God's grace, raised into Christ's resurrection, and reborn by the power of the Holy Spirit, no longer a collection of random strangers who happened to worship there that day. Simply put, they become church.

A worshiping community that is also church is a beautiful and profound thing to behold. Children wiggle and scream without congregational anxiety. Someone stumbles off the street and into the pew without judgment for being late or wearing the wrong outfit. There are both challenging and affirming moments. Everyone has a part in the service. Their individual notes amplify the group's harmony, so that the church resonates with an energy unlike anything else in the world. The sound spills beyond the church doors and waves through the community, piquing the ears of those who hear, bringing curious neighbors in to see for themselves. The vibrations grow deeper and wider with each new individual who enters the pool, resounding again and again with the glory of God on earth.

This kind of church resonance cannot be crafted by any group of humans alone (however committed they may be); it is a miracle from God. Musicians are lucky enough to be able to recreate the magic of a community sound pool and point to God's work among us; walking down any practice hall in a music school or a concert hall before the orchestra tunes leaves one swimming in a pool of tones and meters.

Handbell players are among those who float on sound waves together. As they lift and shake and swing, their dings and dongs create a rich pool of sound. Ears ring as bells pass nearby. Shoulders resonate as bells come to rest. Bodies feel the ripples of physical sound washing over them. Anyone within earshot finds themselves buoyed by the same waves and swimming in the pool filled with grace (and maybe a few clunks).

Bell towers shoulder much larger church bells and carillons. One famous bell hung in the steeple of a Lutheran church in Luck, Wisconsin, bearing the inscription:

> To font and table,
> To prayer and word,
> I call every seeking soul.[1]

Rev. Mary Margaret Flannagan serves as co-pastor at St. Giles Presbyterian Church in Greenville, South Carolina.

Its pool of sound was much wider than its own steeple or churchyard; the bell audibly called community members to worship as its tone sounded up and down the street and across Little Butternut Lake, as if to call, "Come home!" When neighboring, seeking souls heard the sound, not only were they reminded of the church building or the time, they were also bathing in rich tones that transcended institutional life. People were reminded of the light in that place, the sound of their pastor's voice, and the feeling of being together as a community. Even today, years after the bell was destroyed in a church fire, the sound of that toll still washes through our spiritual imaginations.

That wee congregation in Luck, Wisconsin, is part of the larger body of Christ, with "one Lord, one faith, one baptism" (Eph. 4:5). Though we may not have heard their bell with our own ears, we have heard the call to worship together. We trust in the one Lord who calls us to the same faith through rippling waters of baptism. Our baptismal waters—however near or far from Luck—all came from the same source. They trickled through the early disciples' fingers on the shores of the Jordan, flowed beyond the Mediterranean Sea into the Atlantic Ocean, streamed around each continent and into the bays and tidal pools of wildly diverse people whose ears were tuned to different sounds, bathing us in the unity of God's love from every time and place.

Today, we are all swimming in the pool together, whoever we are, wherever we are. The lapping of the Spirit's waves calls us from our distant corners into an integrated community pool of saints and sinners alike. This is not an exclusive resort. We find ourselves in sections with melodic lines that we would never think to play or ring, swimming in pools that have room for everyone. Without a glorious and Almighty God (the Conductor, Composer, and Amplifier), we would be a dissonant mess of individual tones and meters. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, our many clunks are unified. "For . . . all the members of the body, though many, are one" (1 Cor. 12:12, ESV). With chaotic dingalings and dongs and plucks and strums, God creates harmonies that are beautiful to behold.

Then we pray that our vibrations are irresistible—a siren song—wherein friends and neighbors would find themselves drawn into the same waters with space to add their own notes, too. Just as the bell in Luck called people "to font and table, prayer and word," our lives should amplify the resonance of our baptismal living, rippling through the world, demanding attention and changing lives.

Note

1. West Denmark Lutheran Church website, https://www.westdenmark.org/.

Our baptismal waters—however near or far from Luck—all came from the same source. They trickled through the early disciples' fingers on the shores of the Jordan, flowed beyond the Mediterranean Sea into the Atlantic Ocean, streamed around each continent and into the bays and tidal pools of wildly diverse people whose ears were tuned to different sounds, bathing us in the unity of God's love from every time and place.

On Preaching

Colleen Cook

In keeping with the Directory for Worship, Kaela (not her real name) was presented for baptism with neither undue haste nor undue delay. She was thirteen years old, wearing her backpack and clinging to a stuffed animal as she walked to the baptismal font. Her mothers had been Presbyterian for a little over a year—they joined soon after visiting our church's booth at the downtown Pride festival the year before. Kaela had lots to say about Dora the Explorer and Vampirina. She enjoyed playing with the play food and the baby dolls in the nursery, where she had spent the first part of the service. She sometimes found it hard to sit still through a church service, though she did occasionally, scribbling with crayons in a coloring book.

Her Sunday school teacher stood close by with one hand on her arm. Her sponsoring elder and her mothers took their places around the font. Kaela's mothers had renounced evil, affirmed their belief in Christ as Lord and Savior, and made public their intentions to teach Kaela the Christian faith. I held the seashell Kaela had chosen for me to dip into the water. The prayer of Thanksgiving over the Water was printed in the binder I held in my other hand. As I began my rehearsed, formal words, she began to show signs of agitation. I gave up on the lengthy prayer from the *Book of Common Worship*, closed the binder, and said, "Kaela, this water is just like the water from creation and Noah's flood and the water that baptized Jesus. Now we're going to baptize you." She slipped her hand into the font.

As we had practiced in the sanctuary the week before, I dipped the shell into the font and sent a little trickle of water down Kaela's forehead three times, baptizing her in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. I handed her the seashell to keep as a momento and declared her a member of the household of God, welcoming her into the body of Christ. By this time, Kaela was making noises of distress, as many children do at this point in the liturgy. But unlike many children, Kaela was in distress in part because of her different abilities, since she had an intellectual disability and autism. Though she needed time back in the nursery after the baptism, when the service concluded she agreed to come back for a picture with her moms and me. The photo shows Kaela with her hand in the font and her head thrown back laughing.

Kaela's parents and the congregation made promises to guide and nurture her; yet Kaela was also nurturing us.

It was neither an infant baptism nor an adult one. Kaela's parents and the congregation made promises to guide and nurture her; yet Kaela was also nurturing us. In some contexts, she could easily have been labeled someone who "couldn't understand" enough to be baptized, yet it was clear that she understood God better than any of us. The vocation she received at baptism was as profound, unique, and necessary as any of ours, yet I was aware that some churches would have placed several boundaries in her way, since she was the daughter of lesbians and a person with an intellectual disability.

For the sermon I preached from Acts 8, the story about the Ethiopian eunuch who said, "Look, there is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?" What a loaded question. What is there to prevent me? Status? Socioeconomic background? Age? Sexuality? Denominational background? Gender?

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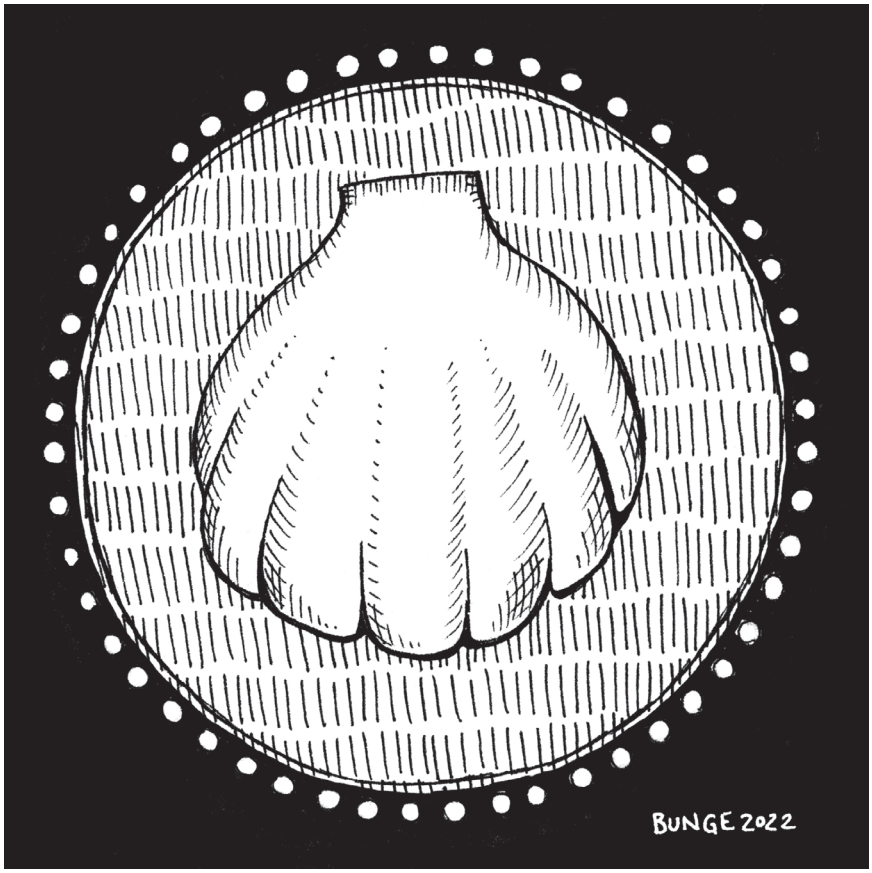
Intellect? Disability? Health? Doctrine? Doubt? Like the eunuch we may have been taught that there are certain boundaries that dictate who is in and who is out. Who can be denied the sacrament of baptism? Who can be denied full entry into God's family? What is to prevent *me* from being baptized?

As Presbyterians, we have inherited the tradition of infant baptism as well as baptism on profession of faith. Our embrace of infant baptism makes the beautiful statement that God claims people in love even before they are able to respond in faith. It was with that claim that Kaela's parents brought her to be baptized that day. The sacraments are the sign and seal of God's reconciling work. They are not intellectual propositions to be parsed out and understood; they are sensory experiences, real connection to God through physical, earthly elements: bread, wine, water. We encounter truth beyond anyone's ability to understand. We all experience the water of our baptism in just the way that Kaela did, as a gift, a surprise, a shock, a blessing, and not as a theological treatise.

Baptism, even with adults, is always more about God choosing us than about us choosing God. Baptism is a strong claim of the identity bestowed upon us by God: child of God. When we recognize this identity as primary, we are able to put our other identities and categories of belonging in perspective. Rather than deriving identity first and foremost from being white or a person of color, being male or female, being rich or poor, educated or uneducated, straight or gay, cisgender or gender nonconforming, neurodivergent or neurotypical, we are able to see ourselves realistically. In Christ it all falls away and our belovedness is obvious. Baptism is a sign of the coming realm of God, where those distinctions will never divide us again and we will see each other as beloved siblings of the same parent.

Imagine the joy of the Ethiopian as his chariot approaches water. "Look! Here is water! Here, within my reach, are the promises of God." There before him is entry into the community of faith and participation in the death and resurrection of the Jesus about whom Philip had been telling him. "Look! Here is water! What is to prevent me, even me, from God's grace and all that promises?"

What is to prevent you from living out your vocation, from participating in the faith to which you have been brought or freely come? Look! Here is water—water of renewal, of grace and surprise and promise! Let's celebrate the bounty of God! What is to prevent us? Nothing, beloved ones, nothing.



Shell
ink on paper
Jennifer Bunge

On the Arts: Unity and Diversity

David A. VanderMeer

As I write this column, we have just passed the fortieth anniversary of the publication of *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, the report of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches, finalized in Lima, Peru, in January of 1982. Its publication four decades ago represented an even longer span of the work for the commission, since it summarized agreements that began in 1927, more than fifty years earlier. Even today, almost a century later, the commission's process serves as a model for ecumenical cooperation. Quoting the preface, "In leaving behind the hostilities of the past, the churches have begun to discover many promising convergences in their shared convictions and perspectives."

The World Council of Churches does not claim any universal authority. The Council consists of more than three hundred member denominations and strives for close collaboration, not necessarily agreement, in Christian witness and service. It celebrates the diversity of cultural backgrounds, traditions, languages, and governance represented in its membership, but at the same time it strives for visible church unity. Art, too, relies on both unity and diversity, and I believe that church unity in the midst of diversity can be acknowledged, explored, understood, and enhanced through the arts. We can approach this from at least two different perspectives—one that feels like finding the unity in our diversity, and the other that seems more like finding the diversity in our unity.

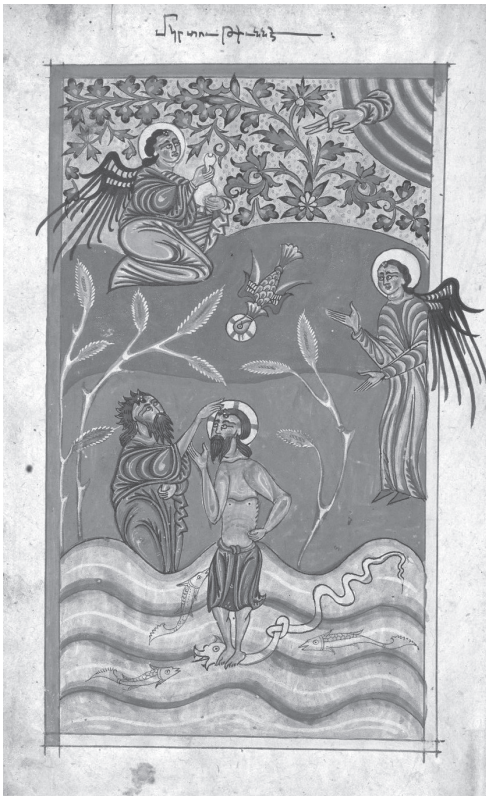
As the writers of *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* worked to find common ground, they identified five meanings of baptism, five different ways of understanding the sacrament. Various artistic representations of the baptism of Jesus and baptismal practice through the centuries also reveal how different artists understood what baptism means. Art about baptism invites viewers to consider their own understanding of baptism as well, and, most importantly, art throughout church history can lead us toward an understanding that "one Lord, one faith, one baptism" can unify us even as we enact belief in many different ways.

Googling "images of the baptism of Jesus" produces thousands of representations made by artists alive today and artists who worked only a few hundred years after the actual baptism of Christ! I have chosen a few pieces from the collection of the Vanderbilt Divinity Library, a fabulous source of art images for church use, as examples. Look carefully at each of the works—they were created centuries apart and in a variety of media. They reflect different cultures and, certainly, different understandings of baptism. But they share powerful commonalities: all reference water in some way; all include the image of the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove; all show the presence of God, either in the form of rays reaching down from

Baptism of Christ, Dave Zelenka, 2005

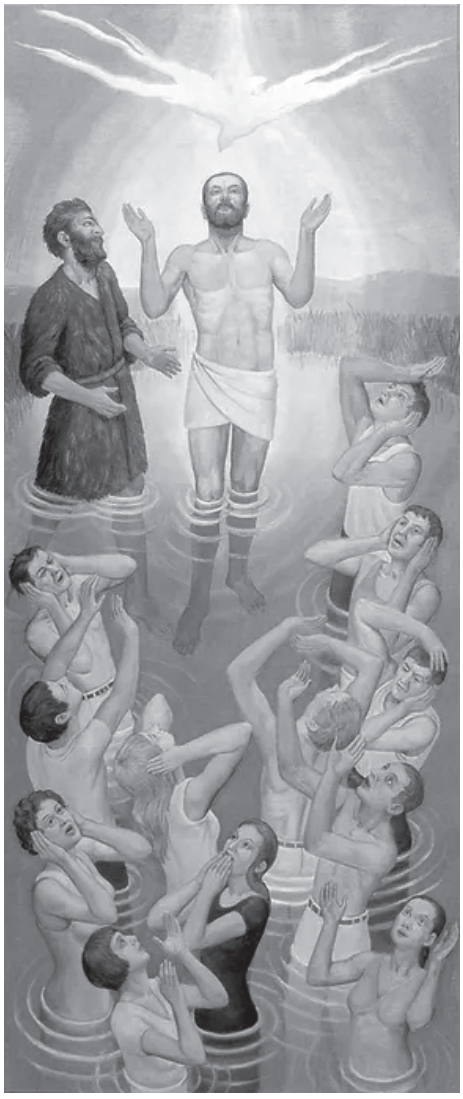
David A. VanderMeer is the minister of music and fine arts at First Presbyterian Church of Ann Arbor, Michigan.

heaven, or in the case of the Armenian Gospel book, the visible "hand of God." Two of the works even include sin, and overcoming sin, represented as the serpent in the two older pieces. Though these works are different in many ways, there are unified in their diversity.



Baptism of Christ
Xač'atur, Armenian, 1455. This Armenian Gospel book was produced in (1455 CE) at the monastery of Gamałiēl in Xizan by the scribe Yohannēs Vardapet and was illuminated by the priest Xač'atur.

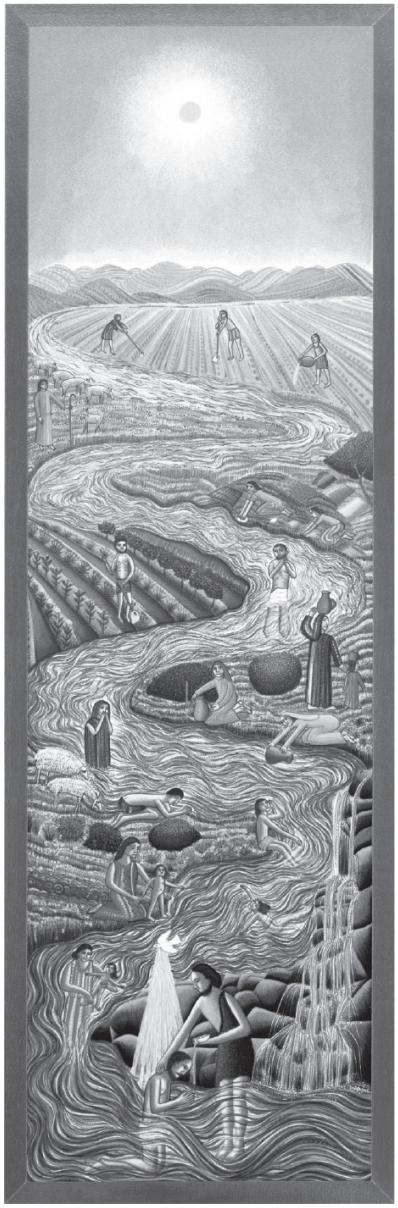
On the other hand, there are other works of art that help us to explore the diversity in our unity. In the mid-nineteenth century, poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote, "Music is the universal language of [hu]mankind." This statement has been quoted many times since it originally appeared, but in 2018 three scientists at Harvard University initiated a study[1] to determine whether it was, in fact, true. Ultimately the study was expanded to include a research team of anthropologists, psychologists, biologists, musicians, and linguists from top universities around the globe. They researched a vast array of music from sixty different countries and more than eighty different cultural groups, and they concluded that Longfellow was correct! Music is a universal language across humankind.



Baptism of Christ, Peter Koenig, 1976

Of course, I would not argue with Longfellow and these Harvard researchers, but I would expand the idea to include many other art forms. Art invites us to learn about and relate to each other in all our diversity, even when our language differences create barriers to communication and understanding through words. It would be trite, but relevant, to note that "a picture is worth a thousand words," especially if the words are in a language we don't speak or write. But it is more than that. Consider the Peter Koenig painting titled *Baptism of Christ*, where, though we see the feet of John the Baptist and of Christ in the upper left of the painting, the focus is not on Jesus but on the others present. The painting depicts people who seem to be watching in awe or in fear of what they are seeing and hearing. They are standing where we would have stood had we been present. We see the scene from our own

perspective! This is a very different view than we may be used to from other representations of the baptism of Jesus, but perhaps it is one that invites us to think more about our own role in the story.



River, John August Swanson, 1987

Another very different view is from Chinese American artist He Qi. Dr. He Qi's art training was in China, but he now lives and works in the United States and is presently artist-in-residence at Fuller Theological Seminary. He interprets scenes from the Bible in the style of traditional Chinese painting. In his *Baptism of Jesus* the elements that are common to the vast majority of paintings of the baptism of Christ—the water, the dove, the presence of God through descending rays, and even the serpent. But the brilliant use of color, the fierceness of the figures' facial expressions and even the dove's expression, the icon-like flatness of the figures, and the boldness of line and form are typical of the tradition of Chinese art that He Qi references. The elements of the biblical narrative are there, but the style differs from what we see in Western art we have examined. He Qi's work shows us that we interpret the text through our own cultural lens, not just in how we read the written words, but also in the visual language we use. The stories unite us, even as we interpret them in our diverse contexts.

So, what are the implications of unity and diversity in the visual arts for congregational worship? Typically, we attend carefully to what the congregation hears—the language we use in our liturgy and hymnody—but we also must attend carefully to what the congregation sees and feels. In addition to using visual art on the worship bulletin however it is presented, we can also incorporate art objects into our worship. For example, we might drape blue fabric from the font so that it spills out onto the floor, reminding those gathered of their constant connections to the waters of baptism. In congregations I've served, we have used blue kite banners with a small fabric dove attached to wave over the congregation during the opening hymn or following the sacrament as the newly baptized is introduced to the congregation. This lifts the eyes of the worshipers and helps to foster an environment of wonder. I have used small glass droplets during a renewal of baptism service and asked each worshiper to come forward to the font to draw out a glass droplet and keep in their pocket every day. These options, and others you might consider, help us to find the unity of the experience in the diversity of the ways we experience it, and at the same time be open to the diversity of the ways others might experience it.

In our deeply divided world, one yearns for unity as the writers of *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* sought unity in the foundational beliefs of Christianity. I think it helps if we remember that there can be diversity in our unity and unity in our diversity. The visual arts can be a powerful tool in helping find the way forward together.

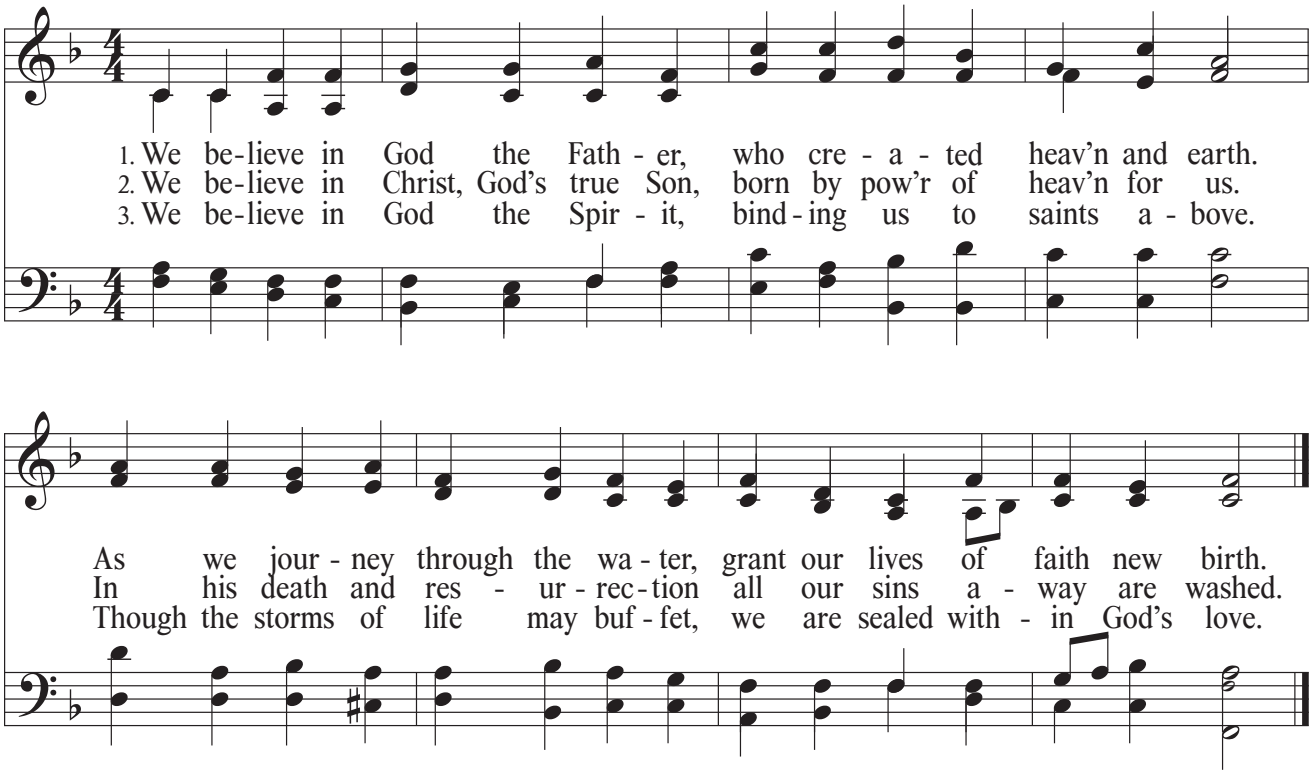
Note

1. Jed Gottlieb, "Music Everywhere," *The Harvard Gazette,* November 21, 2019, https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2019/11/new-harvard-study-establishes-music-is-universal/.

Ideas

“We Believe in God: A Sung Baptismal Setting of The Apostles’ Creed”

Buz Wilcoxon



MUSIC: Witt’s *Psalmodia Sacra*, 1715, alt.

STUTTGART
8.7.8.7

This baptismal hymn reflects the ancient relationship between The Apostles’ Creed and the practice of baptism. The Apostles’ Creed grew out of the ancient baptismal practices of the early church and became a baptismal liturgy in the early centuries of the faith. Before each of three immersions in the water, adult baptizands were asked, “In whom do you believe?” and answered by reciting a portion of The Apostles’ Creed addressing each member of the Trinity. Still today, this creed holds a vital place in our baptismal liturgy.

With three stanzas, this hymn echoes the baptismal pattern. The text also includes references to the meanings of baptism including baptism as new birth, washing of sin, dying, and rising with Christ, and the sealing of God’s covenant love.

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Book Reviews

How Women Transform Preaching

Leonora Tubbs Tisdale

(Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2021)

Claiming the Call to Preach: Four Female Pioneers of Preaching in Nineteenth-Century America

Donna Giver-Johnston

(New York: Oxford University Press, 2021

Reviewed by Holly Clark-Porter

Revived through the Work of Women in the Pulpit

I've been feeling less imaginative lately, and I have realized that I gave away a great deal of my creativity to COVID-era videos and parking lot services. As my creativity has dwindled, my exhaustion, impatience, and thirst for fulfillment have grown. Even (and maybe especially) as society has "returned to normal," the gumption behind my own pastoral identity still feels tasteless lately. However, reading these two books has been like eating lobster mac and cheese with gochujang—comfort food elevated imaginatively with just enough heat to remind me why I come to the Table with a stole on.

Get out your highlighters, preachers! Leonora Tubbs Tisdale's *How Women Transform Preaching* is a quick read, but one that preachers will want to return to again and again. Here preachers will find those highlighted nuggets that will not only reinforce sermon writing but will also help a preacher feel the fire of the Holy Spirit. From the dedication to the footnotes, Tisdale leads us through conversations with the Shouter Baptist women of Trinidad and Tobago, to the venerable Rev. Dr. Jana Childers, to the untitled, unknown names of Quakers, through historic figures to present-day women preachers. This conversation made me feel as though the Christian world is small enough to see everyone and yet large enough to make waves in the world.

While this book opens with (disconcerting) statistics about women in ministry, rest assured it is geared towards weary, worn-out preachers, not statisticians. With a kind of mystery-novel gleam, Tisdale delves into the history and statistics associated with women in the pulpit. Twists and turns in this "herstory" leave readers on the edge of our seats, excited to know what happens next. For instance, I was awed to learn that the less educated, *more conservative, evangelical* women in ministry played a much bigger role in the traction of women preachers than the more educated, Reformed foremothers. Indeed, how will women preachers and the people they inspire bring the church even further into the new thing God is doing?

Tisdale writes with a passion for the vital place of women in preaching and for the gospel at large. While she acknowledges there are those who decry women preachers, this book is not a fight against them, nor is it a one-sided told-you-so. She lets the stories, past and present, speak for themselves and teaches her readers about the unsung and often

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surprising heroines of the church's transformations. (Seriously, this queer, female reviewer was caught off guard a few times and humbly encouraged to rethink the history on the margins.)

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Many of the stories are chilling and on their own could leave a reader enraged. But Tisdale *preaches* these stories in a greater context and brings readers through a full breadth of emotions. It takes guts to read some of these stories (especially if one's own stories resonate), but they are not so far from the parables preached each Sunday. And maybe it helps remind preachers that it should take just as much guts to preach the parables as it does for women to claim the same pulpit those first women at the tomb claimed.

Tisdale speaks to the way women of the past had to forge their own opportunities in order to preach, get creative, and persevere for the sake of their calling. This book is written for everyone who looks for openings for the gospel to be heard in a world uninterested, skeptical, and unmoved by the patterns of church. The church still has untold stories, and always will until kin-dom come, but *How Women Transform Preaching* gives pastors an opportunity, an opening, within which to delve.

Poetry snaps for Donna Giver-Johnston's synthesizing work in *Claiming the Call to Preach: Four Female Pioneers of Preaching in Nineteenth-Century America*. This in-depth exploration of the call stories of women preachers provides a vision for the preaching vocation and should be required reading for seminarians of all genders, for pastor nominating committees, and for ordained and lay people serving the current church.

Whereas Leonora Tubbs Tisdale's *How Women Transform Preaching* inspires preachers to uncover the story of the text and speak to it, Donna Giver-Johnston's book gives preachers sure footing through substance that teaches readers *why* a preacher speaks and why she/he/they should uncover stories, past and present. This is the book to turn to when the detractors come calling. This is the book that should be stuffed full of bookmarks pointing to biblical and historical tools to shut down a debate partner's every argument against women preachers or to empower a marginalized sibling's call.

While Giver-Johnston's writing is inspiring, this is not a book of one-liners meant to bolster sermons; this book motivates the preacher on Monday morning to a wider, fuller vision of the church. After all, preachers know that the sermon happens on Sunday, but the *stuff* of the sermon comes from the experience of the week before, the years before, the reformations before, and the testaments before. Sermons would certainly be missing something without Mary, the bearer of God, or without the voices of the women at the tomb.

If the pulpit is supposed to be a place where we model inclusion and creativity for the people of God, why did the pulpit and its office become a space where exclusion and restriction has been practiced?

Giver-Johnston helped me answer questions I've been asking recently, questions like, if the pulpit is supposed to be a place where we model inclusion and creativity for the people of God, why did the pulpit and its office become a space where exclusion and restriction has been practiced? In answering this question, Giver-Johnston discusses preachers who proclaimed the gospel when the pulpit and its office provided space for inclusion and creativity. Through the call stories of four preachers—Jarena Lee, Frances Willard, Louisa Woosley, and Florence Spearing Randolph—this book informs current conversations about those who have been and are still restricted from the pulpit.

However, Giver-Johnston does not dive right into the stories of Jarena Lee, Frances Willard, Louisa Woosley, and Florence Spearing Randolph; instead, she begins with narratives about God calling pastors, preachers, and prophets throughout time. It is a life-giving reminder to this pastor of ten years that a calling is as academic as it is spiritual as it is vital as it is a gift, and that each call is connected to our foreparents in faith. Giver-Johnston is able to tell some of her own story and

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those of contemporary women alongside historical preachers, showing us some of the shoulders upon which all call stories stand, what has changed, and what still needs to change. Read it slowly, weary pastor, and soak it up.

Especially as debates and conversations about women's bodies grow ever more substantial and heated in the United States, it is imperative that the church also pays attention, speaks to, and recognizes the significance of women's bodies *of work* throughout the church. Women's rights are human rights—this isn't just a political slogan for protest signs. This should be said over and over in the context of pews and pulpits as well. These two books have charged me to renew my vow to tell the stories of women as if the church depended on it. Because after reading these two books, I believe it does. By telling women's stories in the church, we tell of change, bravery, courage, and a sure and certain knowledge that when God calls a woman, God means it. From Tisdale's and Giver-Johnston's research and retelling, I have a better sense that when the church ignores or excludes whole groups of people, the church misses the gospel. But when people are bold enough to say they are called even against the powers that be, the church gains hope, freedom, ability, and might. A heartfelt thank you to both writers for the power of these stories.

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