

# GATHERED ROUND THE FONT

*Rev Jim Allan  
Camrose United Church  
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Mark 1:9-11 - Jesus' baptism

Mark 1:7-8 - Baptized with the spirit

Galatians 3:27-28 - Baptized into Christ

Yesterday I was at a workshop in Coronation. We have a new project going on in our presbytery in response to a crisis in many congregations who are without ministers. It's really a way for those ministers who are in the presbytery to help members of those vacant congregations do their ministry for themselves because we're finding now that when a congregation loses its minister it may be a year or two years before they get another one. We've done a series of workshops and have had quite an enthusiastic response. Yesterday's workshop was on baptism and communion. So I found myself--it may even be the first time in all the years I've been in the ministry--teaching a group of people what baptism and communion is, and what it means to preside at the table or at the font. Even as I tell it now I find myself, as I found myself yesterday, close to tears at some points just because for me it is a celebration of that wonderful gift that has been mine to carry out those functions. It reminded me yesterday in a beautiful way of what a wonderful privilege it is to perform a baptism as we have just done here--and especially when it's one's own family. As I think back over the years, what a wonderful moment it is to be able to receive a child into my arms and to say those ancient, beautiful words, and to touch the water in that wonderful mystery of baptism.

I thought that, in conjunction with yesterday's workshop, I would take the opportunity to make baptism the theme of a service and share a bit with you. Baptism is one of the richest and deepest and most varied parts of our faith. One could do a whole ten-part series on this--I keep saying that about many of my sermon topics, don't I. Anyway, it's one aspect of baptism that I wanted to share with you today. That aspect is the simplest, plainest, most basic piece of baptism. It's the water, the plainest thing in the world--the water--which has so much meaning and so much depth about our whole faith, and especially about baptism. So much is contained within the symbolism of the water itself.

I'm going to use the hymn written by Sylvia Dunstan in 1987 and entitled "Crashing Waters of Creation." She wrote this in conjunction with the blessing of the water in the service of baptism. The hymn picks four different points throughout our salvation story, throughout the biblical story, where water plays a significant role. And there are many other points as well. It starts with creation. The first stanza is simply

*Crashing waters at creation,  
ordered by the spirit's breath,*

*first to witness day's beginning  
from the brightness of night's death."*

The picture of creation that is portrayed for us in Genesis doesn't start off with nothing; it's not the creation of something out of nothing. It's the creation of order out of chaos, so it starts just with water and the spirit hovering over the face of the deep--this image of primal chaos in which there is only water. Then out of that primal chaos of water God brings land and life, creates form and meaning out of chaos. So the water is a central image right there in the picture of creation. I think Sylvia begins her hymn with that because baptism is a re-creation, it's the sense of returning to that primal chaos--that pre-creation--and then of being created again, being recreated, created anew. So that's one of the first pictures of what baptism means to us.

In the second verse we move up to the story of the Exodus. The beginnings of our whole faith tradition lie with the history of Israel which really has its start in this band of slaves in Egypt coming out into freedom--the Exodus and that passing through the waters of the Red Sea. There it is again--that miraculous water. Another hymn, one written by Fred Kaan, has a verse that says "Standing round the font reminds us of the Hebrews' climb ashore." The "climb ashore" refers to the Hebrews after they passed through the waters of the Red Sea into this new life, into this new liberation and freedom--the picture of them climbing ashore after escaping from the armies of Pharaoh. It refers to this miraculous thing that has happened and this new life that is opened up. Kaan invites us to picture ourselves as we were just a moment ago, with the choir, with all the baptism families, with all of you in this circle, gathered round the font. It's not just the baptism families who gather at the font on baptism occasions. It's all of us as a congregation who symbolically gather around the font. And Kaan says when we're gathered around this font we're reminded of the Exodus, of that original act of God bringing the slaves out of slavery into freedom, into liberation, into that new covenant as God's people. So it's a kind of renewal for all of us. Every time we have a baptism it's a renewal of our baptismal faith, it's a remembrance of our re-creation, of our liberation, of our coming into new life in this faith community.

Sylvia's second verse says,

*Parting water stood and trembled  
[What a picture! The water, the water trembling]  
as the captives passed through,  
washing off the chains of bondage,  
channel to a life made new.*

"Washing," there's the water again. What a picture for all of us when we think of all the different ways in which we become captive and trapped and in ruts and stuck in our lives. Here's this water "washing the chains of bondage, channel to a life made new." And so we're born again, and we celebrate our rebirth in Christ every time we gather round this font celebrating the life that God gives and renews ever and ever again.

Then she moves to the story of Jesus' baptism itself.

*Cleansing water once at Jordan,  
closed around the one foretold.*

*Opened to reveal the glory  
ever new and ever old.*

Closed and opened. So Jesus goes under the water and the water closes over him like that primal chaos, and then he emerges out of the water that opens to new life. So there is that sense of the dying and the rising, and Paul in his letter to the Galatians--from which Alex [Oliver] read a moment ago--picks up that sense in which in our baptism we join with Christ in his death and in his resurrection. It's like more than just dying; it's like a reversal of creation; it's as if life becomes uncreated for a moment and then is created again, anew, dying and rising with Christ. That is the heart, the centre, the core of our meditation, of our journey throughout Lent as we move toward that moment of Christ's passion. That is when we, by our baptism, all join together as the body of Christ, sharing with Christ his passion, his suffering, his death, and are reborn together, emerging from that water with the droplets falling around us, and into the new life into which we are all born in Christ.

Finally, then, Sylvia speaks of who Christ has become for us, the living Christ now. The fourth verse begins with

*Living water never ending,  
[there's another beautiful picture, a beautiful image]  
quench the thirst and flood the soul.*

Now I didn't even mention the flood, but that's another powerful image of water that's a part of our tradition. The verse concludes:

*Wellspring source of life eternal,  
drench our dryness, make us whole.*

The picture of Jesus as living water comes from his meeting and conversation with the woman at the well. She is there to gather ordinary water. Jesus tells her that when she drinks this water she will be fine for a while but will thirst again. He also tells her that he can give her the kind of water she can drink and never thirst again. Drinking of that living water has become for us one of the most central images of spiritual life in Christ. It quenches the thirst and it floods the soul; it's the wellspring. That is a very significant image because in ancient, biblical, times life existed on the edge of semi-arid desert land, and people shepherded sheep and had to keep moving to find not only food, but also water which often came from wells.

And so this picture of the well in the midst of the desert, that place where by digging deep into the heart of the earth we can find this fresh life-giving water, becomes a picture of who Christ is for us--that wellspring of living water. Whenever life tends to become empty and dry and dead, and we tend to become lost, that living water drenches the dryness. It keeps life wet and juicy and fruitful and growing and life-giving. That living water, this Christ, is for us all and makes us whole. And so as we all stand around the font every time we gather to baptize, and we pour the water into the font, it is a reminder of the renewing and the ever-renewing life that is ours in the living water of our baptism.

Transcribed by Sue and By Reesor