

# **Holy Water**

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Scientists tell us that seventy-five percent of the Earth's surface is covered with it. All of it that we have now was in existence at the moment of Earth's creation. It is the only essential element for every creature and specimen on the Earth's surface. The United States uses about 346 million gallons of it every day, the average person in the United States uses anywhere from eighty to one hundred gallons of it per day. It can take up to four gallons of it every time we use the restroom.

By now I am sure you have figured out that it...is water. Water is literally all around us. It's in creeks, streams and rivers as they flow to the oceans that roar. Water is the rain puddle a young child splash's in. In a round about way water is what we find ourselves shoveling through, skiing on, and sledding down. Water is there when we wash our hands and our clothes. Even with all the bone tissue and muscle mass taking up space water is still almost seventy percent of our body's makeup. Water is what falls as we weep with sadness. Water is literally everywhere.

We also find water floating around in the Bible. When we read the first Biblical account of God creating light and land, animals and humans, we find that the waters were there before it all. Later in Genesis as humans turn their backs on God; God uses water, lots of water, to wash away most of creation.

The New Testament is flooded with stories of water. Several of Jesus' miracles use water as a sign of his divinity. The Gospel of Matthew tells us of Jesus' turning water into wine. Three of the Gospels have an account of Jesus walking on water. Jesus provides living water so that the woman at the well will thirst no more. Showing that he is no greater than them, Jesus washes the disciples feet...with a basin of water. Pilate washes his hands with water as he declares he will not responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus. As Melanie/Julie read for us something else that water does in the Bible...it baptized Jesus.

The Gospel of Luke, from which our scripture for today comes, moves quickly from shepherds and angels singing in the fields after the birth of Jesus right to Jesus being presented to God in the temple which is a Jewish custom. At the end of Chapter 2 we get a quick story of Jesus teaching as a child and then all of a sudden Jesus in an adult. All Luke gives us to make this leap of what is thought to be about 18 years is, "and Jesus increased in wisdom and years, and in divine and human favor."

In the beginning of Chapter 3 John the Baptist comes onto the scene. Being a good Jew John knows of the prophecy from the book of Isaiah that says, "prepare the way of the Lord" and he has decided to take it seriously. John is traveling about the land proclaiming that all should prepare for the coming of the Lord by being baptized. John tells the people that they cannot simply rely on their ancestors to save them; they themselves must turn from their wicked ways.

John tells the rich to share with those that have none. John tells the tax collectors not to collect more than the state requires.

John was pretty convincing with his warnings as people begin to think perhaps he is the Messiah they have been waiting for. John quickly responds with the words we heard a bit ago, "I baptize you with water, but the one who is more powerful than I is coming; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." In fact, according to Luke's account, John begins to get so much attention that Herod decides he is causing too much trouble and throws him in jail.

The baptism of Jesus is found in all four Gospels leading us to believe that it is a historically true story. Further, Biblical scholars think that occurrences that would have made Christianity more difficult to spread, women in leadership during an extremely male dominated time, for example, that still make into scripture are more likely unchanged stories. The fact that Jesus is baptized makes Jesus sound very human, perhaps even lowly. In order for non-believers to find reason to believe Jesus was the Son of God the writers of the Gospels would have likely wanted to portray Jesus as more divine and strong. They could have easily left the story of their leader being baptized in the river just like every other sinner out, but they didn't. It was meaningful enough that all four writers left it in.

So it begs the question, why did Jesus get baptized? Luke's account doesn't give any mention of it being an issue. Matthew's version though has John questioning why Jesus would want to be baptized by him. John says, "but I need to be baptized by you." Jesus replies, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Well...okay...now we know why Jesus thought he had to be baptized, but without really thinking about it I didn't get what he was saying.

Karl Barth, a 20<sup>th</sup> century Swiss theologian, explains it this way, he says that in the wonder of Jesus baptism we see "[Jesus'] free subjection to the will of God. His free association with [humanity]. His free entry upon the service of God and [humanity]."

Jesus' baptism marks the documented beginning of his active ministry. By being baptized he tells the world two things. One, I am like you. I will work among you, I will experience life like you experience life, and two...I am nothing like you. It is true that Jesus is baptized in the river just like everyone else, but it is also true that after he came up from the water heaven opened up and in a bodily form the Holy Spirit came upon him. A voice, we presume, the voice of God, spoke for all gathered in that place to hear. This was no ordinary baptism.

What is baptism really? In the Methodist church we believe that baptism is one of two sacraments, the other being communion. According to the United Methodist book of discipline, sacraments are ordained by Christ and are symbols of God's love. They are God's means to help us know forgiveness. We believe that baptism is an entrance into God's community. It means turning away from our wrongdoing and represents a new birth in Christian discipleship. Again, in the Methodist church we believe that when a child is baptized their biological and church families alike take on the responsibility to nurture the child in Christian love so that later in life they might confirm their faith.

Baptism is not our doing, but rather God's. In the same way, by being baptized Jesus was saying I am like you; I need divine grace if I am going to live among you. And when heaven parted God was saying I have sent you someone who will help you live in my grace.

The movie *Shawshank Redemption* tells the story of a man, Andy Dufrane, who is sent to maximum-security prison after being found guilty of the killing of his wife and her lover. Andy maintains his innocence. Andy endures regular abuse from other inmates and guards for nineteen years. Through a cleverly concocted plan Andy is able to outwit the prison staff and carves a tunnel out of his cell. During the strikes of thunder in order to cover up the sound, Andy tears a hole through the sewer pipe and crawls 400 feet to freedom.

Andy then experiences a different kind of baptism. Let us watch as Andy stands in the pouring rain having broken free from that which kept him in bondage. Let us watch as the power of water washes him clean.

For nineteen years Andy was literally held prisoner for a crime he did not commit. But he broke out; he stands and lets the rain rinse the dirt from the outside, and the pain on the inside. On this day that we celebrate the baptism of our Lord, I ask, what is holding you? We all have things we need washed out of our lives. Little things. Big things.

I don't remember my baptism, but I am pretty sure no one heard the voice of God, but that does not mean that it did not speak. Jesus' baptism was no ordinary baptism, but really, no one's is. When we are baptized God says I forgive you, forever. We believe that we are only baptized once, but every now and again it is good to remember what it is like to be washed clean. Andy let the rain bathe him; we too can let the power of holy water wash away our pain. In the same way that Jesus used water for miracles the miracle of grace is preformed on us. It is with this grace we know that just like Jesus, we too are God's beloved. And it is with this knowledge that we go out knowing that even though we will surely get dirty again, the holy water will never dry up.