



Water. We need water - more than we need food- to live. Up to 60% of our bodies are water. Dehydration is one of the most difficult challenges we face- and one reason our doctors suggest we drink at least 8 glasses of water a day. We need water to flush our bodies of toxins. Without water, we literally wither – and ultimately die. Water makes the difference between life and death.

We have images of water and its importance as a symbol from the very beginning. Genesis, chapter 1, verse 1: In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. The wind from God – the Holy Spirit- swept over the face of the waters and the earth came forth from chaos, from the formless void and the darkness. The Holy Spirit brings life. The Holy Spirit, given to us at our baptism, enables us to live a life in response to God’s call to us. A challenge to live a life transformed by God’s love for us.

Water. As a symbol – and reality- water serves to differentiate between what was and what will or can be. The Israelites crossed the Red Sea- they moved from a life of slavery to a life of promise by crossing through the water. To protect the Israelites from those pursuing them, the Red Sea closed up – and those not killed stood across the abyss. Water separated the old life from the promise of new life. When the people finished their wandering in the wilderness- when they had learned what God needed them to learn in order to enter the promised land, the people crossed the Jordan River. Passing, once again, from an old way of being into the promise of new life.

Today, Jesus is baptized by John. Literally stepping into the waters of the River Jordan. Metaphorically moving from his private life into his public ministry. Being empowered by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

A study done by the University of Michigan found a direct correlation between washing and guilt. Like Pontius Pilate or Lady Macbeth, washing of hands is one way we literally *and*

figuratively, wash away germs or sins or settle an unsettled conscious. There is, in fact, a link between physical cleanliness and letting go of past behavior.<sup>1</sup>

You may have noticed that I wash my hands before we consecrate the bread and wine. This is a symbol of washing away of impurities and getting ready for the sacred step of consecrating the bread and wine, symbolizing the body and blood of Jesus. What you may not know, unless you are a crucifer holding the water for me to wash my hands, is that I say a verse from the Psalm 51: “Create in me a clean heart and restore in me a right spirit.” This Psalm, attributed to David, is said to have been written after Nathan the Prophet came and called David to account for David’s relationship with Bathsheba. It represents David’s confession and plea for forgiveness and redemption. David prays: “Wash me thoroughly of my iniquity and purify me of my sin” and later “Wash me till I am whiter than snow” (Ps. 51:4, 9b). Washing is the outward and visible sign of repentance and a desire to move forward into a new life.

The baptism of John – for the repentance of sins- is a first step. The water is poured over you symbolically cleansing you from your past and preparing you for a new life- washed of your sins. *Ok, now I’ve been cleansed of my sins, so what?* Do I come back next year to repent of my new sins- for after all we are human and we will sin.

*Not if, but when.* John is quite clear: that while he is authorized to baptize for the repentance of sins, there is one coming after him who offers more – who offers the baptism of the Holy Spirit (Luke 3:15-17, 21-22).

Jesus brings us that next step. From John, laying on of hands and the immersion into the water – to the descent of the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove to Jesus with the voice from heaven. “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

One interesting thing about today’s Gospel is that the heavens opened up – indeed, the heavens tore apart. Not some gentle rending but rather a tearing. Symbolic of the fact that life going forward was definitely not going to be the same. Heaven and earth and connected through the Spirit descending like a dove upon Jesus. God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit- the Holy Trinity presented together at this time and place as Jesus leaves his private life and after a time in the wilderness will begin his public ministry.

In our baptism we are connected with all those that have gone before us as living members of the church. Baptism is what makes us a member of Christ’s church – the body of Christ that exists in the world to offer the good news to all. Baptism effects an ontological change – a wonderful phrase that boils down to “*something* is transformed” within us and we are different than we were before that water was poured over us and we too, heard the words: “You are my beloved; in you I am well pleased.” Somewhere within our soul, the curtain was torn and the heavens are opened to us and the Holy Spirit becomes part of who we are and what we will be.

As Episcopalians, we believe that we are baptized once- that the particulars of the service of baptism is not the defining characteristic. If you have been baptized with water and in the name

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.sciencemag.org/content/suppl/2010/05/06/328.5979.764-b.DC1/SciencePodcast\\_100507.pdf](http://www.sciencemag.org/content/suppl/2010/05/06/328.5979.764-b.DC1/SciencePodcast_100507.pdf)  
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of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, it does not matter whether you were sprinkled, dunked or immersed.

If you have been baptized once, you do not need to be baptized again – your baptism is “good” for all eternity. Still, it is good for all of us periodically throughout the year to be reminded of the importance of baptism. That is why The Episcopal Church has set aside certain Sundays as most appropriate for baptism. It doesn’t mean that we can’t baptize on other days; rather that on these particular days, it is a good time to be reminded of our baptism. That is what we do when we Renew Our Baptismal Vows. We are not being baptized again- rather we are remembering, together, our baptism.

In the *Thanksgiving over the Water* (BCP p. 306) said during our Baptismal service, we are reminded of our connection to those early Israelites, to Jesus and to the hope that lies before us:

We thank you, Almighty God, for the gift of water.  
**Over it** the Holy Spirit moved in the beginning of creation.  
**Through it** you led the children of Israel out of their bondage in Egypt into the land of promise. **In it** your Son Jesus received the baptism of John and was anointed by the Holy Spirit as the Messiah, the Christ, to lead us, through his death and resurrection, from the bondage of sin into everlasting life.

We thank you, Father, for the water of Baptism. **In it** we are buried with Christ in his death. **By it** we share in his resurrection. **Through it** we are reborn by the Holy Spirit. Therefore in joyful obedience to your Son, we bring into his fellowship those who come to him in faith, baptizing them in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Now sanctify this water, we pray you, by the power of your Holy Spirit, that those who here are cleansed from sin and born again may continue for ever in the risen life of Jesus Christ our Savior.

To him, to you, and to the Holy Spirit, be all honor and glory, now and for ever. *Amen.*

This day, as we remember the Baptism of our Lord, and our own Baptism into the Body of Christ, drink deep. Drink of the water that gives everlasting life. And hear the voice from heaven again: “You are my beloved. In you I am well pleased.” *Amen.*