

I'm sure that you, like me, have been praying for the people of Texas this week and for the other southern states hit by freezing temperatures. It is appalling to imagine having no power for days in the middle of a powerful freeze, and then to lose water. Looking at the news this morning I see that over 14million people are still without safe water. The problem is not restricted to Texas - Jackson Mississippi has also been without water and thousands there are still waiting for services to be restored.

Water is sacred, especially to desert dwellers and nomads. It is sacred to us not only because our bodies depend on it – without water we would die within 3 days – but because it is a symbol of God's covenant relationship with humanity and with creation. We even have a special prayer of thanksgiving which we use in the baptismal service. Let me read it to you:

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.

In the light of today's readings, it's interesting that this prayer doesn't even mention the Great Flood and the unconditional promise that God would not again destroy the whole of creation. But you can't fit everything into one prayer. So let's review the highlights it does mention:

We thank you, Almighty God, for the gift of water.  
Over it the Holy Spirit moved in the beginning of creation.

“In the beginning,” say the ancient writers, “God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters” (Gen 1: 1,2) Our scientific understanding of the origins of the universe may be a little different, but without light for photosynthesis and without water to drink and without the Spirit of God which animates animal flesh, there would be nothing. So in many ways they got it right. And of course, there is the echo of human birth in that image of the Spirit of God hovering over the waters, like a mother waiting and watching for her waters to break and the baby to come into this world. Creation is born on the breaking of the waters when God said “let there be an expanse between the waters” and we are born in the breaking of the waters of the womb.

Then the prayer fast forwards to the exodus, “Through it – water – you led the children of Israel out of their bondage in Egypt into the land of promise.” This is the formative event for the Hebrew people. In Egypt they were slaves but God brought them through the waters of the Red Sea which parted before them – and in that experience and the time in the desert, a band of disorganized and loosely associated people became the nation of God. Again this pivotal story is not fully supported by science – archeologists and historians have found little evidence that it actually happened.

But what we know is that story gives life. As we look back on our lives it is the way we tell the story that makes all the difference as to whether we have painful memories or memories of pain. And one of the things we do here week after week is to place our small personal and local stories into the context of that great story of God’s redemption and the salvation history of the people of God. Each one of us has stories of how we were lost in our own Egypts, sunk as the hymn says, in a miry pit, and God led us out.

I just had a little one this week. For months I have been tired and only just keeping my head above water and I have been praying that God would give me enough energy each day and help me to feel better. I took time off and it made no difference. I had a complete blood panel and my doctor found nothing unusual. I began to think that I would be dragging myself around for the rest of my life and so I changed my prayer. I asked God to show me what I needed to do. And almost immediately I remembered an alternative doctor who works with energy. One appointment and I feel better than I have for months. I was wondering around in the Egypt of exhaustion but God answered my prayer and that of many of you and brought me into the land of promise. No obvious water in that story, but each one of us has experiences of exodus.

God bringing the children of Israel out of their bondage in Egypt into the land of promise is not just an ancient myth; it is the story of us as well. Here at St. Benedict's we have spent at least 15 years trying to resolve the issue of a water sprinkler system to protect the building and prevent wild fire in the event of a fire. It has been fifteen years with different leaders leading us as best they can. And now, we are so close we can almost smell the water sitting in those big tanks – PG&E have informed us that they are about to do their bit and hook us up to power. After years of wandering and searching for the way forward, thanks to astonishingly generous financial gifts and tenacious leadership, we are coming out of the wilderness, through the water tanks into the promise land when the county building permit will finally be signed and the building of this church will be complete 21 years after it was moved here.

But I digress. Back to the prayer:

In [water] 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.

That's our gospel reading for today. It is in the waters of baptism that Jesus is publicly declared Messiah as the voice says, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." And what happened then? – just like the children of Israel wandering for forty years in the desert, so Jesus is led into the desert for forty days of fasting and temptation. And just as they were eventually brought to the land of promise, so Jesus comes back out of the desert to proclaim, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

And we are the people of time fulfilled, we are the ones who get to live the reign of God. We are the ones who are called to repent and believe. And I will remind you again that Jesus does not give us a creed to believe in – this belief is in the relationship with God. Jesus calls us back to walk in loving covenant with a loving God. And so the prayer reminds us that "the Messiah, the Christ, [leads] us, through his death and resurrection, from the bondage of sin into everlasting life."

We have not only been called but we have been led and wait, wait there's more...

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.

Isn't that amazing? The water of baptism. We use sacred water to show outwardly the inner truth of God's grace at work in our lives. In the waters of baptism we take part in this ancient story of death and rebirth. In the waters of baptism we take part in the creative work of God becoming part of the new creation, reborn by the Holy Spirit.

This, people of God, is who we are. We are the ones who are called to live the reign of God in these days. We are the ones who are called to be loving and forgiving. We are the ones who are not just called but led to share in the resurrection of the Christ, the great work of redemption in which the Christ is engaged.

That is what it means to be brought through the waters of baptism into the New Covenant, the one sealed with Christ's blood. This is not a

covenant that is beautiful in the clouds but then fades quickly – no this is a covenant which is here and now – which is lived in our response to God's grace as we are reborn by the Holy Spirit every day.

Praise God!