

The Great Vigil of Easter, 2015

Water: it's the most common substance on earth. We have seen its important role in many of the Gospel stories throughout Holy Week. In the middle of his Last Supper with his disciples, Jesus takes the clothes of a slave and washes the disciples feet with a basin of water: the water of forgiveness, the water of servanthood. When Pontius Pilate hands Jesus over to be crucified, he takes water and washes his hands of any responsibility: the water of evasion, of refusal to be accountable for our own decisions.

Tonight, water brings death – and Life.

For 400 years, the Israelites have been slaves to the Egyptians. God hears the cries of his people, and sends Moses to lead them out of slavery in Egypt into freedom in a promised land flowing with milk and honey. In order to force Pharaoh to free the Israelite slaves, God sends 9 plagues on Egypt; but to no avail. Finally, God visits a tenth plague upon the Egyptians: he sends the angel of death to strike down the firstborn of every living creature in Egypt, animal and human; but Death passes over the houses of the Israelites who have marked their doorposts with the blood of a lamb. Pharaoh is finally brought to his knees, and he releases the Hebrew slaves. But when they have gotten some distance away, Pharaoh changes his mind and sends his armies after them, to bring them back. The Israelites flee, but soon find themselves hemmed in: the Egyptian armies pursue from behind, while ahead lies the Red Sea. The people cry out to Moses, saying that it would be better for them to *live* as slaves in Egypt than to *die* in the wilderness. But God parts the sea with a mighty wind, creating a path through the waters, upon which the Israelites escape to freedom. When the Egyptian armies follow, however, their chariot wheels get stuck in the mud, and once all the Israelites are safely across, the waters return, drowning the Egyptians.

Water. Used in acts of forgiveness and servanthood; evasion and washing hands of responsibility; life-giving freedom, and life-taking drowning.

Before we were born, we floated in water in the womb of our mother. Before the world was created, the Holy Spirit hovered over the waters.

All these symbols, all these meanings – and more – converge in the waters of Baptism, where they are reinterpreted and transformed.

For in baptism, Jesus washes our feet, just as he washed his disciples' feet. In baptism, we take vows of *responsibility* to Jesus, *reversing* Pilate's washing his hands of responsibility. In baptism, our false, sinful self is put to death, just as the Egyptians were drowned in the Red Sea; and as the Israelites were brought from slavery into freedom through the waters of the Red Sea, so we are brought out of the slavery of sin into the freedom of life in Christ through the waters of baptism.

In baptism, our dry, dead bones are rehydrated and given sinews, muscle, flesh, and Life. In the waters of baptism we receive a *new* birth, more amazing even than our *first* birth, when we left the water of our mother's womb. The waters of baptism remind us of the waters present at the Creation of the world; but the *new* creation we become in Christ is *more* wondrous still.

In 1962, Anne Bancroft and Patty Duke won Oscars for their roles in the film *The Miracle Worker*, based on the life of Helen Keller. The transforming moment of the film comes when Anne Sullivan, tutor to the blind and deaf Helen, holds Helen's hands under some water flowing from a pump and, for what seems like the thousandth time, spells in sign language into Helen's hands the letters W-A-T-E-R. The young Helen springs to life, understanding for the first time what most of us discover as toddlers - that things have names. Helen Keller entered into a new world, a new dimension of life and growth at the water-pump that day. She walked away from that water-pump a new person.

W-A-T-E-R : it spells new life for us also, as we pass through the waters of baptism.

Friday night, Good Friday, we heard from John's Gospel that after Jesus had breathed his last breath on the cross, a Roman soldier pierced Jesus' side with his lance. And out of this wound flowed blood – *and* water. Now blood is understandable; but what is this water?

In two previous passages in John's Gospel, Jesus states that he is the source of "living water". (4:10-14; 7:37-38) Could this water flowing from the side of his lifeless body be this "living water"? Could what flows from Jesus' death bring us life?

One of the most powerful stories I know concerning the meaning of baptism is found in the animated Walt Disney film, *The Lion King*. The turning point of the story involves – water.

You may remember that in that film, Mufasa is the lion king who rules his animal kingdom with wisdom and kindness. But Mufasa's younger brother Scar is jealous that Mufasa's son, Simba, will inherit the throne rather than Scar. So Scar arranges a stampede. Mufasa is killed, Scar takes the throne, and Simba runs away to a far country – where he learns the easy life, free from all responsibilities.

But back in his homeland, Scar becomes a ruthless ruler of Mufasa's old kingdom, and soon the kingdom becomes a wasteland. A childhood friend of Simba escapes the kingdom and runs to find help from whatever source she can find. She runs into Simba, and wants him to return to live out his destiny as the lion king. Simba, however, is too attached to the easy life, free of responsibilities; and he refuses to return. But a baboon priest takes Simba to a pond, stirs the pond, and asks Simba to look into the water. Rather than seeing a reflection in the

water of himself, he sees instead his father Mufasa. Simba cannot escape his royal identity, revealed in the water. But he still has the choice whether to accept the responsibility which goes along with that identity, or to wash his hands of that responsibility.

Sarah, tonight you look into the baptismal waters, and see there the face of your *heavenly* Father. For in baptism, you are forever linked, through Christ, with God.

In the waters of baptism, all the different waters we have seen these past days meet and intermingle. In the waters of baptism, Jesus washes your feet, and gives you the example of servanthood. In the waters of baptism, you are reminded never to wash your hands of responsibility for the life of Christ in another person. Through the waters of baptism you pass from the slavery of sin to the freedom of new life in Christ. In the waters of baptism, your false, ego self is drowned, that you might be raised to newness of life.

All these meanings, and much more, suffuse the sacramental water which is poured on Sarah's head, and with which the rest of us will be sprinkled. The casual observer may think that this water is no different from any other, no different from what you might drink from the tap, or sprinkle on your lawn. But we know better. This water has come from the side of Jesus. Let us drink deep of that living water.

AMEN