

THOUGHTS FROM THE RHINELAND

I AM HAUNTED BY WATERS

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WATER, WATER, EVERYWHERE.

The very first words of the Bible are perhaps the most provocative. “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters” (Gn 1:1-2). These words stir up our imagination and all our age-old questions about our origins: Where are we from? How did it all begin? What was life like before us? Before God even speaks his first command, “Let there be light,” we have this first mysterious image: the Spirit hovering above the dark, inky, primordial waters.

God sees water when he first looked on the world, and the world first sees God in water. If we jump ahead to the Gospels, Jesus inaugurates his public ministry in an interesting manner: waist-deep in water. At the River Jordan, removed from the cities and civilized places, John got into the peculiar habit of dunking sinners underwater. In fact, God told him to do so (Jn 1:33). The practice became so central to his ministry that it became his very name, John the Baptizer (if translated over-literally, John the Plunger, or the Dipper). Jesus himself comes for baptism, and again the Spirit appears above the water, and again God’s voice is heard, “This is my beloved son” (Mt 3:17).

We ourselves begin our life in the “new world,” the Church, by water. Three times it is poured over our heads in baptism, the names of the Trinitarian Persons are said, and the Spirit rushes upon us to remain with us. Why does water appear at so many important moments?

This is not just any “Bible topic” reflection, but a very personal one. “I am haunted by waters,” says the narrator from the Norman Maclean story, *A River Runs Through It*, and from my earliest years this has echoed in my mind. Memories of water often revisit me and crowd out my thoughts: swimming in the summer, working on fishing boats, surfing on the west coast, or early winter mornings in college with the polar bear club. Perhaps I love water in a way that borders on obsession, but I would argue that you unknowingly love it just as much as I do. You need it just as much as I do.

If we learn to look around us, we realize we are all surrounded by water. We spent our first nine months in water; when we wake up, we wash our mouths and our bodies in it; we drink it, by itself and in some form in every drink; we throw it on each other in jest and in blessing; we travel to where it sits in very large pools, to gaze at it, lay by it, vacation by it; we pour it over the earth that it might grow; we discuss it daily, whether it will soon fall from the sky or not; we build shelters to keep it off our heads and our furniture.

WATER IS ESSENTIAL

The importance of water is especially seen in its oddities. In the world of chemistry, water behaves like a rebel without a cause. “All other liquids reduce in size when frozen, but as water begins to do so as it gets colder, it reaches its freezing point and inexplicably expands, about 7% in size. As a result, ice is lighter than water, so that it floats and thus keeps in the heat of the oceans. If water behaved like all other liquids, ice would be heavy and sink to the bottom. Ice would build up, and this would quickly lead to frozen seas and a frozen planet. Further, a high evaporation point gives rise to the water cycle (evaporation-condensation-

precipitation) which determines our weather and sustains life across the globe. Water's quirks provide a key ingredient in making our "blue planet" habitable.

The Psalmist was insightful in speaking of the "floodgates of heaven," for the air above us is permeated with water, with condensed clouds or hanging humidity. But all moisture from the water system above falls below to make its way into the system of each plant or animal. Water is the most useful and necessary element to all biological life. Although not every living thing breathes oxygen or needs light to survive, all life needs water. All moving things, down to the most miniscule microbes and each colony of bacteria—all creatures of our God and king—are swollen with water. It is no wonder that the earliest philosopher on the books, Thales (7th century B.C.), thought that all matter was fundamentally water. We ourselves are made of water, or at least 70% of us is made of it. Not a single cell would function in our body, nor would a single nutrient or signal be transferred without water. It bears mention that civilization first sprang up between two great rivers, the Tigris and the Euphrates. Our whole human experience—thinking, breathing, looking, walking—is made possible by water.

If you happen to attend your local parish spaghetti dinner, it's a watery affair. Your red wine is water-based; your pasta was once flour, then mixed with water and (over)boiled in water; the tomatoes for the sauce are 95% water; garlic bread has water in both the garlic and the bread; even your sausage and meatballs are water-based, as all flesh is; your cannoli is because cream is; and if you finish with a limoncello, even the strongest homemade batch leaves room for water. At the end of the meal, it was water on your tongue (saliva) which helped you taste it at all, water which helped you get rid of extra salts and wastes in your system, water which beaded together and cooled your forehead when the cook blew a fuse and the air-conditioning went out, and water which helped

you show appreciation for Alfredo, the local sixteen-year-old tenor whose aria brought tears to your eyes.

For whatever reason, known only to Him, God decided upon water as the source of life below.

BAPTISM: WATER'S TRUE VOCATION

For men of every age, water has symbolized both life and death. Hindus pour out their ashes in the Ganges to carry them to the afterlife. Many cultures pour out libations to pray for rain. The Jewish people did so in Jesus' time during the Feast of Tabernacles, and for times of drought, the Church actually provides a special collect (opening prayer) for Mass, asking God to "grant us sufficient rain". In dry climates, we are reminded that all rain is a gift of God.

On the other hand, water threatens man and causes him terror. Even the most sober, cynical fishermen grow worried over setting out in stormy seas, and the apostles were no exception, crying out and thinking they were to drown (Mt 8:25). Likewise, there will always be people believing tales about Loch Ness or other monsters rumored to be lurking beneath the surface. In fact, it was only in the past century that men ceased seeing whales exclusively as their dreadful foe at the edge of a harpoon, and realized they were mostly gentle creatures who even welcome human touch.

The Bible shares these same primary emotions: "You care for the earth, give it water . . . You drench its furrows, you level it, soften it with showers" (Ps 65:10); and, "I am drowned beneath your waves" (Ps 88:7). The same Red Sea that parts for Moses drowns Pharaoh (Ex 14).

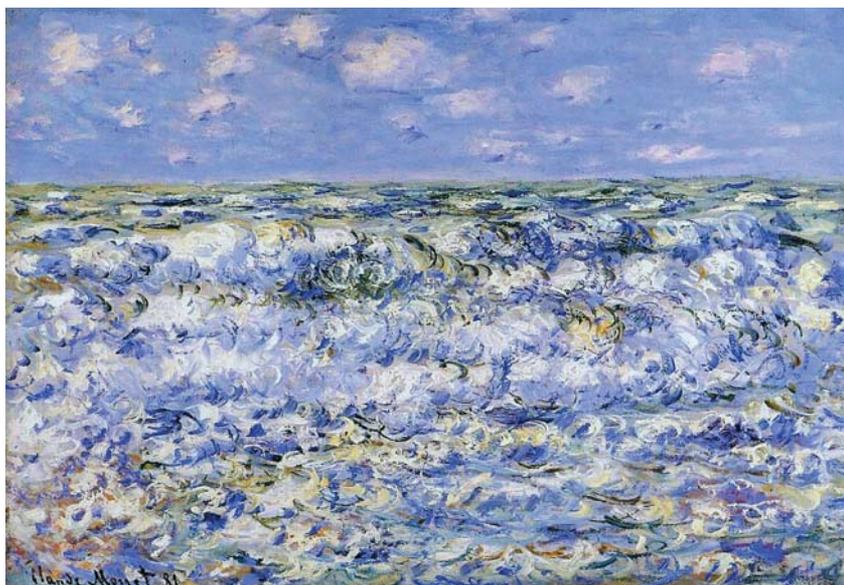
A third theme, water as cleansing, also shows up. Perhaps you have had a philosophical moment at the sink, as I once had, when it occurred to me, "What else would I wash my hands with?" Beyond its practical use, however, water became symbolic of interior cleansing for Israel. This is evidenced in the bronze laver in the Temple for washing upon entrance, as well as Solomon's "molten sea," an enormous tub for priests to wash in (1 Kgs 7:23).

The prophets use this same image: “You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea” (Mal 7:19); and, “Wash yourselves! Make yourselves clean . . . Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow” (Is 1:16–18). In the messianic psalm, water is a source of strength for the king about to be anointed: “He shall drink from the stream by the wayside, and therefore he shall lift up his head” (Ps 110:7).

Jesus finally brings about this true role, or vocation, of water. With him it is given power at last to truly strengthen and cleanse us down to our soul. John proclaimed clearly to the people, “I baptize you with water for repentance . . . he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit” (Mt 3:11). The blessing of baptismal water, read at the Easter Vigil, illustrates this point. It calls upon God, “who in many ways [has] prepared water, your creation, to show forth the grace of Baptism.” The priest recounts the role of water in the lives of Noah, Moses, and Jesus, then prays that the water now receive grace by the Holy Spirit, “so that human nature, created in your image and washed clean through the Sacrament of Baptism from all the squalor of the life of old, may be found worthy to rise to the life of newborn children through water and the Holy Spirit.” Christ is the Creator come among us. As he chose water in the beginning as the basis of biological life, he chooses it again for spiritual life: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them” (Mt 28:19). We place holy water at the doors of every church to remind us throughout all our life whence our life in Christ began. With a small amount of water and a few words, God heals the soul of its ancient curse and makes his home in it.

THE SPIRIT: WELLING UP WITHIN

In his dialogue with the Samaritan woman, Jesus adds an even further meaning to water, offering to every man a gift which “will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (Jn 4:14). He later cries out a similar promise at the Feast of Tabernacles,



CLAUDE MONET - WAVES BREAKING

and the evangelist writes, “Now this he said about the Spirit, which those who believed in him were to receive” (Jn 7:39). And this life of the Spirit, this inner fountain, wells up towards our neighbor. In an Easter Vigil homily (11 April 2009), Benedict XVI comments:

In Baptism, the Lord makes us not only persons of light, but also sources from which living water bursts forth. We all know people like that, who leave us somehow refreshed and renewed; people who are like a fountain of fresh spring water. We do not necessarily have to think of great saints like Augustine, Francis of Assisi, Teresa of Avila, Mother Teresa of Calcutta and so on, people through whom rivers of living water truly entered into human history. Thanks be to God, we find them constantly even in our daily lives: people who are like a spring.

In the first part of his book *Jesus of Nazareth*, Benedict XVI recounts an alternate reading of this passage by the Eastern Fathers Origen and Clement of Alexandria, who see Jesus himself as the spring of water: “The promised river of life that allows the fullness of life to ripen and bear fruit really does exist. It is He who, in ‘loving to the end,’ endured the Cross and now lives with a life that can never again be threatened by death. It is the living Christ.” Jesus quenches a deeper thirst than that of our sodium levels. In all men there is an inner tension between their thirst for both *bios* and *zoé*. Translated from Greek, both words mean “life,” but while the first stands for biological life, the second is the fullness of life, “life in abundance” (Jn 10:10). Thomas Dubay writes,

You are a thirst. Every single choice you make all day long is proof that you seek, you desire, you want... Even after the most thrilling experience (a success, a vacation, a party, a date, a dance), when you are quiet and alone, you perceive deep down a small voice saying, ‘Is that all there is?’ Nothing is enough: not praise, not success, not youth, not love. You are a thirst. (*And You Are Christ's*, 21)

Or as restless Augustine said, “Late have I loved you... You breathed your fragrance on me; I drew in breath and now I pant for you. I have tasted you, now I hunger and thirst for more” (*Confessions*, Book X). It is this thirst which only baptism can begin to quench, when we receive the life of God which gives inner life to our desert souls. Pope Benedict insists, “The saints are oases around which life sprouts up and something of the lost paradise returns.” All those quenched are called to quench others. Those who receive grace from Jesus who is the Source become sources themselves.

Water is also an image of eternity. Gazing at the horizon from the ocean shore, it seems to stretch out forever. Even our best instruments can only explore so much of the deep abyss. Men

like Jacques Cousteau, who spent their lives exploring it, studying its creatures, inventing the SCUBA to breathe underwater, barely scratched the surface of this vast frontier. We are reasonably sure that mermaids are a fiction, but we have yet to discover the vast majority of an estimated thirty million species of sea animals which, until discovered, remain fictions. Below the surface is a world and hierarchy all its own. Our maps of the ocean floor are drastically approximate; we still have yet to develop any creative means of preventing shark attacks; we cannot explain the complex coordinated efforts of coral reef spawning; we do not even know where the world's largest creature in all of history, the blue whale, spends most of its time; only once have we traveled seven miles down the deepest trench, the Mariana, only to disturb a flatfish on the floor and to sit a few minutes in the dark. Bill Bryson reminds us that despite mankind's many technological advances, we are still catching fish in the most rudimentary way: "We're still in the Dark Ages. We just drop a net and see what comes up" (*Short History of Nearly Everything*, 354).

For those on the shore, whether you are a grandfather or a grandson, the mere vastness of the ocean makes you stop and stare. "Waves of wonder without create waves of wonder within," said Peter Kreeft in his lecture "The Sea and Spirituality." If all of creation provides signs which remind us of God, the ocean is the best and biggest. Philosophers and theologians say that in heaven we will see God as he truly is, yet we will not comprehend him. We will not understand him exhaustively as he understands us. An image of this is a child swimming at the edge of the sea. Returning from summer vacation he tells his classmates, "I swam in the Atlantic Ocean." Although in reality he merely tumbled about in the two-foot surf, he really did swim in the ocean.

And when we draw near to this large and sparkling body, what curious effect does our encounter with it produce in us? We learn to play. Seen with the right eyes, the beach is a foretaste of heaven. Responsible adults shout and run and play catch with their

children; they dive into the surf like children; they build castles again and dig holes; they nap in public like their children. For those content to just read and be near the water, they usually do not leave for home without at least putting their feet in. Even for landlocked people, a swimming pool creates a similar environment. Kids leap from the diving board endlessly in an endless variety of entries: the cannonball, pencil, egg drop, swan's dive, sailor's dive, mummy, back flip. Or they take up incessant games like Marco Polo, or simply revert to dunking. Even for adults, the water bug of their youth often does not end, and like all good amphibians, it evolves into lap swimming. The same frog kick, backstroke, and Australian crawl they learned in swim lessons, they employ through old age. The highest prize in all water recreation, however, goes to surfing. It is more difficult than most imagine, yet by far the most peaceful and contemplative sport. No more than a brief reference of its unique joy ought to be said of it, as the Father of Modern Surfing, Duke Kahanamoku, often repeated in his native Hawaiian, "Mahape a ale wala'ua—Don't talk. Keep it in your heart."

CONCLUSION

Water is at the source of life on earth and life in grace. It is uniquely practical and uniquely symbolic. When we seek to pay tribute to our departed, we have a habit of building reflecting pools, such as the 9/11 and the WWII memorials. Water reminds us of peace, which we hope for in the world to come. We also hope for a fullness of life in God's kingdom: "The earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea" (Is 11:9); and, "With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. And you will say in that day: Give thanks to the Lord!" (Is 12:3). Just as Ezekiel saw a vision of a great life-giving river issuing from the Temple (Ez 47), the Heavenly Jerusalem has a river flowing from God's throne, which waters the Tree of Life, from whose branches the saints take fruit (Rev 22). Just as the Bible begins with water,

the very last sentences close with water: “The Spirit and the Bride say, ‘Come.’ And let him who is thirsty come, let him who desires take the water of life without price” (Rev 22:17).

As a final consideration, we should recount some of the many comparisons made between water and the Virgin Mary. An early medieval tradition by way of St. Jerome gives her the title “Star of the Sea,” the protector of sailors and the compass guiding all Christians on their journey home to God. Others call her the sea, as her name is similar to that for “sea” in Latin. St. Louis de Montfort writes, “God the Father gathered all the waters together and called them the seas (maria). He gathered all his graces together and called them Mary (Maria)” (*True Devotion to Mary*). A final symbol was offered in a sermon by St. Bernard, who describes Mary as God’s aqueduct. Through her, grace flowed into the world in Jesus Christ, and by her intercession, grace continues to flow upon God’s children. Mary our Mother, pray for us, that God’s life, the water within us, may grow ever greater in our lives and flow out to a world so often forgetful of its thirst for God.

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