

**The Rev. Christine Love Mendoza**  
**The Church of the Good Shepherd**  
**The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost –Sunday, August 30, 2020**

Water is mentioned 719 times in our holy scriptures. While fewer than the number of references to God, Jesus, heaven, or love, it is much greater than the number of references to faith, hope, prayer, or even worship. Water is mentioned in the very first sentence of our scriptures...at the very beginning of our creation story in the Book of Genesis. “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.” (Gen. 1:1-2) These primordial waters existed before us – before light and land, even before the heavens.

God’s second act of creation was to separate the waters above and below: “And God said, ‘Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.’ So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so. God called the dome Sky.” (Gen. 1:6-8a) Water forms the foundation of all life – life as we know it under the sky dome, as well as in the heavens above. This life was then nourished and made fruitful by these very same waters.

And yet, also from the very beginning, water has been not only an agent of creation, but also an agent of destruction. Curiously, these twin powers of creation and destruction are less in opposition than they are two sides of the very same coin. There seems to be a natural movement from one to the other. In one of the most harrowing stories in our holy scriptures, we read that God used the mighty power of water to destroy nearly all of life on earth, save the remnant found in the ark. And yet as these waters receded, God brought forth life again.

Despite much energy and ingenuity expended by humans over the millennia, it has always been difficult to tame the wild creative and destructive forces of water. We may find we are clever and successful for a time, but all it takes is one unplanned and uncontrollable force of nature to destroy our illusions of control. The storm brings torrential rains; the levee breaks; the sea surges inland; the river carves new paths as it wishes; the once quiet brook becomes a mighty and powerful channel of nature’s uncontrollable power. Not unlike how we so often attempt to contain God in a box of our own comfortable design, neither God nor water is content to reside tamely within our constraints for long.

Throughout scripture we also find water used to mark a significant transition from one state or condition to another. With divine assistance, Moses led the Israelites across the Red Sea, marking their transition from Egyptian slavery to liberation. Forty years later, Aaron led the Israelites across the River Jordan, signaling their movement from a desert journey of purification to rightful residence in the land promised them by God. Hebrew law frequently employs water to mark the important transition from the state of sin to that of ritual and communal purity.

And, of course, John the Baptizer immersed repentant Israelites in the River Jordan, not only re-enacting the crossing of this river led by Aaron, but also as a sign of returning to right relationship with God in preparation for the coming of the Messiah. Jesus even sought out baptism by John in order to publicly mark his transition into his public ministry. The imagery of Jesus being baptized in the river as preparation for his mission and ministry, one that eventually would lead to the cross, became so essential that the earliest Christians further developed this baptismal theology to use the waters of baptism to mark an initiate’s transition to becoming followers of Jesus and his Way of the cross.

It’s no wonder that I’ve been thinking a lot about water recently. Friday evening, I sat rapt as Tropical Depression Laura began to move in – the pressure and temperature falling, as the skies darkening, the wind picking up and the quality of light changing color... and then the rains began. Like many, I had been carefully following the progression of Hurricane Laura in the news last week as it entered the warm and shallow waters of the Gulf of Mexico and gained strength and ferocity. I

watched the meteorologist's predictions of its path with dismay as I realized that just three years ago – this very weekend! – I was preaching my goodbye sermon at my parish in Texas, immediately following the devastating wreckage that Hurricane Harvey wrought over Texas and Louisiana.

Yesterday, we also remembered the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the still nearly incomprehensible disaster brought by Hurricane Katrina along the Gulf Coast that killed over 120,000 people, and the cascading devastation experienced in New Orleans by the subsequent rising flood waters. I have been reminded again of the horror of watching the aftermath of the terrible storm, as the levees burst and the bowl of New Orleans filled. Thousands upon thousands of residents were trapped in the flooded city with little access to food, shelter, or basic necessities – trapped on rooftops, in boats, and in the rapidly deteriorating conditions of the shelter of last resort in the Superdome. And this tragedy was followed only a few weeks later by Hurricane Ike which inflicted lasting terrible damage in and around Houston and Galveston.

As devastating as the fierce winds of storms like these, even they pale in comparison to the powerful destructive force of flood waters. In the past 100 years, no other kind of natural disaster in America has caused more death and destruction than floods. They can happen any at place, any day, and any time, and are likely to only get worse.

While lives have been and will be changed forever by tragedies such as these, I take comfort in the promise that our God is the God who continually brings forth new life from what has been torn down and washed away. And for those who suffer, I pray not so much for the restoration and rebuilding of an old life, but rather for gracious resurrection into new and different life. I sympathize though, for what had been is gone and will be is yet unknown.

For me, it is important to remember that water not only has the power to destroy and create; it also has the power to *transform*. This power of transformation is clearly evident within our physical world. Many of the features of the Earth's surface have been formed by the cutting and eroding action of moving water.

In a similar way, the waters of baptism reshape our lives. As Christians, we believe that through the waters of baptism we die to ourselves and our old lives, and are reborn into a new life shared within the Body of Christ. Through our initiation into the Body of Christ, our Christian *formation* begins. Like moving water flowing over rocks, our lives are molded over time to be cruciform-shaped. It is the Apostle Paul who teaches us that when we take on the mind of Christ – when we act, love and participate in the way of life that Christ embodied – we are formed more and more into Christ's very likeness. For most of us, this transformation – our conversion – happens slowly over the course of our lives.

*Sometimes, however, this formation is more like a mighty storm, chiseling into us suddenly and sharply, changing us in unexpected ways and re-charting the course of our lives with surprising speed and ferocity.* So often, fearsome experiences such as these are the crosses of our flawed and fragile humanity that we must bear as we follow Christ. But, if we remain centered in God, we may discover, within this newly and surprisingly transformed life, the eternal life found in resurrection. Jesus promises us that the Kingdom of God is already in-breaking and we may taste it now, even as we wait for its coming in fullness.

I treasure this hopeful promise because I am living the new life of resurrection. I know resurrection personally. But this joy is not one that came easily or comfortably. As Jesus taught, the acorn must first die and fall from the tree before it can transform into new life. Likewise, the journey to resurrection first passes through the valley of the shadow of death. This is uncomfortable – it is painful and few of us eagerly choose this path. Usually it is chosen for us and we find ourselves with no other alternative than to shoulder our burden and follow Christ. All roads eventually do lead to the cross, but our hope is found in the assurance that the journey does not end there. Following Christ, we, too, may journey through the cross and into the new life found beyond.

Amen.