



Living Water

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WATER

A warm shower, a boiling cauldron, a refreshing drink, a drowning torrent, a wet washcloth, a block of ice... cleansing, putrid, ample, scarce, placid, turbulent... quiet waves, killer tsunami, trickling sustenance, violent downpour, flowing spring, raging flood, storm, where the whale swims: these are all related to water in its “beneficent” and “ominous”¹ dimensions. All these dimensions and more are presumed and encompassed by baptism.²

BAPTISM

The church says this about baptism:

Here is born in Spirit-soaked fertility
a brood destined for another city,
begotten by God’s blowing
and borne upon this torrent
by the church their virgin mother.
Reborn in these depths they reach heaven’s realm,
the born-but-once-unknown-by felicity.

¹These are the words of Carl Schalk about Jaroslav Vajda’s hymn, “God of the Sparrow.” See Paul Westermeyer, *Hymnal Companion to Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2010) 603 (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* #740).

²See Gail Ramshaw, “Water,” in *Treasures Old and New: Images in the Lectionary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002) 401–409, for a sketch of these matters in greater detail.

Words, symbols, and images of water rush and tumble through the church’s liturgy, architecture, and music like an ever-flowing stream. Water matters to God and to us, and we are wise to embrace it in our poetry and in our worship.

This spring is life that floods the world,
the wounds of Christ its awesome source.
Sinner, sink beneath this sacred surf
that swallows up age and spits up youth.
Sinner, here scour sin down to innocence,
for they know no enmity who are by
one font, one Spirit, one faith made one.
Sinner, shudder not at sin's kind and number,
for those here are holy.³

And this:

God, who is rich in mercy and love, gives us new birth into a living hope through the sacrament of baptism. By water and the Word God delivers us from sin and death and raises us to new life in Jesus Christ. We are united with the baptized in the one body of Christ, anointed with the gift of the Holy Spirit, and joined in God's mission for the life of the world.⁴

FONTS

God delivers us “by water and the Word” as we are “born in Spirit-soaked fertility” from a spring of “life that floods the world.” Not surprisingly, therefore, fonts adorn our worship spaces. These may hold shells or bowls into which water is poured, or they may be tubs.⁵ Sometimes, giving visual expression to one of the many meanings of baptism, they are shaped like a womb⁶ or a well⁷ or a cross⁸ or a tomb.⁹ Preferably they enclose “living water.” Edward Sövik explains this preference. It is “generally accepted,” he says,

that the water should be moving water. Among the ancient documents the *Didache* and *Apostolic Tradition* ask explicitly for running water. It is clear that the association of the rite with Jesus' baptism is somehow stronger if the water can be moving. It is also clear, disregarding the historical references, that if the water is to be a metaphor of God's grace, then static water is not as good a metaphor as flowing water. And once the decision to provide flowing water is made, it should be constant, night and day; for to turn it off is to destroy the power of the metaphor.¹⁰

The metaphor has led the church quite naturally to construe the meaning of font from its derivation as fountain or spring and to make it a pool or the bed and banks of a stream or river.

³Inscription in the baptistery in the basilica of St. John Lateran, Rome (fifth century), *Liturgy* 15/3 (1999) 11 (this entire issue of *Liturgy* is on the theme of “Water”).

⁴“Holy Baptism,” *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006) 227.

⁵See “The Font as Tub,” *Liturgy* 15/3 (1999) 17.

⁶See “The Font as Womb,” *Liturgy* 15/3 (1999) 13.

⁷See “The Font as Well” *Liturgy* 15/3 (1999) 20–21.

⁸See “The Font as Cross,” *Liturgy* 15/3 (1999) 25–27.

⁹See “The Font as Tomb,” *Liturgy* 15/3 (1999) 35.

¹⁰Edward Anders Sövik, “Designing the Baptismal Vessel,” *Liturgy* 15/3 (1999) 39.

SPACES

Since baptism initiates the Christian journey and living water continually springs from it, we often orient our worship spaces to the water and what holds it so that when we enter we might

...to that water flie [where]
 You [God] taught the Book of Life my name, that so
 What ever future sinnes should me miscall,
 Your first acquaintance might discredit all.¹¹

Not surprisingly, therefore, baptismal spaces come to be adorned with immediately meaningful physical objects of devotion that mark specific moments in people's individual lives. These spaces also come to be adorned with more carefully crafted physical objects that point to the significance of baptism and its trajectory across larger arcs of time in the community's deeper and less immediate—but no less potent—understanding. So flora and fauna in connection with water images graced fourth-century fonts, and images of drowning and rising have been employed. A journey might be ironically symbolized to remind us further of the baptized going forth from their “acquaintance” with God at the water.

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The water of baptism also joins the wine and wheat of the Lord's Supper to make of the whole house of worship a “banquet hall on holy ground” where “the love of God through Jesus is revealed” and “where peace and justice meet.”¹² Stained glass and icons appear throughout the space with baptismal and other symbols of what happens there. Such a place is not a temple; we are the temples. Nor is such a place a church, though we refer to it that way because it is where the people who are the church gather before they scatter into the world to be what they have just received. Such a place does not become a banquet hall on holy ground with only the presence of physical elements. The word of God is proclaimed there in conjunction with the physical elements. In this “word house” or “mouth-house” (*Mundhaus*, to use Luther's term), we are made a “new creation by water and the word.”¹³ Water, like bread and wine, points to how God comes to us—physically in Christ and physically in the common elements of the earth—where, with the word, as Luther says, God in Christ chooses to be present “for you.”

¹¹George Herbert, “H. Baptisme (I),” *The Poems of George Herbert* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961) 37.

¹²Marty Haugen, “All Are Welcome,” *ELW* #641.

¹³Samuel J. Stone, “The Church's One Foundation,” *ELW* #654.

HYMNS

The church in its hymns has explored water in a flood of poetic imagery. Here are a few such examples, restricted to those that relate to “living water.” Examples of other poetic imagery will follow later.

- With a cue from Ps 42, “as the deer runs to the river,” we come as “thirsty pilgrims” to Jesus, the “source of living water,”¹⁴ the “ever-flowing fountain” and “well.”¹⁵
- “Crashing waters” at creation were the first “to witness day’s beginning”; “parting water” trembled as the captives passed through and the chains of bondage were washed away; the Jordan witnessed “cleansing water”; and the Holy Three is addressed as “living water, never-ending” and “Wellspring, source of life eternal,” who “quench the thirst,” “flood the soul,” “drench our dryness, [and] and make us whole.”¹⁶
- We drink of Jesus, the “life-giving stream.”¹⁷
- “Living water” flows with “soul-refreshing streams.”¹⁸
- Baptism is about “life anew” in “living waters.”¹⁹
- The “still waters” of Ps 23 show up in metrical paraphrases as “streams of living water,”²⁰ “quiet waters,”²¹ “quiet waters of peace,”²² and “living stream.”²³
- The “Living Water of salvation” is “the fountain of each soul” which springs up “in new creation, flows in us and makes us whole.”²⁴

TUNES

Not surprisingly, we set these poetic images to tunes and sing them; but then things get less clear. We can see water and what it does in both its beneficent and ominous dimensions. We can see vessels and what adorns them. We can see the spaces that surround them. We can understand words not only when they are carefully delineated, but when they join other words to spawn more multifaceted insights. But what happens when music joins the party? We can describe its keys, its forms, and its rhythmic schemes; but these sonic realities happen in time, not in space. And they happen *in* but *beyond* our mental comprehension. We cannot see them like water or comprehend them the way we comprehend words. They sound,

¹⁴Herman Stuempfle, “As the Deer Runs to the River,” *ELW* #331.

¹⁵Delores Dufner, “Come to Me, All Pilgrims Thirsty,” *ELW* #777.

¹⁶Sylvia Dunstan, “Crashing Waters at Creation,” *ELW* #455.

¹⁷Horatius Bonar, “I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say,” *ELW* #332.

¹⁸Christopher Wordsworth, “O Day of Rest and Gladness,” *ELW* #521.

¹⁹Nikolai Grundtvig, “Cradling Children in His Arm,” *ELW* #444.

²⁰Henry Baker, “The King of Love My Shepherd Is,” *ELW* #502.

²¹*The Psalms of David in Meter* (Edinburgh, 1650), *ELW* #778.

²²Marty Haugen, “Shepherd Me, O God,” *ELW* #780.

²³Isaac Watts, “My Shepherd, You Supply My Need,” *ELW* #782.

²⁴Marty Haugen, “Tree of Life and Awesome Mystery,” *ELW* #334.

order time, and disappear, just like time that passes away. So what does music with its momentary temporality signify?

Tunes happen in time, not in space. And they happen in but beyond our mental comprehension. We cannot see them like water or comprehend them the way we comprehend words.

Part of the joy and delight of this question is that it cannot easily be answered. So, what we say might be nonsense, an observation that tempts one to remain silent. But, still, something can be said, albeit with gentle suggestion. For example:

- The tune WET SAINTS for “I’m Going on a Journey”²⁵ takes the textual journey on a musical course by means of a gently persistent swing and a place for meditation after every phrase.
- ENGELBERG gives a fittingly explosive setting to “We Know That Christ Is Raised.”²⁶ John Geyer wrote the text with this tune in mind. He exploited its forward stride by linking it to the Spirit’s baptismal “fission [that] shakes the church of God,” put the word “embraced” on the octave whose pitches frame the whole tune, let the tune’s inner power between those pitches signal the break of death’s embrace, and then followed the upward arc of the tune with “blazing joy” and “Alleluia” in the drive to the high fifth as the surprising and unusual final note.

We do not consciously think about syntactic musical details like this when we sing hymns. But the contours of sound in time that our tunes provide give us the means to, as Luther knew, sing the good news. As Carl Schalk points out, “to ‘say and sing’²⁷ was always a single concept for Luther, resulting from the eruption of joyful song in the heart of the redeemed.”²⁸ To say and sing also gives us fresh ears to hear. Music is, as Luther also knew so well, the *viva vox evangelii*, the living voice of the gospel.²⁹ That is, music lives as sound in time, and each singing is always a new and “living” one.

LIVING

It is striking that we speak of the water of baptism as “living” water and the music we sing as the “living” voice of the gospel. It is striking, but not surprising. Baptism is about new *life*. The “living” water we use reflects that life, and the singing we do expresses it. Water moves in space and may make actual sounds in time,

²⁵Edward Bonnemère, WET SAINTS, *ELW* #446.

²⁶Charles Stanford, ENGELBERG, *ELW* #449.

²⁷Luther’s “sing’n und sagen will” at the end of the first stanza of *Vom himmel hoch* points to this, as Carl Schalk suggests (“From Heaven Above,” *ELW* #268). See Carl F. Schalk, *Luther on Music: Paradigms of Praise* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1988) 39.

²⁸Schalk, *Luther on Music*, 39.

²⁹See *ibid.*, 30.

while the word of God resounds with music in time as well as in the acoustical space. Together they form a whole that is larger than their separate parts.

Actually, the whole is larger; it includes the banquet hall, its holy ground, and its iconography. Even the whole, as well as its parts, spills beyond anything we can fully express. Fonts and their designs, worship spaces and their architecture, icons and their meanings, hymns and their imagery, music and its syntax have flooded the world with various forms. A multiplicity of further examples and discussions naturally pour out of what has been said. A list of more hymns in which imagery about water is present can serve as a synecdoche for this whole.

MORE HYMNS

- “Sister water” joins all creatures to “worship God most high.”³⁰ “Longing for water”³¹ we are “baptized in water”³² and “nourished by water.”³³
- Miriam sings of Pharaoh’s army “drowned beneath the sea.”³⁴
- Justice is likened to “streams of sparkling water,” which is pure, enables growth, and is refreshing, abundant, cleansing, and sure; righteousness is likened to an ever-flowing stream “of faith translated into deed.”³⁵
- Water tumbles over rocks in God’s good creation.³⁶
- Water and the word revive us and join us to God’s “Tree of life.”³⁷
- God brings “cool water to the desert’s burning sand”; “from this well comes living water quenching thirst in every land.”³⁸
- We are “renewed by floods of grace.”³⁹
- We ask for “water from the rock.”⁴⁰
- We recall the “water and the blood” from Jesus’ crucified side.⁴¹
- Jesus is “manifest” at “Jordan’s stream” and at Cana, “changing water into wine.”⁴²
- The Spirit enters by water and the word in a “seal both felt and heard”; water is the “sacred sign” that we must die and rise each day, and it “washes us through all our days.”⁴³

³⁰Francis of Assisi, “All Creatures, Worship God Most High,” *ELW* #835.

³¹Bernadette Farrell, “Christ, Be Our Light,” *ELW* #715.

³²Michael Seward, “Baptized in Water,” *ELW* #456.

³³Cathy Skogen-Soldner, “Baptized and Set Free,” *ELW* #453.

³⁴Herman Stuempfle, “For All the Faithful Women,” *ELW* #419.

³⁵Jane Parker Huber, “Let Justice Flow like Streams,” *ELW* #717.

³⁶Ramon and Sara Oliano, “Lord, Your Hands Have Formed,” *ELW* #554.

³⁷Susan Palo Cherwien, “O Blessed Spring,” *ELW* #447.

³⁸Rusty Edwards, “Praise the One Who Breaks the Darkness,” *ELW* #843.

³⁹Ruth Duck, “Remember and Rejoice,” *ELW* #454.

⁴⁰Christian David, “Rise, O Sun of Righteousness,” *ELW* #657.

⁴¹Augustus Toplady, “Rock of Ages, Cleft for Me,” *ELW* #623.

⁴²Christopher Wordsworth, “Songs of Thankfulness and Praise,” *ELW* #310.

⁴³Thomas Herbranson, “This Is the Spirit’s Entry Now,” *ELW* #448.

- Water “blesses.”⁴⁴
- We “wade in the water” that God troubles, and I know “I’ve been redeemed” if you “just follow me down to Jordan’s stream.”⁴⁵
- We pray that God will wash our sons and daughters where “cleansing waters flow” and number them among “water-washed and Spirit-born” people of God.⁴⁶
- By water we share in Christ’s saving death.⁴⁷
- As we start our journey, our heads are wet with Christ’s mark that says God loves us.⁴⁸
- The “means divine” are found “beneath the water and the word” as they are “beneath the bread and wine.”⁴⁹

Water, word, bread, and wine under the Spirit’s living presence are no small matters. That they have stimulated such an amazing array of art, architecture, poetry, and music illustrates that reality.

- In the “water and the witness,” God has “made a new beginning.”⁵⁰
- “When the thirsty pass the cup, water to share....We see God, here by our side, walking our way.”⁵¹
- “The cup of water giv’n for you [Son of Man] still holds the freshness of your grace.”⁵²
- Our song “rolls” like “rushing mighty water.”⁵³
- “Springs of water bless the Lord, and we are bathed in the fountain of life.”⁵⁴
- The Father, Son, and Spirit are revealed in the water of “waterlife.”⁵⁵
- We are born of “water and the Spirit.”⁵⁶

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

At the end of the introduction in the *Hymnal Companion to Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, I said that a good hymnal “suggests seriousness of purpose as the

⁴⁴Shirley Erena Murray, “Touch the Earth Lightly,” *ELW* #739.

⁴⁵African American spiritual, “Wade in the Water,” *ELW* #459.

⁴⁶Ruth Duck, “Wash, O God, Our Sons and Daughters,” *ELW* #445.

⁴⁷John Geyer, “We Know That Christ Is Raised,” *ELW* #449.

⁴⁸Kenneth Larkin, “I’m Going on a Journey,” *ELW* #446.

⁴⁹Henry Alford, “We Walk by Faith,” *ELW* #635.

⁵⁰John Ylvisaker, “We Are Baptized in Christ Jesus,” *ELW* #451.

⁵¹José Antonio Olivar, “When the Poor Ones,” *ELW* #725.

⁵²Frank North, “Where Cross the Crowded Ways of Life,” *ELW* #719.

⁵³Nikolai Grundtvig, “The Bells of Christmas,” *ELW* #298.

⁵⁴Robert Buckley Farlee, “Springs of Water, Bless the Lord,” *ELW* #214.

⁵⁵Handt Hanson, “Waterlife,” *ELW* #457.

⁵⁶Benjamin Schmolck, “Dearest Jesus, We Are Here,” *ELW* #443.

church continues day after day to take up its role in the world.⁵⁷ Not every hymn or tune in a hymnal is worth keeping for successive generations. Nor is every font, icon, or space for worship. But water, word, bread, and wine under the Spirit's living presence are no small matters. That they have stimulated such an amazing array of art, architecture, poetry, and music illustrates that reality. Not all of it is worth keeping, to be sure, but some of it is.

Water is the stuff of life and new life. It is no small matter. The living voice of the gospel that we sing around it is no small matter either. If we as church expect to be taken seriously, the seriousness of purpose our fonts and hymnals have embodied will not be dismissed in the froth of the culture's mirage. If we are wise, we will embrace it in the living flood and finest crafting of the church's being. ☩

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⁵⁷Westermeyer, *Hymnal Companion*, xxiii.