

Matthew 3: 13 – 17     “Waters of Our Baptism”  
Newtonbrook United Church – January 9, 2011

We begin by pouring water into the baptismal font, followed by a moment of silence.

Water – the ancients in their wisdom believed that water was one of the four elements of matter here on earth. Those elements were” earth, air, fire and water.

That ancient belief has been affirmed by our scientific knowledge because we know that life would not exist without water. In fact, we are more than 60 per cent water! Whatever affects the waters of the earth, affects ALL of life, and us as human beings. No water: no life!

Water is a participant – yes, I said “participant” in our baptismal rites.  
How many people here this morning have been baptized with water?  
How many have witnessed a baptism with water?

According to our Christian faith, water is a participant in baptism as “living water”<sup>1</sup>. That’s why I use the word “participant”, rather than saying that we “USE” water in baptism. The water is alive!

In baptism water is also symbolic. One of the functions of water is to wash away / cleanse. In baptism water symbolizes the washing away of the old and the beginning of a new life in Christ. So, one of the questions that we have, as Christians, has to do with how this new life that we experience in Christ affects our journey. Does our baptism make a difference in how we live from day-to-day?

Is baptism just a “rite” of passage; a religious ceremony? Is it just a “nice” action that we do in church because we are “nice people” OR, does it mean that our journey is different because we have been baptized, and we take our baptism seriously? Does baptism lead to transformation?

**I believe that when the novelty of baptism wears off,  
Christian discipleship begins.**

I know that there are people here this morning, I won’t say who, people who participate in lotteries. Lotteries, and the pleasures of winning and the satisfaction that money brings, were in the news this week.

Every day there are just under 900 million people who play the water lottery<sup>2</sup>. For about 900 million of God’s children – our sisters and brothers on this planet – drinking water is like participating in a lottery. Look at the image on the screen ( *a glass ½ full of water* ). Imagine that the water in the glass is nourishing, life-giving water. Now imagine that it might contain deadly, invisible diseases such as cholera, dengue fever, giardia,

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<sup>1</sup> See John 4: 5 – 16 for a story of “living water”

<sup>2</sup> [www.issafrica.org/iss\\_today.php?ID=1012](http://www.issafrica.org/iss_today.php?ID=1012)

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Hepatitis A, or river blindness. Maybe it is water that is downstream from a mine tailings pond and the water contains heavy metals such as mercury, lead, and arsenic.

Up to 4,500 people die every day due to waterborne illness.

*“The irony is that unlike many systemic crises around God’s world, clean water and sanitation are achievable goals. ... A \$1 investment in sanitation leads up to \$34 in return. The only thing in short supply is the political will for change.”<sup>3</sup>*

**When the novelty of baptism wears off, discipleship begins – and Christians can make their voices heard to insure that the waters of our baptism are LIVING WATERS once again.**

It’s easy for us in Canada to distance ourselves from water problems in other parts of God’s world. On Saturday fresh water fell as snow and it blanketed our city. I scooped up some of it from the street, and it has melted. I’m pouring it into this beaker. Anyone for a drink? Should I use it for baptism?

The taste may a bit salty – but we won’t worry about that, will we?

The City of Toronto, according to their website<sup>4</sup>, pours 130,000 to 150,000 metric tones of salt on our streets and sidewalks each year. That salt gets dissolved in water – the bit that doesn’t end up as rust on my car that is. The melted snow, and the salt it contains, flows through the City storm sewers into Lake Ontario. It becomes our drinking water: it becomes part of us.

Maybe you don’t want to drink this water – maybe you simply want to just bathe in this baptismal brine.

How long can this go on without affecting the fish, the wildlife, even the humans? This is the life-giving water, the water that “participates” in our baptism.

*“Think about it. Why have we developed ethics for homicide, suicide and genocide, but none for biocide or geo-cide? So far, no one has been hauled into court for species extinction<sup>5</sup>.*

With the release of a report on the Deepwater Horizon disaster this week, and the continuing investigations on the effects of mining Canada’s tar sands, I hope that this New Year will bring some action that recognizes that there is a cost to cheap carbon; a cost that flows in the waters of our baptism.

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<sup>3</sup> [www.issafrica.org/iss\\_today.php?ID=1012](http://www.issafrica.org/iss_today.php?ID=1012)

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.toronto.ca/transportation/snow/salt.htm>

<sup>5</sup> Larry Rasmussen, “An Earth-Honoring Faith” in Sojourners Magazine, June 2010, page 22

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We in “western societies” have seen ourselves as humans as a distinctive and segregated species, set apart to have dominion over the rest of creation. This is in contrast to cultures, such as aboriginal cultures here in Canada, that have recognized the inter-connectedness of all life on earth. Many of those cultures have honoured the earth, the air, fire and the waters of their habitat. So why not Christians?

The water that participates in our baptism can be honoured through the development of an ethic that is committed to justice for all of life on earth, not just for humans, and not just for our small piece of geography.

We can establish an understanding of justice that reaches across the whole community of life in order to set wrongs right and establish sustainable conditions for all of life on God’s earth. We can do it! And every time that we act in each of our own lives to live in harmony with God’s creation, in partnership with all of life, we take a step towards the establishment of that life-preserving ethic.

We can do it because God has created us to be; *“an intelligent, self-aware, choice-making species participating in an epic, creative journey<sup>6</sup>.”* Presumably, God created us and gave us these gifts so that we could use them for the benefit of all of life, including the waters of our baptism.

**When the novelty of baptism wears off,  
Christian discipleship begins.**

Hymn # 87 in More Voices - Water Flowing from the Mountains

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<sup>6</sup> David Korten, *The great Turning: from Empire to Earth Community*, page 353

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Prayers for God’s Family and Creation

Source of all life; Source of living water; Source of our spirits,  
we bring to you the prayers of our hearts today;  
for deep in our hearts we know that living water sings,  
and living water brings the love that makes our spirit grow.

Our hearts go out to the people of Queensland Australia where the waters have risen  
and flooded the landscape. We pray that each of your children there may find an ark that  
brings them to a place of new life.

Today in Sudan God, there are people who are marking their ballots. May they be  
guided by wisdom and hope.

We pray for the life-giving waters of this nation that know where to flow, even beneath  
winters ice and snow.

We pray for our city, and the people of Toronto, who will learn tomorrow about our city  
budget. May we use our influence to continue to bring life and love to our neighbours  
who we meet at the Drop Inn, and our vulnerable neighbours who live in Willowdale  
Manor and Cummer Lodge. May they all be saved from program reductions.

Loving God, who is as near to us as every breath we take, in this moment of silence our  
hearts go out to all those who continue to pray for something that will end their prayers.

Loving God, living water for all people and all places,  
We offer these prayers as your people,  
Remembering our baptism and our commitments,  
That we may be empowered to make this world the world of your dreams. Amen.

Sung response # 948 – O God, Hear My Prayer