

Water is essential to life. Plants and animals, we all need water to survive. And daily we are re-created through water that allows us to grow and flourish.

Yet, too much water, and we die—we can be drowned by too much of what we critically need.

Water defines and characterizes the lessons for this day. Water causes hardship and yet also creates new life.

And it is hardship and new life that we live into in these 40 days of the season of Lent.

Noah and the rest of his family waited through 40 days and forty nights. Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness—in prayer, reflection, and being tempted by the devil.

A few weeks ago, we had the very same Gospel reading on the Sunday celebrating the Baptism of Our Lord in Epiphany. And on that day, two pastors in Minnesota had a dialog sermon, where they talked with each other about the meaning of baptism as a different format for a sermon. They talked about what baptism was, and who the one was who baptized new Christians.

After the service, a 90 year old woman came to their offices, clearly distraught. She asked if it was true—she asked if God was really the one who baptizes all of us... They said, of course—it is God who baptizes all of us... Jesus suffered upon the cross and died... Once and for all, Christ died for us—and baptism is God's claiming us out of Jesus' death. God gets involved and names us and calls us for his namesake.

“So yes, God is definitely the one who baptizes us,” said these two Lutheran preachers... The woman who asked began to cry. She told them that 90 years ago, her sister was born very ill and her parents wanted to have her baptized, but her baby sister was too ill to leave the hospital and so, the baby's grandmother baptized her there in the hospital. When just days later, the

infant died, they went to their church to arrange for the funeral, but the minister wouldn't do the funeral and wouldn't have the funeral in the church because he hadn't baptized the baby and so the funeral was held below the sanctuary in the church basement.

The readings today begin and end with water. They move from God's destruction and drowning to God's saving and claiming...

It is a bit ironic that we Christians so often decorate Children's rooms with scenes from the story of the flood... It does end beautifully, but its also a violent story.

God has seen humans so fill the world with hate, anger, and evil that it becomes clear God must start over with the world. God decides that the "RESET" button must be pressed... And so sets out to begin the world again, with the one family on earth that had not become filled with evil and with all the creatures of the seas and sky and waters as the foundation...

In a world filled with evil, God would bring destruction—but not destruction for destruction's sake, but destruction so that new life, with all the goodness of God's creation, might grow in a new environment on earth...

And so it was, the world was destroyed, but Noah and his family were brought forth in an Ark in which they lived for 40 days with thousands of animals so that, at the end, they would have new life with the earth cleared and cleaned of evil.

But maybe the most important part of the story came in God making a Promise, a Covenant, to never destroy the earth again with flood waters.

*"God said, "This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: {13} I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. I will*

*remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh.”*

Jesus was baptized and was immediately sent by the spirit into the wilderness... For Jesus, it is clear those 40 days he spent in the wilderness were trying...

Our knowledge of Jesus' homeland suggests that his wilderness was dry desert—a place where thirst, hunger, and loneliness would soon set in, but the only description Mark gives us is that in the wild there are wild beasts—this makes sense, and yet this is disturbing news for Jesus and for us his disciples and we pilgrims setting out on our own 40-day journey into the wild.

Originally, Lent was the time of preparation for those who were to be baptized, a time of concentrated study and prayer before their baptism at the Easter Vigil, the celebration of the Resurrection of the Lord early on Easter Sunday. But since these new members were to be received into a living community of Faith, the entire community was called to preparation. Also, this was the time when those who had been separated from the Church would prepare to rejoin the community.

Lent is a time for prayer, repenting for failures and sin as a way to focus on the need for God's grace. It is really a preparation to celebrate God's marvelous redemption at Easter, and the resurrected life that we live, and hope for us, as Christians.

And maybe to be reminded no matter what we've heard elsewhere, it is God who baptizes, adopts, and claims us once and for always.