

God's Creation: How shall we understand God's Creation?

Refreshing, Renewing, Reforming Waters

Water seems to want to flow. We speak of a water cycle that is constantly in motion: rain, cascades, rivers, seeps, waves, tides, clouds. Our bodies are mostly water and can only survive by being part of the watershed: drinking, pulsing, excreting, bathing, exhaling, birthing. A map tracing water's path would reveal that it touches and flows through every living creature in earth's history, connecting all of us.

Water not only flows but flows down: it rains from the sky and pours downhill. Because water does this naturally and dependably, and in doing so gives life to everything under the heavens, water has helped us to know God. God's mercy comes down like "rain on the righteous and unrighteous" (Matthew 5:45). We pray that God will "pour out the Spirit" on the baptized. God's call for justice is that it will "roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream" (Amos 5:24). We confess both that Jesus was born of Mary and that, like rain, "he came down from heaven."

Floods are natural reformers. They rearrange landscapes and disrupt boundaries that may have been considered more-or-less settled. Floods can also bring life by depositing and irrigating topsoil. Floods can also bring death by stripping away entire landscapes and destroying safe habitats.

Luther placed this transformational power of the flood near the heart of his baptismal theology. When he composed a prayer over the water for baptism, he broke with tradition to make the image of Noah's flood central to the prayer.

In the Genesis narrative, Noah's flood covers *everything*. The biblical text repeats emphatically: *Every* living creature outside of the ark was drowned. Even the highest mountains were deeply covered.

After the waters recede, the new covenant extends to the whole earth for every generation: "I am establishing my covenant with ...every animal of the earth...never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth." (Genesis 9:9-11). By describing it in terms of the biblical flood, Luther portrays baptism as engulfing *everything*, leaving nothing the same.

Luther labels the flood as a "flood of wrath," a flood that renews the world by first destroying it. He wrote that baptism is even more powerful than the flood of Noah, because "while that flood was a flood of wrath, [baptism] is a flood of

grace,” and it *continues* to flood our world to this day from the font.

We are familiar with the floods of wrath. Jesus was put to death in a flood of wrath unleashed by the rulers and the crowds. But in Christ’s dying and rising, God has poured out a flood of *grace* that extends to enemies and all those far away. At baptism, Luther inspires us to imagine grace extending above the highest mountains, into the depths of the sea and embracing the earth for all generations.

It may surprise us to learn that Luther’s prayer at baptism speaks of “holy water” being “set apart.” Many people think of holy water as the bowl of water that has been blessed by a baptismal prayer. But according to Luther’s prayer, all water is holy. The prayer says that in Christ’s baptism God has “sanctified and set apart the Jordon and *all water* for a saving flood.” Here, instead of discarding the concept of holy water, Luther radically expands it. In his vision, holy water has become a flood.

He wrote: “Christ by the touch of his most innocent flesh has hallowed all waters, yes even all creation, through baptism.”

Together with that great parade of earth’s other species, we humans continue to experience floods of both wrath and grace, as sea levels rise, rains pour and glaciers melt.

The flood of baptism places Christians in solidarity with all those creatures who suffer in every flood of wrath. When the waters of baptism wash over someone, they are washed into God’s great work in which everything, dying and rising, is being renewed by God’s grace.

Springs have long been signs of the goodness that mysteriously wells up in our world to sustain and refresh us. Springs flow freely without any human effort, but they can be polluted or forgotten. Lutherans have tended to view the work of reformation as less like repairing a malfunctioning water treatment system and more like rediscovering a life-giving spring. The Reformation called attention to the places where God has promised a gushing spring of abundant life.

Sometimes, however, the work of rediscovery involves rehabilitation. The old springhouse that used to stand on many American farms required the relatively frequent task of clearing out the weeds and junk so the water could again flow clear and accessible. The farmer didn’t make the water. But the farmer needed to clear out the spring. The church is called to join the reforming work of dismantling systems and structures that pollute and impede access to the flowing springs of God’s mercy.

Lutherans have clearly identified grace, vocation, and word and sacrament

as life-giving springs that flow to us from God. Today we may need at least equal vigor and clarity in confessing that the earth itself is a spring of grace. It constantly overflows with goodness from its source in God.

Luther draws out the concept of the ongoing and overflowing act of creation in his expansion of the first article of the creed in his Large Catechism: At every moment, God the creator “constantly sustains” and “makes all creation help provide the benefits and necessities of life—sun, moon, and stars in the heavens; day and night; air, fire, water, the earth and all it yields and brings forth; birds, fish, animals, grain, and all sorts of produce.”

I heard an elementary-school-age Lutheran struggle to remember the name for what is typically called “The Big Bang.” He furrowed his brow and asked, “What do you call it... ‘The Great Overflowing’?”

That may be a good scientific image for the origin of our universe, and it certainly is an apt Lutheran image for the ongoing divine act of creation, overflowing continually, sustaining all things. This affirmation, sometimes known as *creatio continua*, predates Lutheranism, but it is given emphatic and ethical emphasis in the Reformation.

Luther continues in the Large Catechism: “For if we believe it (that the cosmos continually overflows with God’s gifts) with our whole heart, we would also act accordingly, and not to swagger about and boast and brag as if we had life, riches, power, honor, and such things ourselves. This is the way the wretched, perverse world acts, drowned in its blindness, misusing all blessings and gifts of God solely for its own pride, greed, pleasure, and enjoyment...”

Luther is critiquing arrogant consumerism here because it hoards claims to have earned what God gives freely through the flourishing creation: “All this [God] does out of pure love and goodness, without our merit.”

What would allow us to drink more frequently, directly, and mindfully from the spring of creation? In worship we ground every gathering in thanksgiving for the gift of creation, perhaps a gathering hymn, and certainly in our prayers of thanksgiving at font and table.

We join with other human communities, especially with indigenous communities, that seek to preserve and rehabilitate the goodness of the earth from which we drink directly: dark skies filled with stars; flourishing natural preserves for beauty, recreation, and health; enough quiet for the voices of fellow creatures to sing and be heard; clean air and water; rich land for gardens and fresh local produce; buildings that feature natural light and landscape rather than

hide them; strictures and systems that work in harmony with the earth rather than working against it.

These three forms of flowing water—stream, flood, and spring—meet us on at least three levels. They are metaphors from our textual traditions. They flow through our liturgical rites. And, they are, before anything else, life-giving bodies of water on earth. Through water, a fellow creature with us, we encounter a living witness to God, our common creator.

--Benjamin M. Stewart, "Stream, flood and spring," *Living Lutheran*, April 2016, pp. 14-19.
