

I stopped in to visit my mother about 15 years ago on my way to camp on Assateague Island off the coast of Maryland. It was a good stop, because it was close to the halfway point of the drive, but it was also a good stop because I could get a home cooked meal from my mother. I remember while we ate that night, describing to her how it was important to find a campsite that had potable water; otherwise I could spend a lot of time going somewhere else to fetch and carry water for daily needs. And an island beach, while it might seem like a nice place to camp, is actually a fairly harsh and dry environment. When I left the next morning, before she was up, I found two gallons of water stashed on the floor of the back seat of my car.

Water is vitally necessary, but often also an extremely dangerous force. Ancient Babylonians had ways of categorizing water. There were the sweet waters, fresh waters, that were identified as gods of wisdom, fertility and life. And there were the dangerous waters. The restless raging seas which were chaotic and destructive.

Mesopotamian and Canaanite creation myths involved slaying and subduing the waters of chaos. For the ancient Israelites, too, the water of the seas would have represented something dark, dangerous and destructive. A formless, disordered and unbridled, watery power.

“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.”

God’s first act in creation is to subdue and contain the watery power of chaos. God’s first act in creation is to bring order out of chaos. There may have been a restless deep emptiness before, but after God has done God’s work for 6 days there is life, and order. There is light

separated from darkness. There are animals and growing things and there is humanity, formed in the image of God.

God breaks into the empty watery chaos to bring order and life and God names that order, calling it good and claiming it as God's own.

God again breaks into the chaos of our world in the person of Jesus Christ. In our gospel passage, Jesus steps into the restless water that is the Jordan River and in that water he is baptized by John. He comes up from the water and is named and claimed by God who calls him beloved. Jesus steps into the watery chaos of the Jordan and in his baptism joins us to the creative ordering that God brings through Jesus' life, death and resurrection.

We desperately want order in our lives. Because it seems like order is the thing that will keep our own forces of chaos at bay. With order we can keep ourselves and those we care about safe. With order we can prevent those terrible tragedies we see happening all around us. With order we might feel like we understand a bit what is going on around us. Sometimes it seems that if we can manage to create enough order, we can find meaning in a world that can sometimes feel meaningless.

So we do a lot to create that order. We try to live right, exercising, eating a diet high in fiber, trying to get our daily eight hours of sleep. We make sure our cars have airbags and our houses have smoke detectors. We urge our lawmakers for legislation that will keep our children safe and keep dangers away. We're vigilant against those things that might creep in to challenge the safe places we've tried to create. We might even put two gallons of water in the back of our daughter's car as she heads out on a camping trip.

Earlier this week, I heard Tina Fey read this poem about her daughter from her book *Bossypants*.

The Mother's Prayer for Its Daughter

“First Lord no tattoos. May neither the Chinese symbol for truth nor Winnie the Pooh holding the FSU logo stain her tender haunches. May she be beautiful but not damaged, for it is the damage that draws the creepy soccer coach’s eye, not the beauty. When the crystal meth is offered may she remember the parents who cut her grapes in half and stick with beer. Lead her away from acting but not all the way to finance, something where she can make her own hours but still feel intellectually fulfilled and get outside sometimes and not have to wear high heels. What would that be Lord, architecture, midwifery, golf course design? I’m asking you because if I knew, I’d be doing it. And when she one day turns on me and calls me a [bad name] in front of [my husband] give me strength lord to yank her directly into a cab in front of her friends because I will not have that nonsense, I will not have it.”

And our efforts at absolute and comprehensive safety find their way into the culture as well. An article in the New York Times highlights how far manufacturers will go to avoid liability issues. “Visit any toy store and read the labels/ Metal-tipped darts, you will be advised, can cause puncture wounds. Hockey sticks can inflict severe bodily harm. Flimsy plastic helmets offer no protection from bicycle or construction accidents. Do not tow a child, you will be told, on a sled behind your car.

And if you buy a certain Batman costume, you will see the following: ‘PARENT: Please exercise caution – FOR PLAY ONLY: Mask and chest plate are not protective: cape does not enable user to fly.’”

We try to order our worlds in such a way that the forces of chaos are kept at arms length, kept out of our homes and especially away from our children. We try our very best. But it doesn't take much living in this world to find out that our best efforts to keep chaos away sometimes don't seem to amount to much. People we love still get cancer. Those we care about are struck down by a sudden aneurysms. And we find that high fiber and plenty of airbags cannot keep grief and loss and sorrow away. They just can't.

But Jesus stepping into the water of the Jordan gives us something we can cling to. Jesus stepping into that water has the effect of bringing hope into the midst of this world of chaos. He went down into the water and was raised up by John to be named, claimed and loved by God.

And because he did, we too, in our own baptism, are lowered down into that watery deep. Lowered down into Jesus death, so that we might be raised up to new life, raised up into the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

In the Lutheran church and in the Catholic church of my upbringing we sprinkle the water of baptism. That's ok, because the quantity of water does not matter when it is God who is acting in that water. Martin Luther asks in his Small Catechism, "How can water do such great things." And he answers, "Clearly the water does not do it, but the word of God, which is with and alongside the water, and faith, which trusts this word of God in the water."

But a full immersion baptism carries powerful symbolism, as the one being baptized is lowered fully beneath the dark, dangerous water, drowned, if you will, and then they are raised up, lifted into the light of new life.

In our baptism, as our old self is drowned in that watery chaos, we have died the only death that matters. Through our baptism, we are joined to Christ's life, death and resurrection. We are granted new life. We are graced with God's forgiveness and we are promised life with

God forever. And no force of nature will take that away. No illness of mind, body or spirit will deny that promise. No tragedy that this world can offer will defeat that hope. They can't. They just can't

And raised into the light of new life, raised into the hope of the resurrection, we are named and claimed by God. Forever.

The pastor who visited Rod's uncle Bob before he died shared with him the words of Isaiah 43. "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you."

In the beginning, God entered our world and defeated the watery forces of chaos to create life. And in the person of Jesus Christ, God came into our world again to make us new. In this God acted in love for us, freely and without coercion of any kind. Not because we deserve it, because we don't. Not because we earned it, because we can't. But because God loves us, God claims us, God calls us God's own.

Now I am certainly not a product liability lawyer, but maybe that's what the warning labels should read. "Be advised: God loves you, and no matter what happens, God will not leave you."