

In our liturgy for Holy Baptism there is a prayer of thanksgiving, recounting the great deeds God has done for the people of God. It is funny in a way, and unusual for some to "tell God what God already knows", but the form we use is based upon what we call Luther's water prayer, his own revision of the baptismal liturgy. Essentially, Luther's water prayer recounts in a brief but vivid way how God has "made water a sign of the kingdom and of cleansing and rebirth".

The words are familiar to many of you now. We begin with the creation story: "We give you thanks, O God, for in the beginning your Spirit moved over the waters and by your Word you created the world, calling forth life in which you took delight."

Where does our understanding of baptism begin? It begins at creation. And it begins with God's word. And it begins with the spirit of God. These are the themes which have been from the beginning of our time.

As a person who has always been interested in science, I have been fascinated by space exploration. After 23 years, the Hubble telescope is still sending back marvelous pictures of other universes, stars and constellations beyond our own. A recent newspaper article stated that there could be as many as 8 or 9 planets in our solar system with H₂O in liquid form which could then, in turn, support life. And scientists are beginning to consider the possibility of a manned flight to Mars.

We humans are always on a quest to see beyond our own place, to find out about what has come before us. We want to know about our creation and the creation of the world. But what scripture tells us and what this prayer reminds us is that, however our universe, however our cosmos, came to be - it was done as an act of a gracious God. Bonhoeffer says "In the beginning God created heaven and earth. In other words, the Creator - in freedom!-creates the creature. The connection between them is conditioned by nothing except freedom, which means that it is unconditional." He wants us to know that nothing caused God to create us and this world. God created us

out of freedom - and therefore creation itself becomes the first gracious act of God - done with no dependence, with no necessity for that creation. God did not need to create us, but God chose to create us. Creation, our very lives and the life of the universe we live in, came out of nothing, by the free act of God.

Why is this act of creation so important in the life of the baptized? It is important because the God of creation, of the utter beginning of everything, is the God of the resurrection. Just as God created the universe out of nothing, so out of the nothingness of Christ's death, God has brought resurrection; new life. "God did not create us as a painter creates a painting, hangs it on a wall, and goes on to other endeavors. God creates more like a cellist creates a sonata; if the creator was ever to stop creating, so would creation end." (Pastor Martin Copenhaver)

And this is the same free act of re-creation which God in Christ has accomplished in our baptisms. There is nothing that we have done, and nothing that we can do, that will assure our salvation. We are saved because God, out of the nothingness of death, has brought

resurrection, new life through the resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord.

And how has God accomplished all of this? By God's word. God spoke, and the creation came into being. God speaks, and we are God's.

This is at the same time a very difficult concept to understand, and one which is quite ordinary.

It is difficult to understand because we are people who live by facts, by contracts and laws and such. We need to see, in order to believe. A person's word in this day and age is not to be trusted unless it has a signature and the possibility of fines and litigation to back up its credibility.

And yet it is easy to understand because many of our most important and basic life changing experiences begin simply with words. With a positive response to the words "I love you, will you marry me?" the lives of two people change forever. In the same way, the words "you are baptized in the name of the father, of the son, and of the holy spirit" change the life of the individual forever, because

you have been re-created by God, you have put on Christ, and therefore you have put on that new creation- the one that has overcome the nothingness of death itself.

Jesus Christ is God's word incarnate. He came to bring that word of salvation to us, but also to live that word in all that he has done. "The word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father"

And so the story progresses. "Through the waters of the flood you delivered Noah and his family, and through the sea you led your people Israel from slavery into freedom. At the river your Son was baptized by John and anointed with the Holy Spirit."

When Jesus came to John for baptism, he summed up all those watery deliverances of the past. From then on, believers would pass from slavery to freedom, from death to life through immersion in him who is the living water, Jesus Christ. Baptism inaugurates us into his life, his mission, his journey back to God. For us, the waters are the first step in a lifelong journey of faith.

The Holy Spirit is, of course, the final ingredient in this formula of Baptism. Without the ongoing support of God by the work of the spirit in our lives, we would neither comprehend nor believe what we have seen and heard. The spirit is our guide, our counselor, the means by which we hear the words and understand, the means by which we know that something good has taken place, a washing, a renewal. "Pour out your Holy Spirit" we pray, "so that those who are washed in the waters of baptism may be given new life." The spirit is the dynamic, life-giving power of God.

The great Baptismal truth is not that we are to live newly after death, but that we are to be new here and now by the power of the resurrection. And our baptism is sign of that resurrection.

Even as we seek to know the past, how creation came to be, God seems constantly to lean toward the future. Creation continues. Therefore, we Christians, we members of this congregation, can ask questions like "What is going on in the world" "What is God up to in the world? "Where is God working now, and where can I join God in

that work?” Jesus lives, and goes ahead of us in the baptismal work we are called to do.

It may seem strange to recount to God in public prayer the things that God has done for us, but in recounting before God the great act of old, we remind ourselves again of the sacred history of which we are heirs. We hear again how the act of baptism is set in a larger context of the biblical record of God's creative acts with water and the word, of spirit and life. In prayer we praise God and we renew our faith as we draw upon the bond God established with us in our baptism. And in obedience to God's command, we make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen