

# WEEK 7: Water

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Over the next three weeks we are going to be exploring verses that deal with the elements of nature and their associated imagery. This week we will be looking at water and in the following weeks fire and then wind.

There are over 700 mentions of water in the Bible, either bodies of water, the use of water, or the need for water. Water is used to depict great peril as well as healing and deliverance. We find examples of this in all parts of the Bible from the origins of creation to the words of Jesus and the authors of the Epistles. I remember reading somewhere that in order to find out if a book was worth reading you should read the first sentence and the last paragraph. I admit that I have chosen to follow recommendations of friends and Amazon over that method, but it is uncannily true for my favorite book, "A Prayer for Owen Meany" by John Irving.

## FIRST SENTENCE

*"I am doomed to remember a boy with a wrecked voice – not because of his voice, or because he was the smallest person I ever knew, or even because he was the instrument of my mother's death, but because he is the reason I believe in God; I am a Christian because of Owen Meany."*

## LAST PARAGRAPH

*"When we held Owen Meany above our heads, when we passed him back and forth—so effortlessly—we believed that Owen weighed nothing at all. We did not realize that there were forces beyond our play. Now I know they were the forces that contributed to our illusion of Owen's weightlessness; they were the forces we didn't have the faith to feel, they were the forces we failed to believe in—and they were also lifting up Owen Meany, taking him out of our hands. O God—please give him back! I shall keep asking You."*

Interestingly, the Bible begins and ends with the imagery of water. In Genesis chapter 1, we open with God sweeping over the face of the waters as He breathes creation into existence and in the last chapter, chapter 22 of Revelation, we read a closing paragraph that speaks to a river of water of life flowing from the throne of God into a new Jerusalem.

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## Monday

Genesis 6:17  
Genesis 14:28  
Amos 5:24  
John 7:38

## Tuesday

Exodus 17:1-3  
John 4:13-15

## Wednesday

Exodus 30:17-21  
John 13:3-5

## Thursday

2 Kings 5:1-14  
John 5:1-9

## Friday

Mark 1:9-11  
Matthew 28:18-20

# Monday

*For my part, I am going to bring a flood of waters on the earth, to destroy from under heaven all flesh in which is the breath of life; everything that is on the earth shall die. (Genesis 6:17)*

*As the Egyptians fled before it, the Lord tossed the Egyptians into the sea. The waters returned and covered the chariots and the chariot drivers, the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea; not one of them remained. (Genesis 14:28)*

*But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. (Amos 5:24)*

*As the scripture has said, "Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water." (John 7:38)*

We start our journey on the high seas. One of the first metaphors involving water in the Bible has to do with bodies of water. In Genesis 1:2 it talks about the face of the earth being covered by water. As you read further, you will start to see how the Bible splits this metaphor into the mysterious and undefined as well as the affirming and life-giving. There is the mystery of the great expanse in the very beginning, to the destruction and annihilation of Noah's flood, and then the life-giving force of the flowing river.

When we find the references to large bodies of water in the Bible, they are almost always negative. It was the Red Sea that swallowed the chariots of Pharaoh and consumed Jonah, and it was on the Sea of Galilee that the disciples faced multiple instances of peril. In ancient tradition, it was the sea that was home to monsters and only great bodies of water were said to be able to imprison demons. If you recall in the New Testament, when Jesus drives demons into a herd of swine, he immediately has them all jump into the sea. The most commonly used word in Hebrew for large bodies of water, *tehom*, comes from the root meaning deep. The Greek translation of this word is *abyssos* from which we get the word *abyss*. As you can see, the word was meant to conjure up the mysterious and unknown.

Conversely, rivers and streams are almost always used in a positive fashion. These words come from a Hebrew root meaning "to flow". If you have done much camping, you know that the only source of water you can trust as being free from contamination is flowing water. Still bodies of water even if they appear not to be stagnant can never totally be trusted. I remember from my wilderness hiking days that any water we took from a lake we had to boil before using. There is also another fascinating aspect to this that has to do with the actual physical geography of Israel. If you look at a map you will notice that there is only one perennial (or year-round) river in Israel – the Jordan. The land itself was kept fertile because of streams and springs that would bubble up from the ground or rush from the mountains during rainy season.

I find this aspect of Judean geography fascinating considering how the imagery of flowing water is used in both the Old and New Testament. We as Americans have the image of mighty rivers like the Mississippi, the Missouri, and the Colorado that never stop flowing. It causes the imagery of a flowing stream to be more commonplace. To get the right perspective of what it meant in biblical times, think of a torrent –

more of a flash flood. In the Middle East today you will see what are referred to as a “wadi” or dry creek bed that has been carved out of the land when the mighty torrents flow.

When you do that you get the picture that would have been painted by the authors of the text, and it also helps us with a couple of very powerful spiritual images. First, there is a mighty force with that type of moving water. These are the images that are recalled when we sing the song “Let Justice Flow Down” with Zach and the Youth House Band. This comes from the text in Amos we read today. It calls on us to be a mighty force channeling the power of God when we stand up or speak out for some cause or belief.

The second image I see is the life giving and renewing aspect of the water. Jesus is not only portrayed as being the source of that life-giving spiritual water, but he talks of how we might be a source of that as well. That spiritual water, even in the smallest of doses, can be life-giving especially in dry times such as what we are currently facing. I pray that God helps each of you be living water to your friends and family!

Peace (Shalom)

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## Tuesday

*From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the Lord commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. The people quarreled with Moses, and said, ‘Give us water to drink.’ Moses said to them, ‘Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?’ But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, ‘Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?’ (Exodus 17:1-3)*

*Jesus said to her, ‘Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.’ The woman said to him, ‘Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water (John 4:13-15).*

Have you ever been truly thirsty? Probably very few, if any of us, have ever been in the desert without water to the point of serious, life-threatening dehydration, thereby knowing the real pain of thirst. Chances are that when we say we are thirsty or that we are “dying of thirst,” we are not really suffering from true thirst.

Such was the case for the Children of Israel in our first text. True, they were in the wilderness, but something tells me they did not experience the thirst they claimed. First off, the previous two stories in Exodus talk about how God had fed them and the oasis of water. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, people who are truly thirsty don’t talk about it because they are suffering from the symptoms of dehydration which include dizziness, fever and unconsciousness. I think the Israelites weren’t so much thirsty as they were complaining about it.

This text is one that many communities of faith were using when we first started dealing with the isolation of the pandemic, likening it to the isolation and unknown the Israelites experienced in the wilderness. Their complaints, however, were grounded in some truth, being the fear that they didn't or might not have enough to last the duration. They might not have been thirsty right then, but there was the very real uncertainty around what the next day or week might bring. Just like the Israelites, we were not "thirsty" when the pandemic first arose, only afraid of what might happen. Such is the case with physical need.

The Bible also speaks of a different type of thirst; one on a spiritual level. The actual Greek word for thirst used in the Bible is dipsos. This word also has another meaning that goes beyond being physically thirsty. It also means to earnestly desire something. From this we get the synonym for a strong desire or craving for whatever the object may be, like a thirst for knowledge, or for power. In our second passage, Jesus is also at a place of quenching physical thirst in the wilderness, a well. However, in this passage, he offers something more than meeting the immediate need of nourishment. He offers the woman a way of life that would forever quench her spiritual thirst – that inner craving for something more, something deeper.

The ironic part about thirst is that sometimes you can suffer from its result without feeling the actual physical sensation. That is, you can be dehydrated without your mouth feeling like it is full of cotton balls! You can drink a gallon of coffee or soda during the day and not feel the sensation of thirst, but your body will start to suffer from dehydration because it is not getting water, its true nourishment. The same is true in our spiritual lives. We can get our fill of things that make us feel complete (quenched) and content only to realize that it is a façade – that we are going through some form of spiritual dehydration. This week, remember to drink water but when you do also remember to read your Bible, say a small prayer or listen for the voice of God.

Peace (Shalom)

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## Wednesday

*The Lord spoke to Moses: You shall make a bronze basin with a bronze stand for washing. You shall put it between the tent of meeting and the altar, and you shall put water in it; with the water Aaron and his sons shall wash their hands and their feet. When they go into the tent of meeting, or when they come near the altar to minister, to make an offering by fire to the Lord, they shall wash with water, so that they may not die. They shall wash their hands and their feet, so that they may not die: it shall be a perpetual ordinance for them, for him and for his descendants throughout their generations. (Exodus 30:17-21)*

*And during supper Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. (John 13:3-5).*

Today's water theme is again one that starts with a very commonplace activity. Yesterday we dealt with thirst and today with washing. Ritualistic washing was part of Jewish communal life stemming back to the law of Moses. Today's first passage refers to the practice of hand and foot washing; however, there were many other occasions that required washing of the body and there are several passages in the Book of Leviticus that deal with the issue of cleanliness.

Ironically, hand washing has taken on a whole new level of meaning for us over the past two months, and God's advice to wash your hands lest you could die seems almost surreal! I am sure we all are washing our hands with an order of magnitude more times, as well as longer and more vigorous than before we had heard of the coronavirus. Because of that, it is hard to imagine that centuries ago bathing was considered frivolous as well as dangerous! Disease was believed to be spread by "bad air," and water opened the skin to air. A layer of dirt on the body was sometimes considered a prudent protection against disease. While it cannot be historically proven, there is a theory that Jews disproportionately survived the Black Death during the middle ages because of their personal hygiene laws. It is hard to confirm because the Pope blamed the Jews for the spread of the disease, saying they must be poisoning the wells of the Christians. That belief faded as the disease ran rampant throughout all of Europe and even the Jews who lived in very small and tight communities could not survive its spread.

In our second passage we see another example of washing in which Jesus washes the feet of his disciples. At first pass this would seem to be just a New Testament example of a Jewish law. Washing was still required in the rabbinic law of the time but washing of the extremities, especially foot washing, would have been done by servants. Therefore, when we read this story, we are often tempted to view this as one in which Jesus becomes like a servant to his followers. He takes a lower position, stooping to wash the grime and the filth off the feet of those who were gathered. However, there are a few problems with that read-through.

The passage opens with the phrase "during supper." Preparation for any meal, and honestly the act of just entering a house or home, would be cause for washing, especially foot washing. The idea of the disciples needing their feet to be washed while well into the meal is highly unlikely. It is believed they were eating a Seder meal to celebrate Passover so it would have also been a sin against God. This shifts the focus of the story from being one of servitude to one of love.

This section of the gospel of John is the beginning of the Last Supper, and the events of the evening are what we re-enact and celebrate at Maundy Thursday services during Easter. Jesus is about to leave his disciples, so he imparts on them a message of love and caring for one another. It moves the focus from us presenting ourselves clean before Almighty God (what would have been done ritually before the meal) to our living God showing us an ordinary act of compassion. The message being, not only was Jesus about to die for them but that the disciples should move forward and love and care for one another as a community.

I have been fortunate to be on both the giving and receiving end of foot washing during our church's Maundy Thursday services. Having experienced both, I admit that it is much easier to wash someone's

feet than to have my own feet washed. Likewise, it is sometimes easier to go through rituals to wash free my own wrongdoings and imperfection than it is to let someone else take them away from or even for me. We must not lose sight though that is exactly what Jesus did for us. Jesus came to wash your feet. Will you let him?

Peace (Shalom)

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## Thursday

*When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him, 'Do you want to be made well?' 7The sick man answered him, 'Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me.' (John 5:6-8)*

*So he went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean. (2 Kings 5:14)*

Let's start today with a little experiment. Grab your Bible and turn to the Gospel of John, Chapter 5, and read verse 4 to yourself. I did not include it in the text above so you will need to go read it. I'll wait ... For those of you who did this and unless you are reading a King James Version of the Bible, you figured me out. There is no John 5:4. While the story is probably familiar to you, I would bet you never noticed there was a verse missing. This is not an error made by the publisher of your Bible. There was a verse 4 and it was taken out because scholars doubt that it was in the original text. If you have a study Bible there is probably a footnote that includes the verse. In case you don't have one, the missing verse reads:

*"waiting for the stirring of the water; for an angel of the Lord went down at certain seasons into the pool and stirred up the water; whoever stepped in first after the stirring of the water was made well from whatever disease that person had."*

The Gospel of John recounts two healing miracles Jesus performed by the sides of pools of water. One at the Pool of Siloam (9:6–7) and then today's reading by the Pool of Bethesda. In those times invalids, the blind, lame and paralyzed, would gather in the porticoes (porches) around these pools in hopes of a miracle. Without that context, it makes the reader wonder why someone who was lame was resting by a pool. What if he accidentally fell in – wouldn't he drown? According to ancient beliefs, an angel would stir up the waters of the pool and whoever would enter the water first would be cured. This detail is not included in the text not because it wasn't believed to be true, but rather because the word structure of the original Greek text did not match with the surrounding verses. Kind of like if you were reading a Dr. Seuss book and came across a sentence that came from a Shakespearean novel. It would be out of

place. In addition, several early copies of John's gospels had annotations around this verse identifying it as potentially a later addition. Whatever the reason, the story asserts that certain bodies of water held healing powers.

Our second text found in 2 Kings is the curious story of Naaman and his encounter with healing waters. Naaman was a Syrian Army commander (aka non-Jew) who had leprosy. Through the help of an Israelite girl in the service of his wife, Naaman is led to the prophet Elisha who instructs him to bathe in the River Jordan seven times at which point his leprosy will be washed away. After some arguing, Naaman does as Elisha instructed, is healed, and goes home praising Yahweh as the one true God.

Healing or sacred waters are not unique to the Jewish faith; they are a prominent part of other religious beliefs. There is the Ganges River in Hinduism, Lake Titicaca of the Incan society, the waters of the Black Mesa for the Native American Navajo and Hopi peoples and who could forget the ever-elusive Fountain of Youth first described by Herodotus in ancient Greece. Through the ages we have had a fascination with the healing powers of natural pools of water. Still, to this day, hot springs and natural salt pools are sought out for renewal and restoration.

Even as life giving as water is, Jesus reminds us in the story of the Pool of Bethesda that it is not the water that heals, it is faithfulness to God. The pool of water does not heal the man, Jesus does. Even the story of Naaman speaks more to the trust that was required in the words received from Elisha. Getting in and out of the bathtub or shower seven times in a row would seem ridiculous to most but it was a sign that Naaman had faith. Water was just the vehicle and not the source. Just like Jesus offered the woman at the well a type of water that would quench spiritual thirst, so too does he offer the continued renewal and rejuvenation of spirit through his words.

Peace (Shalom)

# Friday

*In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'* (Mark 1:9-11)

*And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'* (Matthew 28:18-20)

You can't do a week on water images in the Bible and not talk about baptism! Baptism along with communion are the two sacraments that we in the Reformed tradition (as well as most Protestant doctrines) observe because they are the two in which Jesus partook. What is interesting is that we tend to forget that baptism actually has its roots in Hebrew scripture. After all, John was baptizing people before there was an acceptance as Jesus being the Messiah and the Son of God.

It traces back to the ritual purification laws from the book of Leviticus and the passage from Exodus that we read when we cover the metaphor of washing. Both the Tabernacle and the Temple had a mikvah which was a container for ritual washing. There were also times when full body immersion was required, and it is that practice that is most associated with Christian baptism. As with Christians, the Jewish faith has different interpretations of the creation of, as well as use of a mikvah depending on level of orthodoxy. While orthodox Jews still practice the use of mikvah based on Levitical law, reformed Judaism uses it primarily in conversion ceremonies as well as to mark new phases of life. Some more progressive Jewish congregations have used the mikvah ceremony for those going through gender identify redefinition to emerge as a new person with a new name – not unlike the process of converting to Judaism.

Whether you sprinkle or dunk, agree with infant baptism or see it as only something that a consenting adult can partake in, baptism is the sign and seal of the inward act of accepting Jesus as the Son of God and that your life is now transformed as a Christian. It is transformative, and represents both the healing and cleansing power of our acceptance of Jesus through the metaphor of water.

We are all familiar with the baptism of Jesus in the beginning of each of the Gospels but, as you can see from the second passage, before Jesus ascended into heaven, he charged his apostles to go forth and make disciples of all peoples which involved baptism and teaching. The Great Commission as it is often referred does, however, start the debate that has resulted in at least the creation of several denominations of protestant belief. I can remember as a child growing up in a more fundamentalist denomination, tent revivals in which altar calls were given for sinners to repent and accept Jesus were often followed by a baptismal service an hour or so later. In fact, many of the ones I used to attend with my Grandfather, who was a traveling evangelist, would occur right next to the banks of a river or lake so that everything happened in close succession and was as smooth as clockwork.

I jest, but there is nothing wrong with that practice. In fact, there is a great deal of sincerity in it. However, I noticed over the years that something was missing and, honestly, that missing piece explains why



we in the PCUSA church take what some might consider too much of a structured and formal process regarding baptism. You see in our church, it is required by the Book of Order that anyone who wants to be baptized needs to first be presented to the Session, that is, to the Ruling Elders who are the elected leaders in our local church.

At first glance, this seems to be going to the other extreme but there is good reason: it is not for approval it is for receiving. It has more to do with the follow-up and what happens after the act of baptism. The other approach can often focus more on the conversion and baptismal act itself rather than being there in community for the person after they emerge from the water. Just like Jesus went straight from his baptism into temptation, we do the same. We enter back into the real world, only we are not equipped with all the tools that Jesus had! One of my all-time favorite Presbyterian Educators and Pastors, Rodger Nishioka, said it best when he wrote a comment piece several years ago. In that article he stated that the PCUSA requirement on baptism and the acknowledgement of the Ruling Elders helps us:

“understand that baptism is not the end of the journey but rather one step on the lifelong adventure of following the Lord. The Sacrament of Baptism is an act of the whole congregation. This means that both ruling and teaching elders should participate in all aspects of the sacrament from the invitation to the preparation to the baptism to the nurture that follows. In this way, we demonstrate to the whole world our life together as the Body of Christ.”

By doing this we acknowledge that this person is now part of a community, one that will love them and support them. The body of Christ will be along side you when you battle the deep waters of trial and rejoice with you when you overflow with joy. We will help you find spiritual nourishment, provide healing and comfort and be there through acts of humility to wash your feet when you need a reminder that you are truly a child of God.

Peace (Shalom)