

“Watermark”

Isaiah 43:1-7; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

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Father’s Day - June 16, 2019

One definition of watermark is that it is a mark showing the height to which water has risen. The snatch of an old Johnny Cash song comes back to me: “How high’s the water, Mama? Three feet high and risin’.”

I remember my father-in-law watching the Bourbeuse River rise during flood time. His watermark was a piece of kindling wood driven into the ground at the water’s edge, marked with a daub of red paint, which allowed him to calculate how fast and far the water had risen within the last hour.

Watermark is also the mark which mars or disfigures, like the mark left on my desktop at home by a moist coffee mug I placed there. That made me somewhat unpopular at home for a while, until I reminded my wife of the watermark her brother had left on our walnut piano when he over-watered the plants she put

there!

I was recently in the bathroom of a friend’s home and noticed a watermark on his ceiling tiles. Then I remembered he had told me about the upstairs commode overflowing and flooding bathrooms on both floors to a depth of two inches.

This called to mind a similar situation in the days when my wife and I inhabited an 8<sup>th</sup> floor apartment in Plaza Square downtown. Nice place, within walking distance of Kiel Hall, the public library and Busch Stadium. While we were away one day (doubtless visiting one of these cultural marvels), the commode tank fractured—spontaneously split wide open—flooding our apartment and the two apartments immediately below us. One of the neighbors finally called the building management office; and by the time we got home, the maintenance people were mopping up the last of the water. Amazingly, not much damage was done to our place. An area carpet was ruined, and the legs of an Italian Provincial chair were watermarked.

Now, I have to tell you about that chair, a marvelous piece of furniture, well-constructed and comfortable to sit in. The chair was tufted and covered in gorgeous rusty orange crushed velvet—a late '60s delight to behold. It was the centerpiece of our living room. It was the damage to this chair that most disturbed us. But over the years those watermarks came to give the chair character. It stayed with us. Over time the chair ceded its place of prominence in the living room to newer pieces, as it took up residence in a back bedroom. And its brilliant orange color gave way to a demure blue. To the casual observer, it would bear little resemblance to the new chair we so proudly brought into our high-rise apartment all those long years ago. But to this day I would know that chair anywhere, distinguished as it is by those faint watermarks. Moral of story: a watermark may disfigure or distinguish.

*The American Heritage Dictionary* offers another definition of watermark: *a translucent design impressed on paper during manufacture and visible when the paper is held to the light*. It is the manufacturer's identifying mark on

bond paper. I've never known why paper is watermarked, but I like it. Somehow, it signifies quality to me.

Now make this connection. Christian baptism is a watermark. Invisible to the naked eye, it is the Creator's identifying mark. The watermark of baptism is visible to the spiritual inner eye when held to the light of Christ. Those who receive baptism *are thereby marked as Christian disciples*. Baptism is our spiritual birthmark.

Do you have a birthmark? Many babies get all marked up working their way out of the birth canal. Most of those marks fade quickly; but many of us have birthmarks that stay with us throughout life. I have one. Some birthmarks show, some don't. Some of us are bothered by our birthmarks; the wise and mature among us are not. They do not see these special marks as disfiguring but as distinguishing features. The marks might even be seen as giving us character.

As we age we develop wrinkles—some of us more and sooner than others. Many believe

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wrinkles add character to a face; but some are bothered by wrinkles. Women may use creams and cosmetics to retard, diminish, or hide them. Men and women may see them only as marks of aging and (as if to cheat death) rush off to a cosmetic surgeon for a Botox injection or a face lift.

What are we to do with the mark of baptism? This one mark we'd like to show, but so often it's a mark that doesn't. A mark that doesn't show is a logical contradiction. Other than your baptismal certificate, what is the evidence that you have been baptized? What is the answer? As with so many answers, one is help to find it by looking in the right place. The Bible is a good place to start, and if we start at the very beginning, we don't have to read far to find it.

The 4<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Book of Genesis tells the story of Cain, the first child born on this planet, according to the biblical account. Cain is also the first killer. He has murdered his brother, Abel, after falling out with him about what is the proper way to worship, of all things! For his

crime Cain has been banished to a life of wandering. He is certain he will be tracked down and killed, but God says to him: *"Not so! If any one slays Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold." And the Lord put a mark on Cain, lest any who came upon him should kill him."* (Genesis 4:15)

God's mark is a protective mark, a mark of God's graciousness, a mark of God's love for this fratricidal child of His! So too is baptism a mark of God's graciousness and protective love, a watermark that leaves no external trace, but is clearly visible in the ultraviolet light of the Church's discernment. The mystery and power of baptism is not what we do but what God does. The mark is a sign of God's claim upon the lives of these lovely little girls in this very room on this very day!

We can hear God say over every baptized child the same words he proclaimed at his own Son's baptism: *This is MY child with whom I am well pleased! Anyone who harms this child will have to deal with ME!"*

Does God love an unbaptized child any less? No. Is an unbaptized child any less a child of God? No. Then what's the point of performing the rite of baptism. Baptism signals that the faith community is helping God watch. Anybody who harms these children—either aggressively or through benign neglect—will have to deal with US! We take an oath at every infant baptism to help look after the spiritual welfare of each child. It is a binding covenant which, if broken, is charged to our account.

Baptism is a watermark that promises life. This is also true for adult (or believer) baptism. Total immersion is a powerful symbol of a deeply mysterious truth. Baptism is death by drowning. Baptized into the death of Christ, we are buried with him. In that watery grave our sins are washed away, we are cleansed and raised to new life with Christ, marked as Christian disciples, and initiated into the fellowship of Christ's holy Church.

Not all marks are life-giving; many are death-dealing. To be tattooed in a Nazi concentration camp was to bear "the mark of the beast," as

the Book of Revelation puts it. It was to be marked for death. In Old Testament times, to be tattooed at all was a mark of death. It was considered an abomination to God. Here's how the Book of Leviticus lays it down. *You shall not...tattoo any marks upon you. I am the Lord.*

Oops! If that command still holds, a sizable portion of the population is in "deep stormy" with the Lord! Whether a demure tat on an ankle or derriere or a sleeve tattoo covering an entire arm, Holy Writ considers this activity an act of vandalism—a defacing of God's property. If some of you are sporting one (and I know you are) don't shoot me; I'm just the messenger! ☺

As I was thinking about this a fragment of a story I heard once surfaced from the deeps of where it had been long buried. Heather Murray Elkins is now a professor at Drew University United Methodist Theological School in New Jersey. While she was in training, she did an internship as the chaplain of a truck stop. One evening, as she sat drinking coffee at the

counter, she engaged a huge truck driver in conversation. He had tattoos over most of his body. She asked him about them. He told her where and when he had gotten them.

One in particular, though, he said he regretted. The truck driver rolled up the left sleeve of a shirt, revealing an upper arm that resembled, in size, a ham. On it was tattooed a small and delicate bird. "Tell me about the bird," said Heather Murray Elkins. He said it was a re-do of an earlier tattoo, which had been the name of a woman in his life. When he married another woman, he tried to have the tattoo removed. That proved to be impossible; so he went to a tattoo artist, who skillfully transformed the name into a bird.

The truck driver looked down at the counter and said in a husky voice, "I love my wife so much, but every time I look at the bird, I'm so ashamed. I've tried reading the Bible, but I can't get over the guilt for the life I've led. Heather Murray Elkins lightly touched his massive arm and said, "You just haven't gotten far enough into the Book. Let me show you."

And then she turned to that passage in Matthew where Jesus says, "*Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground without your Father's will....Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows.*" The man's eyes were moist now, watermarked with tears. The little woman baptized that huge man at the truck stop that night, watermarked him for life. That's what baptism does. It transforms marks of death into the mark of life.

A lot of us are all marked up by life. Not all those marks are visible, either. Remember the young Danish prince, Hamlet, whose uncle murdered Hamlet's father, the king, then married Hamlet's mother. Hamlet, having discovered this villainy, is emotionally scarred and disfigured. He even considers suicide, giving voice to these dark broodings in a soliloquy.

*Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to bear  
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune  
Or by taking arms against a sea of  
Troubles end them.*

Hamlet was a baptized Christian who came to a bad end, as did many others around him. What good was his baptism to him? You might ask the same question about your own baptism, perhaps. And you could certainly ask of Jesus, what benefit his baptism had for him!

Mark, the earliest gospel, says the Spirit drove Jesus to the wilderness for testing immediately after his baptism. Matthew and Luke say with more finesse that Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness where he dueled with his demons. Half-starved and hallucinating, he must have been driven to the edge of madness. When he emerged from the desert, though, Jesus was not only in his right mind, he was articulate—a man of gracious speech—the same man, yet somehow different. That's what the villagers in his hometown thought, anyway. *"Is this not Joseph's son, the carpenter?"* And they marveled at the gracious words that proceeded from his mouth.

What Jesus' baptism did for him was to give him focus and fire, undeniably an unbeatable combination. He never lost either one. You

may say, "But I've never had either one! Where did Jesus' focus and fire come from? According to our gospel text for this day, when Jesus was baptized, the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus in bodily form. The Holy Spirit was the source of Jesus' focus and fire. But the Holy Spirit is not always given at baptism. Sometimes it takes a second touch. Read Acts 8:14-17.

*Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent to them Peter and John, who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, for it had not yet fallen on any of them, but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then they laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit.*

While it is true that we believe in one baptism, the baptism of the Holy Spirit is of a different order. When our charismatic brothers and sisters speak of being "saved-sanctified," what they mean is that water baptism the mark of our salvation; Spirit baptism is the mark of our

sanctification. Sanctification simply means a holy life, growing in grace, going on toward perfection in love in this life. The marks of sanctification are the gifts (evidences, manifestations, expressions) of the Holy Spirit. The fire of the Spirit lights up the watermark of baptism so that it shows. And in the sanctified life here's what the marks look like: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. There are other marks: teaching, healing, prophecy, tongues, exhortation, administration, discernment, interpretation.

You may have many or few gifts. Your marks may be great or small; but no baptized person is without a gift. Find yours, own it, use it. The appropriation of your gifts may bring praise and acclaim or rejection and suffering. No matter. Our job is to exercise our gifts, not control their outcome. Only so do we properly acknowledge our baptisms and our family connections.

No Christian, ancient or modern, has had more gifts than the Apostle Paul. Surprisingly, his boast was not of his accomplishments but of his

sufferings: beaten nearly to death eight times (other lesser beatings too numerous and frequent to keep track of), stoned once, a prisoner in chains for the gospel, two years under house arrest, shipwrecked three times, adrift in the open sea for a night and a day, hungry, cold, thirsty, and in constant danger in city and wilderness from sworn enemies and false friends in the church. Finally, he writes to churches in the Galatian region: *Henceforth let no man trouble me, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus(!)*

Paul was a marked man. No less than he, so too are we marked men and women and children, for we have been baptized into Christ Jesus—watermarked—which means quite simply that we are thereby marked as God's children by adoption and brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ and one another. Like other families we are marked by a name—Christian. We are also marked by the Holy Spirit with focus, fire, and manifestations of the Spirit's gifts. **REMARKABLE** us!