

Have you ever thought about what absolute wonders light and water are? They are, they really are. From the beginning of human existence, light and water have been with us, yet I think we forget how wondrous they, and how thankful we should be to God, for them.

Our Scripture lesson from the book of Genesis is about God’s first Creation—Light. The Message version puts it his way:

“First this: God created the Heavens and Earth—all you see, all you don’t see. Earth was a soup of nothingness, a bottomless emptiness, an inky blackness. God’s Spirit brooded like a bird above the watery abyss.

God spoke: “Light!” And light appeared. God saw that light was good and separated light from dark.

God name the light Day, he named the dark Night.

It was evening, it was morning—Day One.”

God created light and it was good. We all know that—from the time we are little children, we know that having the light on chases away the scary stuff, and makes us feel less lonely somehow.

Even George Harrison knew that light is good. Remember that old Beatles song he wrote “Here Comes the Sun.” One of my favorites.

Several years back, when we had that awful ice storm, lots of us lost electricity for several days. By the time the lights came back on, we felt like throwing a party! I remember talking to one teenaged girl from the church I served then; she was so happy and excited and relieved to have lights again, although she had never thought of it before.

Now I know electric light is man-made, but where did that idea come from? Natural sunlight.

Light can even be healing—helping newborn babies who have jaundice, and preventing disease in children who live in climates with dark, cold winters. And a sunshiny day does great things for our moods and spirits.

Then, there’s water—another gift from God. According to the Genesis passage, it was around even before light.

Water is terrific. Hot water and soap always make us feel better. A cool bath or wet washcloth on the forehead always brings some ease to a feverish child.

Not to mention the drinking of water. We can go for days without food, but we must have water. For those of us who have had that “no water after midnight” order in the hospital—well, nothing ever tasted as good as that first sip of water when that doggone order was changed!

And both light (sunlight anyway) and water have something to do with cleanliness. Think of the days when everyone hung their freshly washed sheets outside on a clothesline to dry, taking advantage of the sunlight’s natural warmth and disinfecting powers.

Cleanliness is a great thing, so thank God for light and water. There’s more though. There’s more to cleanliness than what’s on the outside.

There is also the cleanliness of our souls. That’s where the reading from Mark comes in—it’s about baptism. John the Baptist was “proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” That was to get people’s souls clean.

People need to have clean souls and clear consciences. That is the way God made us. And the only way to do that is to confess our sins, and ask God’s forgiveness, and turn away from our sins, which is what repentance is.

We can’t get faith through our families, like hair color or eye color. Whether we are born into God’s Chosen People, or if we are relatives to the greatest Christians ever, we can’t simply inherit this good soul cleanliness.

We have to make some effort ourselves. We have to make the great effort of facing our own lives—and owning up to what we’ve done wrong.

We have to be honest with ourselves—with God—and with those we may have harmed.

God is always willing to forgive—once we have asked for forgiveness. Then we are expected to get our lives on the right path, with God’s help. God will send us other Christians, certain comments and circumstances to help us along the way.

So, people flocked to John for this wonderful opportunity to get clean, and get right with God.

John’s words were true, and John was really something, himself. He dressed just like Elijah, the great prophet of the Old Testament. John lived in the wilderness, on the simplest diet possible. John lived a life of simplicity and humbleness. He knew he was only the preparer, the warm-up act, so to speak, for Jesus, the Messiah, the one God would send to save the world.

John knew that the baptisms he was performing were drenching folks with water and that Jesus would drench folks with the Holy Spirit, and change their lives from the inside out, according to Eugene Peterson.

But then, something happened which we wouldn't have expected. Jesus came to the Jordan river to get baptized.

Why? Why would Jesus do this? It couldn't have been for the repentance of sins—what sins? Jesus lived a life without sins.

Well, with Jesus, it was a little different. He was baptized as a beginning. It was time to leave his home in Nazareth, his family, his work as a carpenter, and begin his ministry. And baptism in the River Jordan was a great way to make this beginning.

It would also help him identify with everyone else being baptized, then and on into the future.

Let's take a minute away from this part of Jesus' life and turn to our own life and experiences.

Okay, who was baptized as a baby? Raise your hands. Great. That was a wonderful thing for your parents and family to have arranged for you—an adoption by God, into Christ's holy church, from the very beginning of your life.

Okay, who was baptized as a child, or as a youth? That's great, too. You can carry that memory with you—maybe the special clothes you wore, the water, whatever your family or church did to celebrate.

How about those of you baptized as adults—Great! God's blessing came to rest upon you that day, and you became God's own Christian son or daughter, empowered to live right.

If you have yet to be baptized, well, there's no time like the present to accept Christ and his salvation. We can talk about it.

See, even we can identify with Jesus' baptism, and 2000 years have passed since his!

Back to the story. Jesus goes to the river to be baptized.

Here's one version of John's experience that day:

"I was baptizing my cousin Jesus, who I thought was just another man, washing him free of his sins, screaming to the crowds that I would wash this man of his sins but that one is coming who would wash him with the Holy Spirit. But as I lifted Jesus out of the water, the Holy Spirit appeared in the

form of a dove, and the heavens parted, and God spoke to him in my arms. I don't think until that time even Jesus himself realized the enormity of what he was about. And what does one do when God speaks? History talks about men who have spoken and wrestled with angels, but to be spoken to by God? We are in awe that it even happened to Abraham and Moses! But think now, could my life ever have more meaning than it did at that moment? I had baptized a man in the water who had no sins. I had baptized the Messiah. I had heard God. I witnessed the Holy Spirit." (story by Jo-Ann Jennings)

What a wonderful experience that must have been for John the Baptist.

That brings us to the rest of it, the other parts of Jesus being baptized. In this experience, Jesus got God's approval—words spoken from heaven:

"You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well-pleased."

There's nothing like approval. Last night my husband was preaching on this part, and he mentioned that his dad was someone who never gave approval, because he thought if you praised a kid, it would go to his head. Now, my sister and I could tell you how our stepfather gave out praise, without ever being mushy. He'd say, "Ya done good, kid."

Approval is good to have, at the beginning or while we are going along.

Jesus also got something else he would need, the Holy Spirit, the holy power and ability to do his ministry of teaching, preaching, healing, and performing miracles.

And how did Jesus receive the Holy Spirit? "Descending like a dove on him."

A gentle dove, the ancient symbol of peace—to show that Jesus would conquer the world with love.

John's sermons had been fierce and condemning of sin—he had made people realize the errors of their ways. In that way, they were prepared to receive the transforming love which Jesus had to offer them.

It's the same with us, today. Just by showing up, here at church, we are admitting that we need God's help—and we find, that Jesus has love for all of us—to help us along the way, wash us clean of our sins and errors, and bring us into the sunlight of the Christian life.

Amen.

(By Rev. Sally J. DeMasters)