

March 7, 2018 – Exodus 14:13-31

The city of Cape Town, South Africa is running out of water. “Day Zero” they call it. The day when the city's reservoirs run completely dry and the public water system shuts down entirely. The day when 4.3 million people run out of water.

It's a crisis unheard of in the modern era, even in Africa. Of course, there's lots of blame to go around. Poorly maintained reservoirs. Outdated infrastructure. Wasteful use of water by residents. But the biggest factor of all was completely out of anyone's control: a three year drought, that simply left the city with too little rainfall to support its needs.

It's hard for us to imagine a drought that bad, I think. Especially when so many of the headlines recently years have been about flooding. Flooding in Houston. Flooding in New Orleans. Flooding in California. Even just this past week, flooding along the Atlantic coast from the Northeast that came through.

It's amazing how too much water can lead to death and destruction. And too little water can lead to death and destruction. And yet, just the right amount of water, at just the right time, in just the right place, is essential to life and growth.

The Bible talks about this dual aspect of water a lot. We hear about it in the creation story. The chaotic, formless void that preceded creation was described as water. It was a place of darkness, without life of any kind.

And yet, the sky is separated from that water. The land is separated from that water. All of creation is based around this life-giving water.

We hear about it in the Flood. It is water that destroys the whole earth. Water that is the implement of God's wrath and judgement. Water that purges the earth of sin and violence.

And yet, water also saves Noah and his family. Had God destroyed the earth with fire or wind or any other method, that ark would have been useless. But because God destroyed the earth with water, the ark meant life and safety for the 8 souls inside.

Our Old Testament Lesson for today is all about that dual aspect of water. Death and life. Destruction and safety. Wrath and salvation.

Egypt itself had some of those characteristics too. We often forget that Jacob and his sons first fled into Egypt in order to escape a drought. They weren't taken into Egypt against their will as captives. They were glad to leave the Promised Land and go to Egypt.

But, since then, it had obviously become much less of a blessing. As one pharaoh died and another took his place that had no memory of Joseph or Jacob or the reason why the Israelites were there. They only knew that the Israelites were cheap labor.

And so, almost overnight it seems, the Israelites went from guests to prisoners. And Egypt went from being a place of life and salvation, to a place of death and slavery. A place where they were beaten and tortured. A place where their infant sons were thrown in the Nile River. A place far from the land God had promised to Abraham and his descendants.

And so God sent Moses. Now, Moses had plenty of faults, as all God's leaders of the Old Testament did. But you've also got to give Moses a little credit.

Because, despite all his shortcomings, he does a pretty amazing thing. He stands up to pharaoh, one of the most powerful leaders of the world. A man considered a god to the Egyptians. He walks up to pharaoh and says, “Let my people go.”

That takes guts. Or, in Moses' case, that takes faith. Faith in this God who calls himself Yahweh. A God Moses knows almost nothing about. A God he's just met in the burning bush. Faith that this God will deliver on his promises. It's a faith that defies human understanding. A faith that could only come from God himself.

But, at first, it's not really a faith that the rest of the Israelites share. Because even after God sends plague after plague upon the Egyptians. Even after God strikes down pharaoh's own son and proves that this man who thinks he's a god is just a mere mortal. Even then, the people doubt that God can deliver them.

And so they stand at the banks of the Red Sea, terrified. The army of Pharaoh bearing down on one side. A vast body of water on the other. And they are quite certain that the only thing waiting for them is death.

And yet, what does Moses tell them? *“Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the Lord, which he will work for you today. For the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall never see again. The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to be silent.”*

You think this water means death and destruction. But what it really means is life and salvation. You can only focus on the Egyptians racing towards you, but by tomorrow you'll never see them again. You are crying out in fear, but you have one job: be silent and watch the Lord fight for you.

And for the next 12 hours or so, the Israelites watched water turn from death into life into death again. They watched Moses put his arms in the air and a great wind part the waters, so that they walked on dry ground. They watched the pillar of cloud that had guided them by day move behind them, shroud the chariots in darkness, and trap the Egyptians in the mud. They watched the waters collapse down upon the Egyptians in a terrible flood, drowning pharaoh and all his men.

Water can mean death and destruction. Water can mean life and salvation. It just depends on who's controlling the water and why. Where it comes from and where it's going. Is it being used in wrath? Or is it being used in grace?

The same is true of our own Baptism. Because while I think, as good, well-catechized Lutherans, we usually understand that Baptism is done for the forgiveness of our sins, we also often miss the role of water in Baptism.

Because we look at water and we think “washing.” And that's true. Completely true. The word baptism itself means “washing.” I'm not denying that.

But it's not just washing like we wash a plate or we wash our clothes. It's more like washing like the earth being washed clean in the flood. Pharaoh's army being washed away in the Red Sea.

Baptism isn't just about being rinsed off. It's about being purged and purified. Inside and out. It's about killing the Old Adam inside of us. Destroying that corrupt man who's convinced he's a god. Freeing us from slavery to sin.

Baptism is death. It's the death of everything evil inside of us. It's the death of all our sin on the cross. It's the death of our Lord for us.

In Baptism, we are killed and buried with Jesus. So that we might be raised to new life on Easter morning. In baptism, that dried out, shriveled up, hard as stone heart we were born with is transformed. So that a river of living water flows out of it.

And in baptism, we are given faith. Faith like Moses had after the burning bush. Faith like the Israelites had after the Red Sea. Faith that this God who promises to free us and bring us back from exile will do everything he has said he will do. And bring us to the Promised Land of the resurrection.

And all we need do is fear not. Stand firm. Watch the salvation of the Lord. For though we are surrounded by sin, death, and the devil today, tomorrow we will never see them again.

The Lord who died on the cross and rose to new life has fought for us. Is fighting for us. And will continue to fight for us until that day when faith will be made sight. And all will see the salvation of our God.

Until then, we have only to be silent. Wait for him. Watch for him. Trust in him. And spend each day walking through the waters of baptism that save us. Until all the powers of hell flee in terror at the God who fights for us. Amen.