



**Emerging From the Waters**  
**Genesis 9:8-17; Psalm 25:1-10; 1 Peter 3:18-22; Mark 1:9-15**  
**Reverend Giuseppe Mattei**

Water is an integral part of the created order. It sustains and fosters life. Yet, we know all too well that severe droughts or ravaging floods can disrupt people's livelihood and force people off their land. Environmental factors, in fact, count among the causes of mass migrations. Too little or too much water can cause devastating damage to life; it can also end it.

Coastal flooding is a reality that will affect millions of people worldwide in the not-too-far future. In less than ten years, the sea level at Clearwater, FL, will rise by almost 1.30 ft. and the same is to be said for Miami, FL.<sup>1</sup> Don't worry, though, because future underwater archeology will attract tourists not concerned about getting wet, like those flocking to see the submerged archeological site of Baia just a few miles from the center city of Naples, Italy.<sup>2</sup>

On Ash Wednesday the church began its journey toward baptismal immersion in the death and resurrection of Christ. This year, the Sundays in Lent lead us to focus on five covenants God makes in the Hebrew Scriptures and to use them as lenses through which to view baptism. The First letter of Peter we just heard connects the way God saved Noah's family in the flood with the way God saves us through the water of baptism.

In the gospel of Mark, the Holy Spirit descends on Jesus at the time of his baptism by John, and immediately drives him into the desert, a place dramatically defined by its lack of water. Baptism does not make Jesus' life easier. It does not immunize him from evil and the challenges of life. Baptism does not fix things for Jesus. Just the opposite, baptism complicates life, for Jesus and for us. In baptism, the Holy Spirit marks us for God and our hearts are not satisfied until they rest in God, to paraphrase the great North African theologian of the Church, St. Augustine of Hippo. It is the love of God for all people that moves us to seek justice and peace in all the earth.

That is what we promise in baptism, but it is not a stroll in the park. Many forces rage against us, distracting, seducing, and diverting us, challenging our determination, draining our internal resources. Faith tells us we have the power of God on our side: God believes in us; the words of Jesus direct us; the community of believers sustains us. Baptism tells me I am not alone; I walk side by side with you, my Church family. When my faith falters, when I am exhausted, and when I feel hopelessness, it is your prayers, your words of encouragement, your faith in me, and your singing that support me. The faith of Christ in you sustains me. We are baptized in a faith community.

Our liturgy reminds us that our old, sinful self is drowned in the waters of baptism, we leave it behind as a reality of the past, and through the waters we emerge as children of God. But the

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<sup>1</sup> [Sea Level Rise and Coastal Flooding Impacts \(noaa.gov\)](http://noaa.gov);

<sup>2</sup> [Parco archeologico di Baia \(baiasommersa.net\)](http://baiasommersa.net)



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current that flows through these paradoxes is this: in death and life, in flood and drought, God remains faithful. As the psalmist reminds us, God's mercy and steadfast love "are from everlasting." (Ps. 25:6)

Our faith journey is patterned after Jesus': Jesus is called, baptized, and sent to announce the good news of salvation. During his life of teaching, preaching, and healing, he finds obstacle after obstacle and in many forms, he is tempted to abandon the way up to the last minute of his life on Earth. He can go on and remain faithful only because the Holy Spirit helps him to remain in touch with his identity of child of God. God's affirming words give him (and us) strength and food for the journey. In prayer, we tap into the power of the Spirit of Jesus and find renewed life.

The ELCA talks about this pattern by saying we are Called, Gathered, Enlightened, and Sent Out. Another way to think of this pattern comes from Henri Nouwen's book, *Life of The Beloved*. Nouwen says we are Taken (Chosen by God), Blessed (Called Beloved by God in Baptism), Broken (Tempted), and Given (Sharing the Good News of God with the world). We see this cycle in today's short text from the gospel of Mark and God invites us into it over and over again throughout our lives. Isn't this the Eucharistic pattern?

According to Nouwen, the life of faith hinges on God's words spoken to us at baptism. Jesus leaves his home, is constantly tempted, and remains faithful to God's call to share the good news, fully knowing it will lead him to the cross. He can do all that only because he fiercely hangs on all the words of God and fully trusts a deep sense of his "beloved-ness." Nouwen writes; "We ARE the Beloved and must BECOME the Beloved, we ARE children of God and must BECOME children of God, we ARE brothers and sisters and must BECOME brothers and sisters." The Spirit is here to help us on the way and baptism initiates the process of becoming.

Jesus went through horrific physical and mental pain: The people from his hometown thought he was a joke. The religious leaders told him he wasn't being faithful to God. His friends ditched him in his moment of greatest need. His own family thought he went mad. On top of that, people constantly challenged his identity: "He eats with sinners. He has a demon. What makes him so special? Whom does he think he is? A king? A prophet?"

But the voice he kept in the forefront of his heart and mind was his heavenly Father's, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

In baptism, we cease to exist under the powers of this world and are transformed to a new and different kind of existence. We have crossed those waters long time ago. We have left the waters of sin and chaos behind and look with trust and expectation at the promises of God's covenant. Please, notice: the rainbow is not intended to be a covenant reminder for us. It is a sign for God.



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In the book of Genesis, God says: “When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember.” God is the initiator of the covenant, and God sets the rainbow as a self-reminder.

As OT professor, Terence Fretheim, writes, “The covenant will be as good as God is. God establishes it in goodness and love and upholds it in faithfulness. It will never need to be renewed; it stands forever, regardless of what people do. Humans can just rest in the arms of this promise.” Funny how that sign in the sky appears not on clear days but following a storm. The spiritual insight is that the promises of God are empty words without a backdrop of challenge, adversity, and sometimes even despair.

God’s reassuring word comes to us when we are down and out, when we need courage and strength. Trust in the promise. Become who you are. Walk boldly in faith. Amen.