IMMANUEL CHURCH-ON-THE-HILL

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Wallowing in the Waters of Baptism

By The Rev. J. Randolph Alexander, Jr.

When I say the prayer of blessing over holy water near the entrance of one of our chapels, I usually add something like this: "May those who encounter this water remember their baptism and ask how they are tending it."

That recollection is one of the chief reasons for having that holy water there, that we might contemplate with awe and wonder our baptism, whether or not we can actually remember it. As one steps into consecrated space, it is appropriate to bring to mind in a very tangible way the great sacrament we received once and for all, and to remember that, ultimately, we do not belong to this world.

You might even think of the holy water at the door as a kind of detoxing from a world which so often defines us by how much we earn, where we're from, what we look like, how old we are, or a hundred other time-limited distinctions. In the Church, and in baptism, we are reminded that we are children of God, made in the image of God, redeemed by the sacrifice of Christ himself, and bound for eternity. But then we forget again, and we need to be reminded again.

We dwelt a lot in seminary on the history, theology, and centrality of baptism in the Christian life. The symbolism of the sacrament is deep, rich, obvious, and inexhaustible. Pretty soon I discovered I had an unexpected window towards understanding some of this symbolism because, unlike most of my classmates, I could remember my own baptism.

I was baptized in a river on a Sunday afternoon, and I'm pretty sure those on the bank of the river had just joined in singing "Shall We Gather at the River?" I was given a little handkerchief to hold over my nose and mouth as I was lowered into the water, but Pastor McGhee held me down under the water so long that the hanky floated away. He held me down, as I say, a long time, and I remember thinking, "I could die down here."

Death is, in fact, part of the imagery of baptism. St. Paul says, "If we have joined with Christ in a death like his, we shall surely join with him in a Resurrection like his" (Romans 6:5). We are dying to so much in baptism, notably to all that holds us back from what God dreams for us and from how God dreams we are to live with other people. The goal in all of this dying is to rise towards new life.

It was sunny on the day of my baptism. As I was held under the water, I noticed the bright light of the sun was being filtered in waves through the water. I thought, "I have to move towards that light." Indeed, moving through all of this life towards Jesus, the light of the world, is one way of thinking of the Christian journey. Rising towards the light, towards new, abundant, and eternal life, is virtually our mission statement.

So, whenever I put a few drops of that blessed water on my forehead as I enter a church, I often try to think of moving towards that light, even as I die towards what might have been holding me back. I also declare, in the name of Jesus, some deliverance from the darkness.

A professor of mine in seminary used to say that there would be times in our lives when the very best thing we could do would be to imagine wallowing around in the waters of our baptism, much as we might imagine a bear wallowing with abandon in a pond in the wild.

He didn't mean jumping into a pool, of course, but he did mean straining to remember how very much God loves us, and that we have been forgiven and grafted into Christ's body, the Church, through those waters. There would be times, my professor would say, when the light will seem very far away, indeed, but that we would need to catch hold of and claim the truth that we were moving towards it. We do some of that wallowing, if we pay attention, every time we witness a baptism and we renew our own vows.

Thank God for the waters of baptism. Have you wallowed around in yours lately?

As you ponder my question, let these two hymns inspire your thoughts:
"We Know that Christ is Raised and Dies No More"
"Shall We Gather at the River?"