



Grace Church

The Rev. Dr. Matthew Calkins  
Rector

## Water and Spirit

### Sermon for Lent 2, March 12, 2017

*Readings:* Genesis 12:1-4a; Romans 4:1-5, 13-17; John 3:1-17; Psalm 121

*Sermon text:* Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.”  
John 3:15

Water and Spirit, two things, Jesus tells us in the gospel according to John, that we must be born of. Born of water, of earth, from below, from a long long history of evolution of species and ancestors and instincts. Born of Spirit, of sky and wind and the breath of God, from above, beyond, the future not the past. That place where the world as it should be—the kingdom of heaven, Jesus called it—meets the world as it is.

On Ash Wednesday, we were reminded of our birth from below. “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return” (words said during the imposition of ashes).

On Easter Sunday we will sing our victory song, “Alleluia, Christ is risen!”; “the Lord is risen indeed, alleluia!” (the call and response of the Easter acclamation).

This is the faith that we proclaim: As Christ rose, so will we. Dusty bodies washed clean.

We may be dust but we are “wonderfully made.”<sup>1</sup> We are frail and strong, beautiful and mortal. Prone to ignorance and sin, tempted in many ways, as I preached about last week, but also capable of great deeds and achievements.

Indeed all of creation is wonderfully made, right from the beginning. God pronounced the work of his hands good and very good on the days of creation (Genesis 1). No “original sin” can erase God’s “original blessing” (Matthew Fox). Orthodox Christianity rejects as

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<sup>1</sup>Psalm 139:14: I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well.

heresy the idea that the material world is evil or our bodies merely filthy prisons for an immaterial soul. We are not bodies with a mind or minds with a body but embodied minds and mindful bodies; we rise as one soul, given life by the Spirit of God (all things depend for their existence on God's outpoured being). Our perceptions are limited and prone to error, but we perceive an objective reality, not an illusion cast by a demiurge (or science fiction matrix). We also sense something more, something revealed to us beyond this world.

In sum: We are not either/or but both/and creatures. We must be born not of water or of Spirit but of both.

We are thrown into this world (as Heidegger vividly put it). No choice. And we can't change the past; once the concrete is poured it is set. But every present moment is a moment of decision. We are immersed, as in baptism, in the watery flux, the ever-rushing present. We dimly see ahead; there are many possible futures. The winds that fill our sails are sometimes steady, sometimes calm, sometimes swirling, sometimes overwhelming. We are called by the Spirit, and also tempted by appetites and pride.

The temptation is always to make our own well-being, and that of those closest to us, the end and goal of our life and work. But we lessen the fullness of our life that way. For we are also called to be a blessing to the world and to be faithful to God who made us, as we learn from this morning's story about the covenant God made with Abraham.

As our lives bless the world, so we glorify God, so we fulfill our purpose in life, so we find abiding joy and peace. This is what the great tradition teaches.

"The glory of God is a living human being," as St Irenaeus wrote (*gloria enim Dei vivens homo*). But what is a living human being, a human fully alive?

Irenaeus continues: "but [the purpose and end of] human life is the vision of God" (*vita autem hominis visio Dei; Against Heresies 4:20:7*).

I love Irenaeus. He was born early in the second century and grew up in the town of Smyrna, on the western coast of Turkey, where he heard the elderly bishop Polycarp teach. Polycarp had been taught by the apostle John. Imagine that. His teacher heard the gospel from John, who heard it from Jesus. Now that's apostolic tradition.

Irenaeus later became the second bishop of Lyons, in France, not far from Taizé (home of the wonderful order of brothers whose "pilgrimage of trust on earth" has inspired so many young people; go to [taize.fr](http://taize.fr) for more). He was a great defender of the teaching of the apostles against certain gnostic teachers of the time (such as Valentinus and Marcion; look them up). They attacked the Old Testament as opposed to the New, considered this world evil and the soul as a divine spark imprisoned in a fleshly cage, and claimed to have secret teachings of Jesus transmitted through "gnostic gospels." Many of these have recently been recovered in Nag Hammadi.

Now the gnostic gospels make for very interesting reading; they contain provocative metaphors that challenge us to break out of shallow understandings of God and Christ; they include feminine imagery of God that opens our minds to new ways of understanding.

Their suppression, in which Irenaeus played a prominent role, reveals how the early church became captive to patterns of patriarchal and hierarchical authority that marginalized women and criminalized esoteric forms of Christian faith.

We have recovered the early church freedom of metaphor in such works of literature and cinema as *The Shack* and reintroduced esoteric interpretation of the teaching of Jesus through such wisdom tradition teachers as Cynthia Bourgeault, whose book *The Wisdom Jesus* draws heavily on *The Gospel of Thomas*.

But I believe these modern-day wisdom teachers fundamentally agree with the deep stream of orthodoxy that Irenaeus so ardently defended. Consider the doctrines of Incarnation, Resurrection and Ascension. Incarnation: the teaching that God became human so that we might participate in the life of God (a teaching known in Eastern Orthodoxy as *theosis*). Resurrection: as Christ rose, so will we. Dusty bodies washed clean. Sown in perishable flesh, raised in eternal glory. Ascension: What Christ has assumed—a mortal body, by extension this material universe—is now incorporate into the life of God; heaven and earth are becoming one, in sign and seed now (this is the kingdom already, the kingdom within), in fullness at the end (at the second coming, at the marriage of heaven and earth envisioned at Revelation 22). God and creation will be both/and as well. These are powerful teachings; the more you study them, the deeper they reveal themselves to be.

Jesus was certainly a human being fully alive. And he had a clear vision of God. Only the one who has descended from heaven has seen the Father, Jesus tells us in today's gospel. And he was sent by the Father for a reason: to save the world. Not to condemn it—for God made it good, remember? But to repair, restore, heal and raise it. Just as we will be raised through Christ, so will the world be raised. The kingdom of heaven will come to earth. The world as it is will become the world as it should be. Even now creation is groaning in labor, Paul wrote, waiting and longing to give birth to the children of light. The vision is there; the voice is calling in the wind; Jesus offers his hand, he gives his word. Will you take it? Do you trust his word?

To follow Jesus is to trust and believe in his message, in his gospel. In him the Word is made flesh, the end is made clear: we are to love like he did, to trust like he did, to speak and act with courage and compassion as he did.

Such is the life that is the glory of God and which glorifies God, the life fully human, the life beyond self, the life as part of the whole, the life God has called you to. The both/and life: human and divine, past and future, married in an eternal now.

Embrace it. Rejoice in it. Plunge in the water, and then come up and take a deep soul-filling breath. You are born of both water and Spirit. It's a glorious world. Praise God.

In the name of Christ, Amen.

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