

**Common Waters:  
Global water crises and Christian baptism**  
For @this Point Spring 2015

*Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters . . . [Isa. 55:1]*

Christians talk a lot about water. We remember the waters of creation, both the mysterious chaotic waters of Genesis 1 and the more ordered rivers of water in Genesis 2. We hear Isaiah's words inviting thirsty people to the waters, we walk beside the "still waters" of Psalm 23, and we pant for the streams with the deer of Psalm 42. We hear Jesus' words to the Samaritan woman promising her living water, and we glimpse the waters of the new Jerusalem, "bright as crystal," at the end of Revelation.

We Christians not only talk about water, but we are also signed with water at the beginning of our Christian journey. In so doing, we confront water's deep threat of death, as well as its deep promise of life. From beginning to end, we are a water-oriented people.

Sometimes our water-talk, however, seems oddly disconnected from actual global water issues. What might we water-marked people have to say to the realities of water shortage, contamination, and boundary disputes facing our world today? Do our baptismal waters have anything to do with the waters of the Nile and the Chattahoochee, and the shrinking snowcaps of California? In this essay, I will offer some snapshots of global water crises, and then offer a few reflections on what our own Christian baptismal wisdom may learn and offer to this world in which water is increasingly contested, contaminated, and scarce.

### **Water and the threat of death**

#### *The Chattahoochee and the Flint*

Since 1970, Georgia, Florida, and Alabama have struggled over access and control of their shared waters. From Lake Lanier in north Georgia, the Chattahoochee and Flint Rivers flow southward, through the middle of Atlanta and then Alabama, down to the Florida panhandle, where they empty into the Apalachicola Bay. Along the way they feed towns, farms, and wetlands in all three states. The growing population of the Atlanta area in recent decades, however, has required more and more water, restricting water flow downstream. According to the Atlanta Journal Constitution, "Florida has argued that Georgia's thirst is threatening the fragile ecosystem of the Apalachicola Bay — and the fisheries and oystermen who depend on it. Georgia has flatly rejected those claims. Alabama has long shared Florida's concerns. It depends on water flowing from Georgia to cool power plants and irrigate its farms, and it has argued that Georgia keeps more than its fair share."<sup>1</sup>

Florida asked the U.S. Supreme Court this year to limit Georgia's water withdrawals from the Chattahoochee River to 1992 levels, when metro Atlanta's population hovered around 3

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.myajc.com/news/news/state-regional-govt-politics/deal-sets-meetings-with-alabama-florida-leaders-on/nkgcL/?icid=ajc\\_internallink\\_myajcinvitationbox\\_feb2014\\_accessdigital\\_post-purchase#a4ab3260.3959696.735691](http://www.myajc.com/news/news/state-regional-govt-politics/deal-sets-meetings-with-alabama-florida-leaders-on/nkgcL/?icid=ajc_internallink_myajcinvitationbox_feb2014_accessdigital_post-purchase#a4ab3260.3959696.735691). Accessed 4/3/2015.

million people. It now surpasses 5.4 million. The Court surprised many by deciding to hear the case during its 2014-15 session. Residents of all three states now wait anxiously to see how their own water resources will be affected.

### *The Nile, Ethiopia and Egypt*

In northern Africa, neighbors also struggle over access and control of shared river waters. Ethiopia and Egypt have long argued over the Nile, on whom people of both nations depend. Colonial-era agreements gave Egypt a virtual monopoly over the river, exacerbating conflict and distrust between these two nations. In recent years, Ethiopia prompted a spike in tensions with its neighboring state because of the planned “Grand Ethiopia Renaissance Dam Project,” an effort to harness the water power of the Nile for electricity.

This plan, which would lessen Ethiopia’s dependence on other nations for energy resources, has been seen as a threat by Egypt. Former Egyptian president Mohamed Morsi once warned that every drop of water stolen from the Nile “would be defended by a drop of Egyptian blood.” Once the dam is completed, of course, no water would be “stolen” from the Nile, since its power would simply be harnessed for generation of electricity. Initially, however, the reservoir would need to fill up, and this would take roughly as much water as Egypt currently gets from the Nile in the course of a year: 63 billion cubic meters. Depending on how long the fill period takes, Egyptian farmers could be plunged into drought. In addition, even temporary restriction of the Nile river flow would limit access to water resources for Ethiopian tribes, whose traditional way of life depends on fishing and mining from the river.<sup>2</sup>

### *California*

Back in the United States, a four-year drought has generated another kind of ecological and political water crisis. Record low snowfalls this winter finally led Governor Jerry Brown on April 1 to order mandatory water use reductions for the first time in California’s history. With an executive order, the governor “directed the State Water Resources Control Board to impose a 25 percent reduction on the state’s 400 local water supply agencies, which serve 90 percent of California residents, over the coming year. The agencies will be responsible for coming up with restrictions to cut back on water use and for monitoring compliance. State officials said the order would impose varying degrees of cutbacks on water use across the board — affecting homeowners, farms and other businesses, as well as the maintenance of cemeteries and golf courses.”<sup>3</sup> Such drastic reduction in permissible water use is arousing concern across the state as citizens wonder how this will affect their quality of life in the months and years ahead. Not only California will be affected, of course. Water shortages in that agriculturally rich state could reduce supplies and raise costs of produce to the rest of the United States as well. Citizens of Georgia will pay more for their romaine lettuce because of drought on the other side of the country.

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<sup>2</sup> For more on this story, see

<http://www.npr.org/player/v2/mediaPlayer.html?action=1&t=1&islist=false&id=395321624&m=395475173&live=1>. Accessed April 3, 2015

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/02/us/california-imposes-first-ever-water-restrictions-to-deal-with-drought.html?hp&action=click&pgtype=Homepage&module=first-column-region&region=top-news&WT.nav=top-news&r=0>. Accessed April 3, 2015.

*Chad, Ethiopia, Mali, South Sudan, Nigeria*

Besides political conflict and climate change, water also signifies danger in areas of the world where clean water is not readily available. In several African countries, for instance, people still do not have easy access to clean water for drinking, washing, and bathing. Local water sources may be contaminated with water-borne parasites that cause diseases such as Guinea worm (still endemic in Chad, Ethiopia, Mali, South Sudan) and schistosomiasis (especially in Nigeria). Guinea worm, when untreated, causes intense pain, rendering its victims unable to care for themselves or others. Schistosomiasis weakens the immune system and stunts growth, sometimes leading even to premature death.<sup>4</sup>

*Damascus and the Middle East*

Political instability and ecological damage are both involved in water crises in the Middle East. The Strategic Foresight Group, an India-based think tank that develops solutions to targeted global issues, recently reported on their efforts in water diplomacy in the Middle East. Their report begins:

Exactly 1300 years ago, in 715 AD, Caliph Al Walid dedicated a grand mosque to the people of Damascus. In his dedication address, he said: “Inhabitants of Damascus, four things give you a marked superiority over the rest of the world: your climate, your water, your fruits, and your baths.” His thoughts were reflected in the beautiful mosaics of what came to be known as the Ummayyad Mosque. These mosaics depicted flowing rivers, tall trees and rich greenery. Even today a visitor to the Ummayyad Mosque first notices these mosaics. . . .

Exactly one hundred years ago, in 1915, flowing water, tall trees and rich greenery in Caliph Al Walid’s vision could be still witnessed in Damascus. It has all changed by the beginning of 2015. The Barada River which inspired Al Walid made it possible for Damascus to evolve as a major city for centuries. The word “Barada” means golden stream. However, by 2015 Barada has ceased to be a river and has become a stream. It looks golden or rather brown, instead of blue, on account of pollution. Tonnes of waste from household, industry and irrigation are discharged into the river. Legal and illegal wells have adverse impact on groundwater. Parts of the river have turned dry. The depletion of Barada River has forced the Damascus elite to take baths in five star hotels. In other parts of Syria and Iraq, water crisis have deprived farmers of their livelihood and homes. Some of them have joined violent groups opposed to the state. The genesis of terrorist organisations like ISIS, Al Nusra, [and] Al Qaeda has complex explanations. Depletion of rivers and lakes is part of it.

Elsewhere in the Middle East, the Dead Sea is dying. It has shrunk by a third in the last fifty years. It may become a pond in another fifty.

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<sup>4</sup> See Carter Center information on Guinea worm:

[http://www.cartercenter.org/health/guinea\\_worm/index.html](http://www.cartercenter.org/health/guinea_worm/index.html) and schistosomiasis:  
<http://www.cartercenter.org/health/schistosomiasis/index.html>

. . . Declining availability of water has impact on agriculture, electricity generation and urbanisation, and therefore on migration, social stability, internal strife and transboundary conflicts. It would be an exaggeration to say that water is the cause of the present conflict in the Middle East. At the same time, it would naïve to ignore the fault lines created by water crisis.”<sup>5</sup>

### *Issues*

These snapshots reveal multiple dimensions of water crises confronting the world today. In places like Ethiopia and Egypt, Florida and Georgia, water is *contested*. Nations and states argue about access to existing water resources, focusing attention on national and state borders and distribution of economic resources. In parts of Africa and the Middle East, water is *contaminated*. Unclean water threatens the health of millions worldwide, focusing attention on our human impact on natural water resources. In California and parts of the Middle East, water is *scarce*. Due to climate change, water resources are shifting and shrinking globally, focusing attention on ecological fragility and the need to manage existing water stores.

Many scholars and policy experts have documented the growing water crisis that faces our world today. Pointing out that only 1% of the world’s water supply is fresh, and only .02% readily available, Michael Guebert offers this sobering observation: “As a result of an increasing human population, higher-than-ever per capita resource demands, and widespread improper use of freshwater resources, humans have induced a global water crisis.”<sup>6</sup> Focusing particularly on the effects of climate change, Sandra Postel, Director of the Global Water Policy Project, warns that “the growing number of water shortages around the world and the possibility of these shortages leading to economic disruption, food crises, social tensions, and even war suggest that the challenges posed by water in the coming decades will rival those posed by declining oil supplies.”<sup>7</sup> Concerns about water are increasingly generating fear, anger, and conflict on a massive scale.

### **Water and the promise of life: emerging efforts to address water crises**

In the midst of this bleak portrait of water crises in our world, many people and agencies are actively seeking water solutions. Organizations like Wine to Water and Living Waters for the World seek to provide access to clean water to underserved populations in many countries. Wine to Water, whose name inverts the miracle at Cana in John 2, addresses the water crisis by raising money selling wine. Proclaiming the simple motto, “There is no life without water,” they

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<sup>5</sup> [http://strategicforesight.com/publication\\_pdf/33406Blue%20Peace%20Progress%20Report.pdf](http://strategicforesight.com/publication_pdf/33406Blue%20Peace%20Progress%20Report.pdf). Accessed April 3, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Guebert, “Water for Life: Global Freshwater Resources,” in *Keeping God’s Earth: The Global Environment in Biblical Perspective*, ed. Noah J. Taly and Daniel I. Block (IVP Academic, 2010), 144.

<sup>7</sup> Sandra Postel, “Water: Adapting to a New Normal,,” in *The Post Carbon Reader: Managing the 21<sup>st</sup> Century’s Sustainability Crises*, ed. Richard Heinberg and Daniel Lerch (Watershed Media, 2010), 77.

sponsor wine tastings and sell bottles of wine online in order to raise funds for clean water systems.<sup>8</sup> Living Waters for the World (LWW) similarly focuses on providing clean, sustainable water sources for communities around the world. As their website says, this “mission resource of the Synod of Living Waters of the Presbyterian Church (USA), trains and equips mission teams to share the gift of clean, sustainable water with communities in need. LWW water treatment systems and related educational programs fill a critical niche in the world water crisis - communities with available but contaminated water.”<sup>9</sup> The Carter Center, for its part, has led remarkable efforts to combat water-borne diseases such as Guinea worm and schistosomiasis through introduction of regular filtering and consistent education programs. All of these agencies demonstrate how focused attention over time can provide people access to safe water even in remote and impoverished areas.

In certain areas, political progress is also evident. Because of the Supreme Court decision to hear Florida’s Chattahoochee River case, governors in Georgia, Florida, and Alabama are beginning talks to resolve the conflict over their shared river waters. This spring, Sudan has actually brokered a deal to avert war between Egypt and Ethiopia regarding the Nile River and the Grand Renaissance Dam. The agreement will give Egypt some of the electricity generated, and it gives a timeline to check on the dam’s impact on water levels to populations downstream. Aaron Wolf, director of the program in water conflict management and transformation at the University of Oregon, reflected on this agreement with the wise observation that “water . . . brings people into a room who wouldn’t normally sit in a room together—so it brings Arabs and Israelis, Egyptians and Ethiopians, northern California and southern California.’ He says that when it comes to water, even the bitterest rivals end up eventually having to negotiate.”<sup>10</sup>

This observation of the power of water to bring even enemies together has some support from recent work by the Strategic Foresight Group mentioned earlier. This group has developed a promising approach to water diplomacy around the world called “Blue Peace,” defined as the “comprehensive, integrated and collaborative management of all water resources in a circle of countries in a way that is sustainable for the long-term, in an interdependent relationship with social and political dynamics.” After examining trans-boundary water relations in over 200 shared river basins in 148 countries, the Strategic Foresight Group has concluded, “The correlation between the degree of cooperation in water and general atmosphere of peace and friendship between any two or more countries is strong.”<sup>11</sup> Their basic “water to war equation” is stark: “Any two countries engaged in active water cooperation do not go to war for any reason

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<sup>8</sup> <http://winetowater.org/>

<sup>9</sup> <http://livingwatersfortheworld.org/>

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<http://www.npr.org/player/v2/mediaPlayer.html?action=1&t=1&islist=false&id=395321624&m=395475173&live=1>. Accessed April 3, 2015.

<sup>11</sup> [http://www.strategicforesight.com/publication\\_pdf/20795water-cooperature-sm.pdf](http://www.strategicforesight.com/publication_pdf/20795water-cooperature-sm.pdf); accessed

whatsoever.”<sup>12</sup> The research leading to the “Blue Peace” approach reveals how cooperation rather than conflict actually increases the availability of safe and sufficient water in a region. Rather than operating out of fear, which motivates hoarding and defense, active water cooperation operates out of trust that there is enough water for all, when we steward it well. Working on water issues together enables nation-states to concentrate on preserving, expanding, and improving water resources for all, rather than dividing it into ever smaller reserves.

Water divides peoples and nations, but it can—and must—also draw people together. Water generates fear and conflict, but it is also necessary for life. As citizens of the world today, we are called to address these water issues for our own personal future, and for the future of all.

### **Waters of baptism: learning from and speaking to global water crises**

Do we have a particular Christian word to offer to this situation? As already mentioned, our narratives are saturated with water: the creation, the flood, the Red Sea, crossing the Jordan into the promised land, Jesus’ baptism in the same Jordan River marking a new kind of promise, the waters of eternal life promised by Jesus, the waters of life in Revelation. At baptism, no matter what our age, we are marked with those waters, immersed into that great story, and united with Christ crucified, risen, and returning. How might these symbols and these narratives shape us to offer a particular word to the global water crisis that faces us all?

One thing we know as Christians: the waters of baptism both unite and divide us, marking terror of death as well as gift of life. The realities of death and life, of boundaries contested and boundaries dissolved—these watery truths are ones we know from our own story. Yet maybe in this new day, faced with waters contested, contaminated, and scarce, we might learn our baptismal wisdom anew in order to speak a fresh word to the world.

#### *What might we learn?*

Before we speak, we do well to listen and to learn. How might the varied water crises in our world enable us to see our own baptism in a new way?

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<sup>12</sup> “Active water cooperation” is no nebulous concept here. SFG specifically defines active water cooperation as “commitment of riparian countries to most of the following activities, or more, where such commitment is translated into action programmes implemented with agreed time frames or on an on-going basis:

- Joint management of the water body with decision making authority on water allocation and resource management submitted to a river basin organization
- Joint investment programme and joint decision making on allocation of financial resources pertaining to projects to accrue benefits from the river or lake
- Joint management of flood control
- Coordination of water quality and reduction of pollutants to harmonise quality between countries
- Joint programme of action for environmental protection of water body with deadlines which are implemented
- Consultation between riparian countries on construction of dams or reservoirs with data exchange accepted by all countries or joint construction and management of dams
- Joint management of water flows in all their aspects (Ibid.)

One thing we need to learn anew: baptism is, among other things, about actual water. This does not mean that H<sub>2</sub>O is a chemical compound that bears divine presence in a material way. Baptismal water is just common ordinary water, which God uses as a visible sign of an invisible grace. Yet it may be time to repent a little of our anti-material tendencies and recognize that in baptism, we do come into contact with an element that is necessary for our very life, even as it also threatens death. The global water crisis might help us to recognize afresh the gift and fragility of baptismal waters.

And water truly is fragile—even dangerous. From the various crises described above, we cannot overlook the fact that boundary waters generate conflict, even as reservoirs dry up and existing waters, left untreated, bring disease to millions of people in the world. Such sober realities should affect our own dealings with baptismal waters, tempering any temptation we may have to celebrate the life-giving qualities of water without equally acknowledging their capacity to deal death.

From these scenarios, however, we might also learn some good news about water's power to draw people together. The work of agencies like the Strategic Foresight Group show us that when nations and states cooperate actively around water issues rather than competing for scarce resources, the risk of war is reduced and access to water increases. This is not naïve wishful thinking, but research-based reality. Because it is necessary for life, and because it is limited, water really can bring together even the bitterest enemies. Aaron Wolf's comment regarding the Ethiopian dam negotiations sound remarkably like baptismal teaching here: "water . . . brings people into a room who wouldn't normally sit in a room together—so it brings Arabs and Israelis, Egyptians and Ethiopians, northern California and southern California.' . . . when it comes to water, even the bitterest rivals end up eventually having to negotiate." Poignantly, the negotiations prompted by serious water crises like those in Egypt, Ethiopia, and the southeastern United States might challenge Christians to hear anew the call to unity that we proclaim in baptism.

### *What might we offer?*

Having listened, we may now speak. From our own baptismal wisdom, Christians might contribute three insights to the current conversations about water:

- Baptism shows that water is not ours, but given to all
- Baptism orients us anew to the waters of creation, which are a gift of God
- Baptism orients us to new creation, in which the barriers that separate us are washed away

#### 1. *Water is not ours*

First, baptism reminds us that we are not our own—and that the waters in which we baptize are not our own, either. At baptism, we are marked as "God's own forever." This is a common baptismal theme: we belong to a loving God who has embraced us, and we are united to a community sent to bear God's love to the world. It is less commonly stated, but no less true that baptism shows us the whole created world—including the waters with which we baptize--as not our own, but as a gift of our gracious God. In baptism, we retell the ways that God has moved over, through, and in water to bring about creation, liberation, new life. Water is a sign and instrument of God's saving work in the world. In multiple ways, baptism shows us that water is not our commodity, but a vital gift of God. Therefore we should not protect and defend water as if it belonged to us, but recognize that it is a gift for all.

In the political sphere, how might this inform a Christian response to the dispute over Chattahoochee river waters in Georgia, Florida, and Alabama? On a small scale, how might respect for water as a common gift for all inspire us to ordinary acts of conservation: installing rain barrels, limiting lawn watering, turning off the water as we brush our teeth? When we jealously guard water sources as if they are our own, the result tends to be conflict and scarcity. When we work together to recognize water as a common good, however, the result can be peace and life. So the researchers at the Strategic Foresight Group have shown. To this Christians can add: this is what baptism has already shown us, if we have eyes to see.

## 2. *Baptism orients us anew to the waters of creation*

In a related second point, baptism orients us to creation as well as new creation. Baptismal theologies have long been marked by interplay between these two themes. Baptism connects us both with the waters of creation and with Jesus' death and resurrection, inaugurating the new creation. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, both Protestants and Catholics moved toward increased emphasis on this second nexus of themes: baptism unites us with Christ in his death and resurrection (Romans 6) and promises us new birth by water and the Spirit (John 3).<sup>13</sup> Such focus on baptism as new creation carries many benefits: recovery of rich New Testament baptismal imagery; ecumenical convergence in baptismal theology and practice; and clarity about baptism as a costly calling, not just a cultural rite of passage.<sup>14</sup>

Even as we emphasize baptism as death/resurrection and rebirth, however, we need to acknowledge a potential problem. Sometimes we can focus on baptism as new creation so much that it detracts from creation itself. We can celebrate the "living waters" promised by Jesus as if they have nothing to do with the waters of the Jordan and the Nile. We turn our eyes away from the contested waters of the Chattahoochee as if they were none of our concern, and pant for the disembodied, spiritualized waters of some distant new Jerusalem.

Baptism must not become a symbol to remove us from the world in which waters are contested, polluted, and scarce. When we trace our hands in the waters of the font, we are reminded of the dark chaotic waters of creation that both humble us and give us life. By immersion in the waters of baptism, with the one who himself stood in the Jordan river among sinners who sought repentance and rebirth, we are drawn into solidarity with the wounded creation itself. Our hearts might indeed then be turned to repentance—for what we have done to make our neighbors in California and the Middle East thirsty and sick. Our eyes might be opened to the gift-character of creation, as well as our call to tend it.

## 3. *Baptism orients us to new creation*

Finally, baptism also marks the beginning of our life as part of a new creation in Christ. "The old has passed away; behold, the new has come!" we proclaim. On the basis of this new

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<sup>13</sup> Though the images are not identical, for purposes of this argument I consider "new creation", "death and resurrection", and "rebirth/new birth" as variations on the same idea: baptism destroys old ways and marks entrance into a new life.

<sup>14</sup> For more extended discussion of these ideas, see my essay "Creation and New Creation in Baptism." In *Theology in Service of the Church: Essays in Honor of Joseph D. Small, III*. Westminster John Knox Press, 2008.



life, we declare that there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave nor free, male and female (Gal. 3:27-28). The waters of baptism wash away the ultimate claims of social, economic and political divides that separate us. In recent years, many Christians have appealed to this very text to address barriers of race and gender, seeing the radical implications that baptism into Christ challenges all the constructed social barriers that keep us one from another. Today we might see this point directed to national and state barriers that separate people (even Christian people) one from another across watery boundaries. Even as we observe the way that water draws people together across political borders, Christians might learn again our own baptismal wisdom that the waters have long called us to cross those boundaries and recognize one another as brothers and sisters, not enemies.

Perhaps our common baptismal waters above all can help us to see the water crises of our world in terms of the already and the not yet. Already water is a gift, which means it is not ours, but given for the common good of the world: Egypt as well as Ethiopia, Florida as well as Georgia. Forgetting this, we have alternately squandered and hoarded those waters, pretending they belong to us rather than God. In Christ's baptism, we are drawn into solidarity with the wounded world—where Californians thirst and Nigerians suffer from water-borne diseases. We are not transported to some other world, but more profoundly into this one, with its brokenness and pain. At the same, time, baptism plunges us into deep longing for the day when the clear waters of life will run through the new Jerusalem. Might such eschatological longing empower us to work together for such clean and common waters even now?