

Baptism as Drowning

Scripture Reading — Romans 6

We were ... buried with him through baptism ... in order that ... we too may live a new life.
Romans 6:4 —

As we have seen, we are born in water and we are washed in water. But water is not only life-giving; it is also death-dealing. We can drown in water too.

When we read about the Spirit of God “hovering over the waters” in Genesis 1:2, we should know that in the Hebrew culture those waters symbolized chaos—all that is death-dealing. Later, the people of Israel had to go down through the chaotic, potentially death-dealing waters of the Red Sea before they came up on the other side into freedom (Exodus 14:29).

Here in Romans the symbol returns: entering the waters of baptism is like “being buried” so that we, like Jesus, can be raised to new life.

When we become Christians, our identity as selfish, proud, and fearful people is “drowned.” We rise to a new identity as liberated people.

The sheer drama of all this led some early Christian churches (and some recent ones) to build spaces for baptism that looked like tombs. New Christians would walk down into a tomb-like pool, symbolizing the drowning of their old self, and then would walk up on the other side, symbolizing the coming to life of their new self.

May we all live today in the joy of knowing that in baptism we have already died the only death that ultimately matters: death to our old life of sin.

Prayer

Lord God, may our lives today be filled with your forgiveness as we die to our sins, and filled with new life as we learn to do every kind of good. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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