

How can water do such great things?

It is not water that does these things, but God's Word with the water and our trust in this Word. Water by itself is only water, but with the Word of God it is a life-giving water which by grace gives the new birth through the Holy Spirit.



St. Paul writes in Titus 3: *“He saved us ...in virtue of his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit, which he poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that we might be justified by his grace and become heirs in hope of eternal life. The saying is sure.”*

He showed up with his wife and young son at worship one Sunday. His name was Bill. When I visited him he said, he had never been a churchgoer. Growing up his family never went to church and he found everything we said and did in church a bit strange. His wife on the other hand had grown up in a fundamentalist church with a mother who used a lot of “God talk” as a way of disciplining her. The result was this woman was turned off to the church and suspicious of all organizational religion. Yet they worried that their only son might be missing something important for his life, so they were willing to try a Lutheran Church. That visit began my first of many conversations over the next year and a half.

Bill was more of a scientific thinker. We read together some different articles and books that dealt with science and faith. To my surprise he kept on coming with his family. He attended our new member class but wasn't ready to join. We talked about the possibility of baptizing Bill and his son at the same time but he wasn't ready for that either. After 18 months, one Sunday to my total surprise he came up for communion with an outstretched hand. He took the bread dipped it in the wine and received the body and blood of Jesus Christ. My first thought was that in seminary I learned that baptism was meant to come before one communes, and yet clearly it seemed God was stirring up the faith of Bill to receive this gift of grace and forgiveness. It wasn't long after that day that he let me know he was ready to be baptized along with his son. Those two baptisms were a wonderful celebration of the Holy Spirit's gift of new birth for this family and for the congregation.

Another image for baptism that I invite you to think about is an underground cavern. There is one near Linville Falls, North Carolina that has lots of visitors each year. In this cavern there are all kinds of limestone mineral formations that have been shaped by the underground river which carved out this cavern over a long period of time. Stalagmites and stalagmites reach towards each other from above and below reflecting an unusual beauty and gracefulness of God's creation.

At the same time there is something a bit mysterious and strange about those underground caverns. The patterns and shapes of these limestone formations along with the quartz crystals are all uniquely formed by the rushing underground water so that every section of a cavern possesses its own splendor and design when illumined.

In a similar way I believe there is something mysterious about the grace of God that flows in and through the swirling waters of our baptism. Like an underground river we are seldom conscious of how these water of our baptism continuously are carving out the new and unique creation in Christ that shapes and forms who we are. At times we might see glimpses of this new creation at work in the depths of our being, but we are never in control of this underground stream of grace. Yet we are profoundly grateful for the ongoing forgiveness and new life that is mysteriously shaped in us through Gods word and water, by the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit.