

In the waters: Genesis 1:1-5, Mark 1:4-11

Will the water bring death or life?

by [Frank M. Yamada](#) in the [December 30, 2008](#) issue

“I am haunted by waters.” These are the last words of Norman Maclean’s novella *A River Runs Through It*. Waters haunt all of us who profess the Christian faith. The human imagination is consumed with images of water, and rightly so. Our bodies are made up of water. If we fail to drink, or if we are prevented from drinking, we will expire. Drought means the possibility of death for both land and humans—too little rainfall and life as we know it is threatened.

Water is also dangerous, chaotic, devastating. In the ancient world the primeval disorder takes shape in the form of a watery chaos or monsters from the deep. An abundance of rain can lead to the land’s fertility, but too much water will drown the crops. Hurricanes in the U.S. and tsunamis in the Indian Ocean remind us that water can be an agent of death. The watery depths of the sea are a great unknown. We know that we cannot tame or master them and that, as generations come and go, the water remains.

Water will play a central role in the coming decades or centuries. Will the waters bring death or life? Is the proper biblical echo for our situation found in the Noahic flood—a story in which human sinfulness determines God’s judgment by water—or will a faithful remnant pass through the waters of the sea as God liberates the chosen people from the hand of oppression? Maybe to ask these questions is to seek a control over our destiny which is not ours to name. When it comes to water, only God appears able to speak. God’s word commands the waters into their place, bringing forth light and life. God’s voice rains down from heaven upon Jesus as he comes up from the waters, affirming his status as “the Beloved” (Mark 1:11). In the beginning, there was water. At the end, there will also be water—and God remains sovereign throughout.

For most of my life I have lived near big bodies of water. As a teen, I remember getting up before dawn and making my way down to the Pacific. As the sun was rising, a handful of friends and I would walk the deserted beaches, grab our boards and catch some early morning waves. Then we’d leave before the sands and water began to teem with summer crowds.

On the water at dawn, the ocean’s surface shimmers like liquid glass. Sounds are thick and weighty. I remember being able to hear every stroke as I paddled out, my arms going down into the waters, dividing the glass before rising again in a rhythmic cadence. As I separated water from water, I always felt more connected to myself. As the water surrounded me, all of the voices in my mind that sought to lay hold of me would fade, and God would again have room to speak. It is probably fitting that when I was baptized at 19, I was not sprinkled but dunked full-body into the Pacific Ocean as a pastor spoke over me, “I baptize you in the name . . .”

Today I live close to Lake Michigan, another big body of water. Although the lake sometimes looks and acts like the ocean, I miss the smell of salt in the air. Whenever I am down at the water’s edge during peak hours in the summer, I’m usually sharing the lake with many others. Lifeguards patrol the beach, blowing their whistles whenever people swim out of safety’s reach. Radios buzz and brightly colored umbrellas dot the sand. I sometimes return to the Pacific too, but today the same beachfront is crowded with high-rise condominiums; the flashing signs of restaurants flood the streets on Pacific Coast Highway. The water is there, but it’s harder to hear the sound of the waves above the human clamor. Still, in the beginning there were waters, and I believe that when our market-driven culture has breathed its last—probably much sooner than we imagine—the waters will

still be there.

When I remember my baptism, I reach back to hear the voice that speaks to me out of the waters—the voice that proclaims to a world of conflict that we are all “very good” and claims us all as “beloved.” The Spirit moves in and out of our busy lives, and there are times when I recognize the Spirit’s hovering presence beckoning all to a different order, to a new creation. As I reach for the water, whether in a font or on the ocean’s edge, I find myself trying to connect to the chaotic, life-giving and mysterious power that resides in its depths. One day I hope that I can say along with Langston Hughes: “I’ve known rivers: ancient, dusky rivers. My soul has grown deep like the rivers.”