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Stream, flood and stream

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**Evangelical Lutheran
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Study guide:

Stream, flood and stream

Water renewing the earth and the church

By Robert C. Blezard

Biologically, water is necessary for life itself. Where you have a lot of water you will usually find an abundance of life too. No wonder water is such a dominant image in Scripture. We need water for life, but we need God's love, mercy and grace for our spiritual lives.

Exercise 1: Stream

Think about a stream or river—constantly in motion, never quite the same, always evolving into something new. There is a flow, with new things coming in all the time and old things being carried downstream.

- Why is water flow a good image for life? For the things of God? For God's grace and love?
- What happens when things cease to flow?
- How have you experienced life as a flow? What promise does flow have for your life? For your congregation's life?

Exercise 2: Flood

When do floods happen, and why? In some places yearly seasonal floods are good for the fields, animals and ecology. Under what circumstances are floods beneficial, and why? How is a "flood" of God's love and grace beneficial to our lives? Can you share a time when you felt this?

Some floods are destructive—destroying buildings, moving earth, carving new channels and harming life. Is this always a bad thing? When must "the old," the obsolete, the bad first be washed away to make space for the new and good? When has God's flood washed away part of your soul that needed cleansing?

Exercise 3: Spring

Seemingly from out of nowhere water springs bubble up from the ground. From the depths of the earth they arise with clarity and purity, and they are a delight to drink from. In what ways is this similar to God's love and grace? Have you experienced this in tangible ways?

Exercise 4: Your watering

Which metaphor for God's love—flow, spring or flood—speaks most clearly to you and why? Do they apply or have they applied to your life? Why is water such a good image for our spiritual lives in God?



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Exercise 5: Scripture

Explore these passages where water is mentioned as a metaphor or symbol. What do they tell about God's relationship with you and God's people?

Jeremiah 17:7-8—How are you sustained by God's grace and love? How does God provide you stability and strength?

Psalms 23—What does "still waters" mean to you? How does God refresh your soul?

Isaiah 43:19-21—In what ways have you experienced your life (or your congregation's) as a desert? What river has God made for you? What does that promise mean?

Amos 5:21-24—In this context, what is justice and what is righteousness? What role does the water image serve here? What does it mean to God's people?

John 4:7-15—What water does Jesus have to give to the woman at the well? What is living water? Have you drunk it?

John 7:38—Describe a time when you've been thirsty for Jesus. How? Why? How do you "drink" in Jesus? What does it mean that rivers of living water will flow from a believer's heart? Have you experienced this?

Exercise 6: Field trip

By yourself or as a study group visit a body of water, preferably one that is flowing and offers some solitude, such as a river park or a forest. Spend time alone or in small groups quietly meditating on the Scripture passages above.

Exercise 7: 'Sintflutgebet'

Say what? German for "Flood Prayer," this beautiful passage is at the heart of Lutheran baptism. Versions can be found in Evangelical Lutheran Worship (page 230) or the Lutheran Book of Worship (page 122), but the LBW version is fuller and more detailed. Review the stories mentioned in the prayer (LBW version if possible), referring to the Bible passages where they are described. Discuss:

- What happens in the stories?
- How are the people changed? Why?
- What role does water play?
- What are the common ideas that run through the stories?
- What does your baptismal flood mean to you?



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Exercise 8: Water art

Gather crayons and paper or whatever art materials you prefer. Read over Scripture passages involving water and spend at least 30 minutes praying and quietly meditating on how God's grace and love waters your life as a stream, spring or flood. Then draw or color the scene on paper. Don't be concerned that you aren't skilled in art; just keep working until you are done. Share your art with others and explain what it means to you.

Exercise 9: Go with the flow

- Like a healthy body of water, why do our souls need a constant inflow and outflow?
- What are your primary sources of spiritual inflow? How and why do they refresh and replenish you? What happens when your inflow is restricted?
- What are your spiritual outflows? What happens when your outflow exceeds inflow? What happens when your inflow exceeds outflow?
- How do you keep your inflows and outflows in balance, and why is that important?
- Now ask these same questions about the spiritual health of your congregation, your synod and our denomination.

Exercise 10: Desert

Pondering your life of faith, think of a time when have you experienced a time of spiritual drought. Can you share? What was it like? What brought it on? How did you cope? How long did it last? How and why did it end? What did you learn? How did it change your life? Now repeat the exercise using these water terms: thunderstorm, rain, flow, overflow, flash flood, flood.

Exercise 11: Dry bones

Ezekiel's vision of the Valley of Dry Bones gives us a compelling illustration of God's power for life. As you read Ezekiel 37:1-14, imagine how a Hollywood special-effects team would depict the vision.

- What is the connection between dryness and death?
- How does God vivify the bones?
- Though water isn't specifically mentioned, why would it be involved?
- When are you dry in your bones? How does God revive you?
- When is a church "dry bones"? Can God revive these churches? How? And why? How can God's people help?

Stream, flood and spring

Water renewing the earth and the church

We are drawn to clear, sparkling streams of water. Since prehistoric times, these streams have attracted our wonder and attention. We linger on a footbridge over a creek. We pull off the road by a waterfall and post the photos online. Maybe we stay for an impromptu picnic lunch.

Scientists agree that these powerful instincts tell us something important. Clean, free-flowing water is one indicator of a healthy place to live. Many species make a home in or near such water. It is often literally an oasis of biodiversity and life. Our instincts tell us before we learn it in school: flowing water is an *ecological* sign.

But this same flowing water also serves as a *theological* sign of God's renewal of the church and the world. In fact, especially among Lutherans, we

can even say that the flowing waters of the earth have helped inspire our own Reformation.

This month the world celebrates Earth Day and the church continues its celebration of the great baptismal festival of Easter. So April may be an especially appropriate time to consider how water brings a sort of springtime renewal to the church's life.

In a baptismal season, around Earth Day, during springtime, here is a little pilgrimage to three forms of water: stream, flood and spring. Across continents, out under the sky, these forms of water are actively renewing the face of the earth. In Lutheran traditions, that same water may also shimmer and flash with theological meaning, reforming and renewing the church.

STREAM

Have you ever paused beside a stream to listen as the water rippled by you? Or stood in awe as it cascaded down? If you were in the wilderness, you might have knelt down to drink or to wash your face. You have at least seen photos: a flourishing creek flowing down over rocks and logs, in and out of sunlight, nourishing the landscape.

Water flows

Water seems to want to flow. We speak of a water cycle that is constantly in motion: rain, cascades, rivers, seeps, waves, tides, clouds. Our bodies are mostly water and can only survive by being part of the watershed: drinking, pulsing, excreting, bathing, exhaling, birthing.

In a laboratory we can isolate water and consider its molecular structure. But imagine what would remain hidden if we didn't step back to see water in motion. A map that traced water's path would reveal that it touches and flows through every living creature in earth's history, connecting us all. At least on our home planet, the flowing nature of water is key to its significance.

Water flows down

In its liquid, visible form, water not only flows, but flows down: it rains from the sky and pours downhill. Because water does this naturally and dependably, and in doing so gives life to everything under the heavens, water has helped us know God. God's mercy comes down like "rain on the righteous and unrighteous" (Matthew 5:45). We pray that God will "pour out" the Spirit on the baptized. God's call for justice is that it will "roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream (Amos 5:24). We confess both that Jesus was born of Mary and that, like rain, "he came down from heaven."

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Sometimes Christianity has emphasized movement in the opposite direction. The Christian life can be portrayed as an effort to rise above our earthly nature—to make our way up and out of our messy bodies and world to a purely spiritual existence. There are times—perhaps in great suffering—when such spirituality can be healthy.

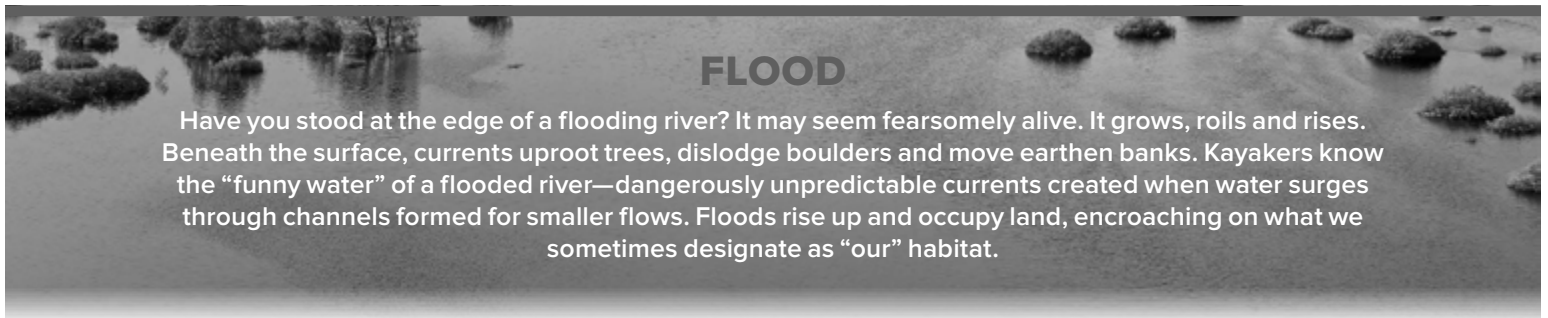
But Lutherans have been cautious about emphasizing a spiritual ascent toward God. It risks devaluing our earthly lives and bodies. It could focus on *our* spiritual aptitude rather than on *God's* extravagant giving. Lutheran tradition has emphasized God “coming down” to us. Martin Luther used water language to describe God’s presence “with all creatures, flowing and pouring into them, filling all things.”

Theologian Paul Santmire wrote that “this theology encourages us to envision God cascading down, like a mountain river, into all things,

binding them together and calling forth growth. It points us to God, working the divine purposes in, with and under the whole creation.” It calls us to contemplate—spiritually, liturgically, scientifically—the ways in which God’s goodness is constantly flowing and pouring into and through the world.

Water in worship can accent the flowing and pouring nature of God. You may have noticed worship leaders pouring water into the font at the baptismal prayer. One of the prayers in Evangelical Lutheran Worship draws on images from the psalms to describe God as overflowing with goodness: “You water the mountains and send springs into the valleys to refresh and satisfy all living things.”

When baptisms make generous use of water, they give physical expression to the flow of God’s mercies washing into our lives.



Have you stood at the edge of a flooding river? It may seem fearsomely alive. It grows, roils and rises. Beneath the surface, currents uproot trees, dislodge boulders and move earthen banks. Kayakers know the “funny water” of a flooded river—dangerously unpredictable currents created when water surges through channels formed for smaller flows. Floods rise up and occupy land, encroaching on what we sometimes designate as “our” habitat.

Floods are natural reformers. They rearrange landscapes and disrupt boundaries that may have been considered more-or-less settled. Floods can bring life by depositing and irrigating topsoil. Floods can also bring death by stripping away entire landscapes and destroying safe habitats.

Luther placed this transformational power of the flood near the heart of his baptismal theology. When he composed a prayer over the water for baptism, he broke with tradition to make the image of Noah’s flood central to the prayer. The image was so prominent that his 1523 prayer became known as the *Sintflutgebet*, or “Flood Prayer.”

In the Genesis narrative, Noah’s flood covers *everything*. The biblical text repeats emphatically: *Every* living creature outside of the ark was drowned. Even the highest mountains were deeply covered.

After the waters recede, the new covenant extends to the whole earth for every generation: “I am

establishing my covenant with ... every animal of the earth ... never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth” (Genesis 9:9-11). By describing it in terms of the biblical flood, Luther portrays baptism as engulfing *everything*, leaving nothing the same.

Flood of grace

Luther labels the flood of Noah as a “flood of wrath,” a flood that renews the world by first destroying it. He wrote that baptism is even more powerful than the flood of Noah because “while that was a flood of wrath, this [baptism] is a flood of grace,” and it *continues* to flood our world to this day from the font.

We are familiar with floods of wrath. Jesus was put to death in a flood of wrath unleashed by the rulers and the crowds. But in Christ’s dying and rising, God has poured out a flood of *grace* that extends to enemies and all those far away. At baptism, Luther



Photo: John O'Hara

inspires us to imagine grace extending above the highest mountains, into the depths of the sea and embracing the earth for all generations.

It may surprise us to learn that Luther's prayer at baptism speaks of "holy water" being "set apart." Many people think of holy water as the bowl of water that has been blessed by a baptismal prayer. But according to Luther's prayer, all water is holy. The prayer says that in Christ's baptism God has "sanctified and set apart the Jordan and *all water* for a saving flood." Here, instead of discarding the concept of holy water, Luther radically expands it. In his vision, holy water has become a flood.

He wrote: "Christ by the touch of his most innocent flesh has hallowed all waters, yes even all creation, through baptism."

Luther focused on the salvation of the human species rather than the great procession of every species finding safety in the ark. However, theologian Cal DeWitt memorably called Noah's flood "the world's first endangered species act." Together with that great parade of earth's other species, we humans continue to experience floods of both wrath and grace, as sea levels rise, rains pour and glaciers melt.

The flood of baptism places Christians in solidarity with all those creatures who suffer in every flood of wrath. When the waters of baptism wash over someone, they are washed into God's great work in which everything, dying and rising, is being renewed by God's grace.

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SPRING

Have you ever drunk from a spring in the wilderness? Perhaps on a summer hike you discovered the cool water bubbling up from the sandy bottom of a clear pool or flowing out from among the rocks. Maybe after days of filtering your drinking water drawn from less pristine streams, you marveled at the simplicity and sweetness of drinking directly from a spring.

Springs have long been signs of the goodness that mysteriously wells up in our world to sustain and refresh us. Springs flow freely without any human effort, but they can be polluted or forgotten. Lutherans have tended to view the work of reformation as less like repairing a malfunctioning water treatment system and more like rediscovering a life-giving spring.

The Reformation called attention to the places where God has promised a gushing spring of abundant life and grace. The Lutheran Confessions can be seen in part as maps written to guide the church back to these springs when they become neglected:

- The incarnate, crucified and risen Christ with us in the world.
- God's word and sacrament and the assembly around them.
- The forgiveness of sins and justification by grace through faith.
- The vocations of the royal priesthood of the baptized.
- The importance and goodness of the arts, especially music.
- The gift of mutually supportive and just human relationships, with special care and dignity for the least of these and those who especially share the sufferings of Christ.

These are sources of renewal, promised by God to be constantly flowing with new life.

Clearing out the spring

Sometimes, however, the work of rediscovery involves rehabilitation. Lutheran theologian Gordon Lathrop, who has introduced this spring imagery to many, recalls the old springhouse that used to stand on many American farms and the relatively frequent task of clearing out the weeds and junk—even the broken-down house itself—so the water could again flow clear and accessible.

The farmer didn't make the water. But the farmer needed to clear out the spring. Our congregations always need to be clearing out the spring.

Lathrop suggests that the work of reformation is not only about recalling the forgotten springs of God's abundant life. Sometimes the springs are familiar but have become obstructed or polluted. Perhaps a church practice obscures the gospel. Or, as in Flint, Mich., a system of environmental racism poisons the water supply of nearly an entire city. The church is called to join the reforming work of dismantling systems and structures that pollute or impede access to the flowing springs of God's mercy.

Creation itself is a spring

Lutherans have clearly identified grace, vocation, and word and sacrament as life-giving springs that flow to us from God. Today we may need at least equal vigor and clarity in confessing that the earth itself is a spring of grace. It constantly overflows with goodness from its source in God.

Luther draws out the concept of the ongoing, overflowing act of creation in his explanation of the first article of the creed in his Large Catechism: At every moment, God the creator "constantly sustains" and "makes all creation help provide the benefits and necessities of life—sun, moon, and stars in the heavens; day and night; air, fire, water, the earth and all that it yields and brings forth; birds, fish, animals, grain, and all sorts of produce."

I heard an elementary-school-age Lutheran struggle to remember the name for what is typically known as the "The Big Bang." He furrowed his brow and asked, "What do you call it ... 'The Great Overflowing'?"

That may be a good scientific image for the origin of our universe, and it is certainly an apt Lutheran image for the ongoing divine act of creation, overflowing continually, sustaining all things. This affirmation, sometimes known as *creatio continua*, predates Lutheranism, but it is given emphatic and ethical emphasis in the Reformation.

Luther continues in the Large Catechism: "For if we believed it (that the cosmos continually overflows with God's gifts) with our whole heart, we would also act accordingly, and not swagger about and boast and

brag as if we had life, riches, power, honor, and such things of ourselves. ... This is the way the wretched, perverse world acts, drowned in its blindness, misusing all the blessings and gifts of God solely for its own pride, greed, pleasure, and enjoyment”

Luther is critiquing arrogant consumerism here because it hoards and claims to have earned what God gives freely through the flourishing creation: “All this [God] does out of pure love and goodness, without our merit.”

What would allow us to drink more frequently, directly and mindfully from the spring of creation? In worship we ground every gathering in thanksgiving for the gift of creation, perhaps in a gathering hymn, and certainly in our prayers of

thanksgiving at font and table. Some fonts with flowing water gush upward into a bowl and overflow, suggesting the abundance and mystery of a spring.

We join with other human communities, especially indigenous communities, that seek to preserve and rehabilitate the goodness of the earth from which we may drink directly: dark skies filled with stars; flourishing natural preserves for beauty, recreation and health; enough quiet for the voices of fellow creatures to sing and be heard; clean air and water; rich land for gardens and fresh local produce; buildings that feature natural light and landscape rather than hide them; structures and systems that work in harmony with the earth rather than against it.



FLOWING, REFORMING WATERS

These three forms of flowing water—stream, flood and spring—meet us on at least three levels. They are metaphors from our textual traditions. They flow through our liturgical rites. And they are, before anything else, life-giving bodies of water on the earth. Through water, a fellow creature with us, we encounter a living witness to God, our common creator.


On this troubled earth we creatures of dust learn from the flowing water all around us. God comes to earth as surely as waterfalls from the mountain heights, flowing relentlessly, giving life to all of us shaped from the earth. Against every scheme to save the world through destruction and violence, God desires to flood the world with mercy, saving every species on earth, leaving nothing outside of this deluge of grace. And the task of reformation calls us to remember and clear out the life-giving springs where God’s mercy and goodness have been promised to us.

On this troubled earth, we creatures of dust learn from the flowing water all around us. When you next encounter a free-flowing stream, give thanks to God for it, pray for its health and let it speak the gospel to you: God comes to earth as surely as waterfalls from the mountain heights and rivers rolling over the land, flowing relentlessly, giving life to all of us shaped from the earth.

When you next encounter a flood, first keep yourself and others safe, pray for those in danger

and providing aid, and consider letting this flood call to mind an even greater one: against every scheme to save the world through destruction and violence, God desires to flood the world with mercy, saving every species on earth, leaving nothing outside of this deluge of grace.

And you might be blessed to encounter a spring bubbling up from the earth. If you know the water is safe, drink deeply and give thanks. Pray for the health of this and all springs. And let the spring remind you: the task of reformation calls us to remember and clear out the life-giving springs where God’s mercy and goodness have been promised to us.

In this era we especially turn again to the first spring given to us earthly creatures: the fruitful earth itself, overflowing with God’s goodness. In the work of reformation we help one another to rediscover this spring, to drink from it deeply, and to join the ongoing work of clearing out the pollution and obstructions so God’s life-giving waters flow freely for all. 



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