

Grace and Peace be to you from God our Father and Jesus Christ our Lord.

On Good Friday in 1964, a massive earthquake occurred off Resurrection Bay in Alaska. Eyewitnesses as far away as the town of Seaside, Oregon report that the water along the coast was sucked out to sea, exposing the mud at the bottom of the Necanicum River and creating a trough 1200 yards west of the beach. The water level beyond the trough rose until finally it all came rushing back in to devastate the town. Water is one of the most destructive forces on earth.

From the very first pages of Genesis, God tamed the waters He created with His Word. In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, covered by the waters until God separated them by His word. He fixed the firmament to keep the waters above from the waters below, creating a space by His Word where life could dwell. With those boundaries firmly in place, holding back the waters, the water in the Garden became a cool, life-giving mist—not the suffocating watery deep.

But sometime after the fall, God unleashed the destructive force of water upon His creation. When God saw human wickedness increase exponentially, He removed the boundaries separating the waters so they came crashing back together again. For forty days, water came from above and from the fountains of the deep below. The space God established between the waters on day two of creation collapsed, and the waters rushed in to destroy all life within that space, except for Noah, his family, and the animals on the ark. The sea became an instrument of God's own wrath and judgment against sin. And yet when St. Peter reflects on Noah, he says that Noah was saved through the waters. The instrument of God's judgment became the means of salvation for Noah and his family as they floated safely in the ark God commanded him to build.

The next time the sea figures prominently in the history of God's people is when Moses leads the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt. Pursued by Pharaoh, the children of Israel were entrapped by the sea. They had no place to go. They could not go backwards because they would impale themselves on Pharaoh's swords. They could not go forwards because there they would meet a watery grave. But once again, by His Word God separated the waters from the waters. The Israelites went through the middle of the sea on dry ground. In the beginning, God opened a space among the waters where human life could flourish. Now He opened a space where the Israelites could pass through to live.

Not so for the Egyptians. When the Egyptians followed the Israelites into the sea, God brought His wrath upon them by removing the boundaries separating those waters. The sea rushed back in to fill the void and swept away their chariots, drowning Pharaoh and all his hosts. Miriam sang: "I will sing unto the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously. The horse and the rider he has thrown into the sea." God used the waters of the Red Sea as an instrument of judgment against the Egyptians, but they were God's salvation for the Israelites.

Jesus also spoke to tame the sea with His word during His earthly ministry, showing Him to be the God of Creation. One day He slept in the back of a boat, and a storm arose on the sea, threatening to swallow the disciples. But Jesus said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" A great calm fell upon the sea, opening up a space for them to safely travel to the other side. And in Revelation, we see a glimpse of the new heaven and the new earth. The sea "is no more." God's great instrument of wrath and judgment is stilled and put away for good as evil is banished forever, and His creation is renewed.

You might think that as a new creation, Christians are removed from among the judgment and immune from evil, but not so! Think of your baptism. The Small Catechism tells us that baptism is water combined with God's word. In your baptism, God throws you directly into the conflict. His instrument of wrath and condemnation meets your sinful heart and mind. Though your sinful heart was destroyed in those waters and the new man was saved and brought forth, your new self still lives in your old flesh,

bringing the heart of spiritual warfare to your heart. So, it's no surprise that the Christin's life is a struggle! Don't be deceived. We were never promised an easy life.

When you look around at the other people in this room, you might be tempted to think everyone else has it all together and you are the only one who is a mess. But what do you think the church is? Is it a calm place, full of light, where we gather to hear a few polished words of fine rhetoric? Are you supposed to nod in pious agreement with the preacher and say to yourself, "How nice"?

We are baptized! That means we are all in the fight of our lives! So, of course, you are overwhelmed by the spiritual struggle. I'm not talking just about with superficial sins like getting angry with someone who accidentally steps on your foot or breaking a neighbor's window and not telling them. No, we still live in a fallen world under God's wrath. Even as Christians, Satan, the sinful world, and even our own flesh still wage war against us. As a result, your life does not go the way you want it. Maybe you lost your parents and when other people haven't. Or you're single and don't see how you will ever be married. Or you don't think God could possibly love you. Or you doubt Christianity because it seems implausible after all you have been through. You're left out. Maybe the Christian life is full, or at least livable, for the other nice people who have their lives together, but you will never thrive.

Don't fall for the lies. These attacks do not define you. What you see here is a microcosm of what is playing out in the pages of Genesis. You look at that story to understand what is happening to you. Whether evil or God's wrath, it's not always easy to tell. This is the watery deluge that suffocates life. But the catechism tells us that baptism is not just water but also God's word. God's word separates the waters from the waters, opening a space where life can thrive. It divides the sea and lets the Israelites pass through on the dry ground. You can survive this because you have the very word of God surrounding you, at whose rebuke the waters fled and which set a "boundary that they may not pass, so that they might not again cover the earth." It creates a space in which you can live and thrive, even to all eternity.

In this season of repentance, we acknowledge that we have been overwhelmed by the forces of sin and evil in our lives, but we also acknowledge that we have God's word, which is powerful to tear apart those forces. As the Psalmist says, "The waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging. We will not fear though the earth gives way, and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea." Why? Because God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. God is with us. He Himself is our fortress. Amen.