

## **Book review**

*Wade in the Water: Following the Sacred Stream of Baptism* by Eric E. Peterson  
(Wipf and Stock, 2018)

Most of us would agree with Eric Peterson's assessment of American Christianity. In his recent book, *Wade in the Water*, Peterson writes that "much of the present day malaise in the church of North America is largely the result of adapting methods of evangelism that are more suitable as propaganda techniques for the enterprise of capitalism than for calling people to a holy life as citizens of the kingdom of God." Peterson argues that the way to help people "who desire to live meaningfully in a broken world" is to reclaim the practice and power of baptism. His book points the way to doing so.

Peterson begins his book by briefly exploring responses to age old questions about the meaning of life, drawing from philosophers, poets, scientists, theologians and even folk tales. His goal is to show that even though "human beings have been engaged in a continual process of searching for the meaning to their existence" their quest is often unsuccessful, leading to dissatisfaction and despair. Peterson believes the church can provide antidote to this despair by helping people recover a sacramental worldview through focusing deeply on the gift of baptism. Peterson then takes the reader on a "meandering route" to understand baptism's "massive capacity to form mere mortals into the image of God."

Along the way, Peterson mines the Bible for baptismal passages and allusions. I found this one of most useful parts of the book, especially the connections Peterson makes between the Old Testament and baptism. For example, in reflecting on the story of Jonah as a foreshadowing of baptism, Peterson notes that after his three days in the belly of a great fish, Jonah turned away from his sin and came out a repentant man, with a new heart, mind and direction. Likewise, "Baptism is the sign of this flip-flopping relationship between sin and condemnation, as it incubates people for a new life in Christ, transforming them--Jonah-like--from lives and lifestyles of running away from God, to lives running after God." Peterson's discussion of a variety of biblical texts provides a solid resource to use in preaching, teaching, and baptismal preparation to show the strength and power of baptism to change lives and form disciples.

Likewise the chapter exploring ways the early church understood baptism as "beginning and becoming" contains many rich images and insights for preaching and teaching. I particularly enjoyed the delightful language for baptism used by Tertullian such as, "But we, little fishes, after the example of our ICHTHUS Jesus Christ, are born in water nor have we safety in any other way than by permanently abiding in water."

Peterson's practical theology section explores the role of the pastor and congregation in helping people develop a lifelong baptismal identity. Of particular note, is Peterson's critique of how the church has "softened some of the startling effects of baptism" instead of provoking images of struggle: "Like birthing, the transition to new life in Christ is fraught with discomfort, even pain." Particularly touching for a catechumenate practitioner like myself, is Peterson's affirmation of the work of JBL:NAAC and the life-changing experience he had at one of their adult catechumenate training events.

While Peterson writes in an engaging, conversational style peppered with quotes and examples, sometimes he wanders excessively, using too many diverse images and citations. For instance, I didn't need to wade through lengthy arguments and a variety of examples from popular culture to conclude

with him “that the church exists in an environment that frequently contains values that clash with those of the kingdom of God.” Likewise his section, “Signed, Sealed and Delivered,” in the final chapter was perhaps one more approach to baptism than was needed.

While Peterson’s book may meander too much at times in its exploration of baptism, it makes a strong argument for the need to restore baptism to central importance in the life of the church. It provides powerful language, arguments and methods for doing so.

*Reviewed by Martha Maier, JBL:NAAC Board Member*