

Water of Life

The lectionary presents us with quite a long story this morning. To do all of it justice would keep us here longer than I am willing to talk or you to listen. Fortunately, it is probably also a familiar story for most of us. So I will assume a few things this morning, leave out some others and focus down on the key metaphor for the passage – water.

It is little wonder that water is such a ubiquitous metaphor in all of the world's literatures. Our lives depend upon it. In an average, healthy person, the human body is approximately 70% water. Doctors and scientists tell us we may need to drink as much as eight eight-ounce glasses of water daily for optimal health. We drink it, we cook in it, we wash our bodies, our clothes, our utensils, our cars in it. Our oceans and seas and lakes and rivers still carry the vast majority of trade goods in our world. Boundaries have been established and wars have been fought over rights to water, both as a transportation system and as a source for food. Irrigation rights are a major source of conflict in places less well-watered than Western Washington.

Even though we live in a post-industrial, post-agrarian society, where the day to day importance of water is obscured by its ready availability, our contemporary art and literature continue to be full of water imagery and themes. That 1974 classic of American film noir, "Chinatown," centers on the crimes committed in pursuit of water rights. Frank Herbert's monumental science fiction novel, Dune, which continues to engender sequels and adaptations more than 40 years after its initial printing, is primarily set on a desert planet where the search for water and its conservation is a major factor in the plot. The list of the world's literature and art in which water is a major image or theme could be endless.

We find water images throughout the Bible, as well. The need for water was even more inescapable for that agriculture-based society and that relatively arid place. There are many stories in the Pentateuch about wells and the search for water. These stories can be read with both a literal and a figurative meaning. Just as God leads the patriarchs to wells and empowers Moses to release water from the desert ground for the wandering Israelites, so too does God refresh their spirits, bringing courage, hope and fortitude to an often querulous, murmuring Chosen People. The imagery of water may be found in the Wisdom literature, for example in Song of Songs, where the young man praises his lover's charms as "a garden fountain, a well of living water, and flowing streams from Lebanon." Water is also a prime image for the prophets; both in its lack, as they speak of the judgment of God upon the nation, and in its abundance, as they look toward Israel's restoration and renewed blessing. This is particularly true of Jeremiah, who uses images of water in general and "living water" in particular to describe Yahweh's relationship with the people. In condemning Judah for following false gods in chapter 2, Jeremiah brings this word from the Lord: "my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water." It is an image that Jeremiah repeats in chapter 17: "O hope of Israel! O Lord! All who forsake you shall be put to shame; those who turn away from you shall be recorded in the underworld, for they have forsaken the fountain of living water, the Lord." As to hope for the future, Jeremiah returns to the water image just before the famous passage in which he reveals Yahweh's promise of a new covenant. I'm indebted to our own Dr. Pamela Scalise for her lovely translation of Jeremiah 31:25, in which Yahweh promises, "For I will make the weary drink their fill, and every languishing person I will replenish." You can find that, by the

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way, in Dr. Scalise's contribution to the second volume of the Word Biblical Commentary set on Jeremiah.

Water is a particularly important image in the Gospel according to John. In chapter one, John tells the story of John the Baptizer, using water to symbolize repentance and a new commitment to following God's will but also as a way of, you should pardon the expression, "flushing out" the promised Messiah. "I came baptizing with water for this reason," says the Baptizer, "that he might be revealed to Israel." In chapter two, we have the story of Jesus turning water into wine at the wedding in Cana; clearly for John the Evangelist, water is a symbol of the presence of God and the joy of the Beloved Community. And in chapter three, we have Jesus' teaching to Nicodemus and his words, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit," which we considered last week. As I mentioned then, I believe there is both a spiritual and a physical component to the image of water in that verse, an idea to which I'll return in a few minutes. So by the time we read the story of the woman at the well in chapter four, we should be ready for that ongoing use of the image of water to be significant.

You have probably heard more than once that the exchange between Jesus and the unnamed Samaritan woman is surprising for many reasons. For a rabbi to speak to any unescorted, unfamiliar woman in public was an enormous breach of protocol. It would be nearly inconceivable for an observant Jew to ask to share the water of a Samaritan. If you are having trouble imagining such a prohibition, think of the recent history in parts of this country, when no self-respecting white person would drink from a fountain labeled "Colored," and when a black person's disregard of this taboo could result in a beating or worse. And you have probably heard that it would have been highly unusual for a woman to come to a well at midday, alone, when all her peers would have come early in the morning, not just for the water but for fellowship.

What drove this woman from her home in the heat of the day to perform this strenuous but necessary task? What kept her from coming in the cool of the morning, when the burden would be less onerous, when she might have the pleasure of the company of her neighbors? For years, I have heard that she came at that time in order to be alone, to hide her shame from the harsh gazes and clucking tongues that would judge her lifestyle. She had, after all, as Jesus reveals, been married five times and was now living with a man who was not her husband. The notion that she was guilty of the most profligate type of sexual sins has been deeply ingrained in the preaching, songs and stories that I have heard and read about this woman. But I read something in an old sermon by John Claypool this week that has caused me to call that interpretation into question and imagine quite a different scenario. Claypool wrote, "I used to think that her problem was one of moral laxity because later it comes out she had been married five times and was now living with a man who wasn't even her husband. Then someone pointed out to me that no woman in that culture could have ever gotten a divorce. If this woman had had five husbands and now had none, it meant that either five husbands had died or five men had married her and then abandoned her in divorce. This person said her problem was grief, not guilt." The Methodist scholar, Safiyah Fosua says that "When this passage was studied with a group of women in AIDS-stricken Southern Africa, they immediately pitied the woman and concluded that she must have been an AIDS carrier -- killing her husbands while she remained unaffected by the disease."

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It was not the accusations of her peers that she was avoiding. It was their pity or perhaps their pleasure in their normal lives. I have known people who have lost a relationship or a spouse to avoid the company of couples. I have seen childless friends back out of social engagements when they learned their friends' children would be present. Sometimes, grief will exile us from normal society; give normal activities a hard, cutting edge. This is a woman who knows the stories her people have in common with the Jews – she tests Jesus by comparing him with Jacob, who dug that very well. Would the well also have reminded her of the great romantic stories of Jacob and Rachel or Isaac and Rebekah, both of which begin at a well?

John has already told us in chapter 2 that Jesus knows the heart of every person. Surely, Jesus looked at this woman trudging up to the well with her jar and knew that as thirsty as he might have been for water, that she was thirstier still for the living water of God's presence, for compassion, for hope. The poet Rumi wrote, "thirst seeks water, but water seeks thirst." How could Jesus, the one sent to reveal the presence of God and the love of God for all humankind, not reach out to this woman in pain? As he did with Nicodemus, he uses ambiguous language to engage the woman's curiosity and conversation. "Living water" would normally mean simply fresh flowing water. But Jesus is clearly drawing on the tradition of Jeremiah. He is offering the gift of the indwelling Spirit of God to this woman with the broken spirit. It is a phrase that he uses later in Jerusalem and that John interprets. In chapter seven, John reports: "On the last day of the festival, the great day, while Jesus was standing there, he cried out, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, 'Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water.'" Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive..."

What a remarkable thing, to be offered the gift of the Spirit of God, overflowing our hearts like a river, gushing up in our lives so that we may experience true life, never to thirst again for purpose, for meaning, for deep joy. What Jesus offered to the Samaritan woman at the well, to the festival-goers in Jerusalem, he continues to offer, to us and to all who thirst for a true life. We are offered living water, yet we so often settle for something far less; for dead water. The Very Rev. Samuel G. Candler, Dean of the Episcopal Cathedral of St. Philip in Atlanta, writes: "Some water is dead, and yet folks continue to drink it. Do you know what dead water is? Dead water is the same old television show every night. Dead water is the same old argument you get into every day. Dead water is that little habit you persist in nourishing, that habit which is small in itself, but which will kill you one day. Dead water is what may have nourished somebody long ago, but it sure does not give you joy and vigor today. Dead water is that water you give for yourself which still leaves you crying out for more." Like the people of Judah at the time of Jeremiah, we too often give our allegiance to lesser things, to cisterns that we have dug for ourselves; cracked, dry cisterns that hold no water. But Jesus continues to offer to fill us with living water, the Spirit of God within us, so that we will never be thirsty.

The Samaritan woman receives his offer with astonished joy. She leaves her jar, leaves her self-imposed exile from society and plunges headlong back into the city's busy marketplace. "She said to the people, 'Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?'" She has heard Jesus' offer and accepted it without even a word to him. She does not even allow herself to fully believe that he is who he says he is, but already the water of God's redeeming Spirit is bubbling up inside of her. In her blog, "The Painted

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Prayerbook,” Jan Richardson writes, “She left her jar. She left her jar behind, that water-bearing vessel on which she depended for her very life. She abandoned it at the well. She had become the vessel. Filled with the living water that she found in the midst of her mundane, daily task, the woman goes to spill forth what she has found.”

For those of us who have also been filled with the living water, I believe that there is also the imperative to spill forth what we have found. There are many ways in which we may do this. Each of us will have the opportunities at different times in our lives to tell our own story to someone else, to introduce them to the idea that they, too, can have living water bubbling up in their own lives. But this is obviously not the only way in which we must let the overflowing Spirit of God make a difference in how we live, in how we touch the other people in our lives and in our world. As I said last Sunday, I believe that Jesus’ remark to Nicodemus that we must be born of both water and the Spirit to enter the Kingdom of God, the Beloved Community, means that we must live fully human lives, concerned for physical life as well as for spiritual. And so, in the few minutes remaining this morning, I want to return to the subject of physical water.

In most of the United States, and certainly here in Western Washington, we are able to take water for granted. But this is not true in much of the world and, as climate change continues to spawn drought and human selfishness and mismanagement continues to waste fresh water, it will be less and less true for more and more people. In a speech in 2000, then-United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan said, “Global freshwater consumption rose sixfold between 1900 and 1995 - more than twice the rate of population growth. About one third of the world’s population already lives in countries considered to be ‘water stressed’ - that is, where consumption exceeds 10% of total supply.” Greenpeace International reports, “The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change estimates 3 billion or more additional people will be at risk of water shortage due to climate change. The Stockholm Environment Institute estimates that, using only a moderate projection of climate change, 63 percent of the global population will live in countries of significant water stress by 2025.” This last figure was also referenced in the Kofi Annan speech. According to Water Partners International, “More than one billion people lack access to a safe supply of drinking water. Water-related diseases are one of the leading causes of disease and death in the world.” The World Health Organization, in fact, estimates that “80% of all sickness in the world is attributable to unsafe water and inadequate sanitation,” a figure that some sources put even higher. Sadly, UNICEF reports that a child dies every fifteen seconds from disease due to unsafe drinking water, poor sanitation and hygiene.

Those are staggering numbers and it is hardly within our capabilities to absorb them, let alone address the problem. But even for us, as individuals or as our small part of the Body of Christ, there are ways to contribute to solutions rather than to problems. I want you to know about two programs which friends of mine are involved in that are doing their part to alleviate water problems in various parts of the world and I hope you will consider supporting one or both. I’ve mentioned before my friend Darrell Adams, the folksinger who has been a regular guest on Garrison Keilor’s radio programs and whose song, “The Family of God,” we’ve sung here in worship. Darrell is also a staff member for a ministry called Edge Outreach. The organization is self-described as “a faith-based nonprofit; training and sending people and organizations to take integrated water solutions where they are most needed in the world, hosting vision clinics for

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refugees and the poor, and networking local agencies and volunteers to provide community needs in Louisville, KY.” Their website reports, “In September 2007, EDGE created swimservice.com to train and mobilize college students to use the most efficient water solutions available, take and install them overseas, and train indigenous leaders in their use and maintenance.”

Two other friends from our Louisville days are David and Colleen Burroughs. They are the founders and executives of Passport Camps, “an international student ministry born out of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. Passport offers life-changing experiences with an emphasis on mission action and global justice in the name of Jesus Christ.” They have mission-oriented camps for children as well as for youth. Colleen is an “MK,” a missionary kid. Despite her very Irish name, she was born and raised in Malawi, where her parents served for years. A few years ago, she learned to her shock that, despite its verdant setting, Malawi is one of the countries that are severely water stressed. As a result, Passport now operates “Watering Malawi” in conjunction with World Vision, whom we have supported for years through their “30-Hour Famine” program. You can find details on “Watering Malawi” if you fold out the insert in your bulletin where the confessional liturgy is printed. I’ve also put some basic information about Edge Outreach on the reverse.

Supporting these ministries represents small steps in the fight to combat water stress and the effects of global climate change but small steps are necessary. It is important for us to remember that each of these small steps for us may make an enormous difference in the lives of a whole village in Africa or South America. If they do not have to spend hours in the search for and acquisition of potable water, then children can go to school, women can gather around the well, and perhaps the conversation can turn to the living water of God’s Spirit as well as the physical water needed to keep their families alive. Remember what Rumi said – “thirst seeks water, but water seeks thirst.” May the living water that is the Spirit of God in our lives seek out the thirsty, the physically thirsty in Africa and the spiritually thirsty right here in our community. For we, as the Body of Christ, can offer them a living water that will change their lives, so that they and we might never thirst again. Thanks be to God.