

Lent 3A, March 22, 2017

Exodus 17:1-7, Psalm 95:1-7, John 4:5-42

World Water Day, SW CA Synod Office

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The rain begins as a mist, drizzling, spitting, or suddenly: a downpour. It hammers the roof, runs down the windows, pelts our umbrellas, overflows our cisterns, gathers into trickles and gullies, creeks and arroyos and cascades and rivers, a gigantic tidal flow, and as the heavens open and the miracle pours forth, we can breathe again, here in California... the land can breathe, the air can breathe, the trees and wildflowers and animals drink, and all those who thirst – everywhere on Earth – tip their faces to the sky and drink it in...

Water is everything – how do you preach on water? Bishop Erwin, how am I to preach on *everything*? We're made of water, life itself made of water from the very first cell pulsating in the ocean, its first membrane surrounding that first interior fluid, dividing the waters within the membrane as life first came into being, from the waters outside that first cell. Earth is made of water, cycling endlessly from microbial cells to glacial ice to pine sap to Jesus's saliva and this morning's coffee, a child's diaper, a rattlesnake's venom, sweet nectar in a bee's stomach.

And water is in trouble. Saltwater is in trouble as oceans acidify and dissolve sea animals' shells, including plankton, the base of the entire marine food chain – and as warmer acidic waters bleach and kill entire coral systems, and ocean fish populations crash. And freshwater is in trouble too. Only 2.5% of Earth's water is the fresh water land-based life forms require. 99.5% of that 2.5% is inaccessible in glaciers, polar ice caps, and permafrost; in deep underground aquifers; and in atmospheric humidity, soil moisture, and the flesh of plants and animals. Only 0.5% of freshwater on Earth is readily available in lakes, rivers, streams, and springs.

So, OK, maybe we would do well not to pollute this limited supply of available fresh water on Earth. Or, since it's too late for that, we can just drill into the aquifers! Indeed, Jacob's Well has been supplying water in Samaria for thousands of years, new wells are still often the best way to provide clean water in many places in the world, and trees too root deep into groundwater, canopies of life even where rainfall is scarce – as in southern California prior to European arrival, a huge floodplain of seasonal snow melt from the mountains with such a high water table that trees, shrubs, and native grasses grew green here year-round, and artesian springs provided year-round streams too, cold and clear and abundant.

But springs and streams worldwide are threatened as colossal pumps pull water 24/7 from aquifers in the Central Valley, Nebraska, and across the globe, and as we dam rivers and drain wetlands and frack fresh water back into the rock to force out more gas to heat the planet and acidify the oceans further, and the grasslands wither and forests die as water tables keep dropping – causing deserts on Earth to expand by 56 acres *per minute*, 29 million acres *more* desert every year... Freshwater is in trouble too. And as rivers vanish along with their mountain glaciers, or run thick with chemicals and sewage and poisons, and wells go dry, and rains become erratic, the poorest humans and countless species and ecosystems are quite literally dying every day, every minute, right now, right now, for lack of that clean fresh water that is the primal gift of God on Earth, source of all life.

And the woman said to Jesus, “Sir, give me this water that I may never be thirsty...” And the LORD said, “Strike the rock, and water will come out of it for the people to drink.” And from the very heart of Christ, his body pierced just a few chapters later in John – just a few weeks from today – the blood and water flow, divine love pouring forth to bathe and bless and heal this ravaged world...

The Gospel is water, living water from the heart of God. The water flows and flows, spring welling up to eternal life, a never-ending fountain, this river of mercy bubbling up from the depths and falling from heaven, mercy gathering and swelling throughout Scripture until by the end it overflows into Eden reopened, heaven and Earth made new, the river of life gathering all to its banks...

The Gospel is living water from the heart of God... and it invites us in.

I grew up here in southern California and learned to swim in the ocean, and I loved diving under waves and shooting up again the other side, body-surfing and boogie-boarding and spending hours in that watery salty moving living vastness. Many of us have profound connections with the ocean and its larger wild life. But more recently I've been sensing the need for more intimate personal immersion also in Earth's wild fresh waters too: to take seriously the early church's practice of baptism *into local waters*, and to begin to get to know the actual literal waters of my own home and all who live there – precisely as the larger baptismal relationships of my life. I began to sense a baptismal invitation physically into local water, to savor its fluidity through my hair and in my mouth, to feel the flow of Strawberry Creek rushing over my bare feet when I lived in Berkeley, or wild tributaries of Wildwood Creek in Thousand Oaks this morning, from this very rain. Have you ever stood in the creek, feeling its flow on your skin? Can you even get into your local creek?

It's harder to immerse in local waters here than it was in Ohio, where I taught previously, kayaking in every creek and river, wading and swimming and falling in love with the astonishing abundance of life even in the battered urban creek near my home, which from the street above looked pretty much dead. But from kayak level

[its] depths... lit up unexpectedly [in the late afternoon sun on my first voyage out], and I was stunned to see masses of tiny fish darting around my paddle, shadowy carp, mollusks, riparian plants, bass, even a water-snake. The water was clear as light, rich with nymphs and organisms, each milliliter of this stream full of life, and I knew for the first time that the water supporting life *is itself alive*. Wild water *is* living water. And I sensed how powerfully baptism invites us fully into these actual waters, living waters. I began designing seminary rites of baptismal remembrance along its banks, and I learned how the herons and homeless folks at the edges of our circle pull ritual language out into all sorts of new connections.¹

And when I moved back to southern California, my childhood home, I realized that the water is somehow even more alive here, where it's so scarce, where every drop brings banks of flowers and deep-rooted chaparral and poison oak right back to life. Loving the water and its life – knowing its life – helps me notice and pray for those who depend on the creeks near CLU, animals and plants and also humans, my students, the larger life of our campus. Caring about my local creeks and their life floods my passion to work for water-wisdom and sane policy in California, catchment basins and permeable pavements and toilet-to-tap and native plantings, and caring about water also animates me to step up already for water-justice for those in every place with no clean fresh creek or well or river – and I will happily join you too in that effort, here and across the ELCA.

For baptism into local waters immerses us into Earth's water-life in all its forms: mules and amoebas and Samaritans and finches, lupines and monarchs and jellyfish, mangoes and feral pigs and bougainvillea and walruses, your best friend and tree frogs and spider monkeys, bamboo and dung beetles, dingoes and salamanders and soil microbes and whole pods of dolphins leaping and leaping and leaping against the Pacific sunset... all this life *is* the baptismal life, this astonishing exuberance born in the water and alive in the water everywhere on Earth, this holy water Jesus gives and is given and is, heart pierced open, water for the thirsty, water from the rock, water from the very heart of God...

¹ Lisa E. Dahill, "Rewilding Christian Spirituality: Outdoor Sacraments and the Life of the World," in *Eco-Reformation: Grace and Hope for a Planet in Peril*, ed. Lisa E. Dahill and James B. Martin-Schramm (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2016), 186.

And all this grace still falls from heaven. We have depleted aquifers and destroyed rivers and commodified water to charge criminal rates to the poor – but as long as Earth’s hydrological cycle continues, there will still be rain, and rain is free. Rain is grace, and it will recharge the aquifers if we let it – the literal ones *and* the deep chasms of our hearts and the buckets of the poor. It will saturate the parched soil and fill the rivers.

Such grace begins as a mist, drizzling, spitting, or suddenly: a downpour. It hammers the roof, runs down the windows, pelts our umbrellas, overflows our cisterns, gathers into trickles and gullies, creeks and arroyos and cascades and rivers, a gigantic tidal flow, and as the heavens open and the miracle pours forth, we can breathe again... the land can breathe, the air can breathe, the trees and wildflowers and animals drink, and all those who thirst – everywhere on Earth – tip their faces to the sky. They drink it in...

Amen.

PRAYERS

Let us pray for the whole people of God in Christ Jesus, for all creatures according to their needs, and for the watersheds of this synod.

Marsha prays for the watersheds...

Living Water, come fill your whole church on Earth: well up in us and all your people, spring forth from us, send rivers of mercy through bishops and pastors, musicians and deacons, children and elders, that all the world might bathe and drink of you. Hear us, O God. *Your mercy is great.*

Healing Water, fill the nations: let your peace flow like a river, your justice like an ever-flowing stream through all places of violence, especially Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Sudan, and all places and peoples of the world – or our own cities – in need of healing. Hear us, O God. *Your mercy is great.*

Water of Life, rain on Earth wherever creation groans: we pray for plants and animals of all kinds, including human beings, deprived of the food and water they need or forced from their homes and habitats... for all creatures who will die today from being assaulted, bulldozed, poisoned, or bombed... for species that will go extinct today, and all that are threatened or endangered... Hear us, O God. *Your mercy is great.*

Raging Waters, cleanse the hearts of those in power to open the water of life for all. We pray for all those on Earth deprived of clean water by human sin and economic injustice, and pray too for our own conversion to lives of courage and leadership, to make possible water justice here in this synod and far beyond. Hear us, O God. *Your mercy is great.*

Salt Water, bless the tears of all who suffer or grieve this day: we pray for humans or other animals who are sick or alone, tortured or imprisoned, dying or bereaved. Especially we pray for those we name now in silence or aloud:_____. Hear us, O God. *Your mercy is great.*

For what else do the people of God now pray, in silence or aloud?

Wild Water, you fill this Earth with astonishing abundance of life, born/e in the water washing and drenching all things, making us yours. We give you thanks for those who have died in the faith and for those who will be born today: that they may know a future filled with your beauty, wet with your love for every creature of Earth. Hear us, O God...

PRESIDER: Into your hands, O God, we commend all for whom we pray, trusting in your mercy, through Jesus Christ, the Water of Life.