

“Water, Water, Everywhere” a sermon by The Rev. Keenan Kelsey
Noe Valley Ministry PC(USA) May 4, 2008

TEXTS: Genesis 10:1-10 In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day. And God said, ‘Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.’ So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so. God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day. And God said, ‘Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.’ And it was so. God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good.

Genesis 2:5-6 In the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens,⁵ when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up—for the LORD God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground;⁶ but a stream would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground.

John 7:37-39 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,³⁸ 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.”³⁹ Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive; for as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified.

John 4:7-15 A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, ‘Give me a drink’. (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, ‘How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?’ (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, ‘If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, “Give me a drink”, you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.’ The woman said to him, ‘Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?’ Jesus said to her, ‘Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.’ The woman said to him, ‘Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.’

IT IS NO WONDER that water was chosen as the vehicle for the Holy Spirit, as the conveyer of God’s grace. Psalm 24 begins “The earth is the Lord’s, and all that is in it, the world and those who live in it. For God founded it on the seas and established it on the rivers.”

This profound affirmation echoes both Genesis 1, where the chaos of water and darkness existed formless until God pulled up land to stabilize and collect the waters – and Genesis 2, where creation began with the dry land, but nothing would grow and flourish until the streams were summoned to vitalize the earth. The earth is from God, and water is the stuff of creation, a living reality,

Do you remember, in science class, how you learned about the water cycle? Precipitation—Evaporation—Transpiration... How the journey of a drop of water continues in an endless circle? How a cloud's journey across the Rockies drops in a thunderstorm in Iowa where it passes between layers of soil and rock and eventually bubbles up in a Georgia well or seeps out the side of a cliff along the Mississippi or pumps into the leaves of an oak tree in Vermont or helps to fill Walden Pond. Living Water. Chickasaw poet Linda Hogan says it better than the scientific language: "Between earth and earth's atmosphere, the amount of water remains constant; there is never a drop more, never a drop less. This is a story of circular infinity, of a planet birthing itself."

Did Jesus know all this? That all living waters are one? That dry land and dry souls are connected through water? He couldn't know that the Jordan River and that well in Samaria flowed with the water that came from the ice of Antarctica. But somehow, when he used the image of water to talk about wisdom, about the gift of the Spirit, I think he did know that he was also talking about the waters of the Deep, over which the Spirit hovered at creation. When he offered the Samaritan woman living water, he knew he was offering her the very mixed up stuff of creation itself.

It's no wonder that Jesus turned water into a vehicle for God's grace, and thirst into spiritual yearnings as he sat there by Jacob's well, that ancient and sacred place for quenching thirst. If thirst of the body is the very taste of death, then thirst of the soul is the very picture of spiritual despair.

That was the kind of world Jesus came to save, a world dying of spiritual thirst, a world of dry spirits, of dry souls, a world of inner deserts, of swollen tongues and cracked lips and parched throats; a world of inner springs of the soul run dry. The Bible was written in an era without air conditioners, water coolers, or refrigeration of any kind. And it was a hot, dry land, desolate in places. Folks knew how it felt to be thirsty. They were thirsty physically--and spiritually.

The question today is, what are we doing with our stewardship of these waters? How are we tending to both the physical and the spiritual waters of our lives?

Evidence has it that we are not doing very well with the living waters of our earth. Water is quickly becoming the precious commodity of the 21st century that oil was for the 20th century. Current water usage, aggravated by population growth, urbanization, irrigation and manufacturing, is already more than the earth can sustain. One could argue that the war in the Middle East is as much about water as anything else. Certainly we know that water shortage is one reason Mexicans are running to the US. And we, the

world's elite, use 40 to 70 times more water than the poor in many third world nations, who pay an average 12 times as much for the substandard water they do receive. Over fishing depletes the natural balance and our denial of global warming has affected the glacial masses and changed the amounts of moving water on the globe. Half of the world's wetlands, with their invaluable filtration powers, have been destroyed. Industrial pollutants increase the threat to species survival exponentially. Deforestation leaves watershed unprotected; construction of dams and reservoirs poisons ecosystems. And In the aftermath of the 2005 tsunami in the Indian Ocean, deaths from water borne disease exceeded the death toll of the tidal wave itself.

It would seem that we humans have little choice but to work together in such a crisis. Instead, we are moving increasingly toward privatization, asking global corporations to rebuild and manage water system, risking water manipulation and exploitation. This effort is led by prestigious organizations such as the International Monetary fund and the North America Free Trade Agreement. Yet, is there a solution in making water a scarce commodity that must be purchased rather than a common resource available to all people? If "the earth is the Lord's" does it make sense to dole out our waters on a commercial basis? We have a Biblical, ethical, spiritual mandate to care for our natural resources, to steward them for sustainability, and we are faced with a justice issue in caring for both the lands and the people of the world. How do we cope righteously, as God's partners, in the complex arena of political agendas?

Perhaps the answer lies in those other Living Waters, the waters of the Jordan and the well of Samaria; the waters of baptism and the waters carrying of the Holy Spirit. Dr. George Buttrick, while chaplain at Harvard University, wrote: "Whoever lives with Christ has in his heart a spring of water, perennial and inexhaustible; a peace that passes understanding, a joy deeper than all passing joys, a life more abundant than any other life, a power that meets any and all troubles, a perpetual fountain, clean and clear, cool and refreshing." How are we stewarding, cultivating, protecting, drawing on these waters?

The woman of Sychar was on a spiritual desert. Many of us have at least one foot in some kind of desert; it may be a desert of greed or selfishness or spiritual pride or fear or hatred or anger or an unforgiving spirit. Whatever our desert is, it is drying out our spiritual selves; it is killing us. We are dying of thirst. To that desert - our desert - comes the same living water that came to the woman at the well. When people have made a desert of their habits, where a tedious life will not sustain any plant or herb, God will send a stream of vision and imagination and life will start to bloom. I believe that as a result of drinking deeply of the Living Water, we will be able to solve the problems of the earth's water. Already each of you who gave to one great hour of sharing this year have supplied third world access to clean, safe water in the form of Borehole wells. When drought-related famine hit Malawi and other areas of Southern Africa in 2002-03, communities with borehole wells were able to continue watering vegetable gardens, lessening the drought's impact on their food supply. Because of their simplicity, they can be managed by village-level committees, and experience shows that the key to a successful water program is local management.

In John's gospel there is a continuing emphasis on living water, but water is not the only agent of action. Receiving this water is not a passive experience; we must do something to acquire it, and we must be changed after we imbibe it. Just as we must drink literal water to survive, we need also to risk changing our lives by taking the initiative to be open to the Holy Spirit. Remember, in the Gospel story, once the woman drank of Jesus' living waters, she ran back into town, she told her friends and neighbors, she was spurred into action. But we will never solve the issue of sharing our resources until we solve the issue of claiming the Living Waters for our souls.

The gentle rains that fall on you are the same water that rained upon Moses, and Galileo, and Napoleon. The cool glass of water you drink on a warm summer day is the same water that Jesus turned into wine that day at Cana. The bottle of water we thoughtlessly drink and throw away holds the same molecules that make up a glacier, and Lake Tahoe, and a rainbow.

In the face of any crisis, in the middle of any desert, there is Living Water for us, and these Living Waters will lead us to life, physical and spiritual.

Like baby Sydney, may we all emerge from the living waters, physical and spiritual, tender, open aware, embraced, received, and renewed in Love.