

WATER FOR THIRSTY LANDSCAPES AND LIVES

*“The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing fountains of endless life”
~ John 4: 14*

For those guided by the calendar cycle of the Christian year, as we are here in Memorial Church, this period is known as Lent, today being the 3rd Sunday of the season. The forty days that precede Easter, it is essentially attributed as a time for self-examination and reflection. A time to pause and ponder more deeply about our lives. What is important to you? Who is important to you? What could you or we do better, not only for ourselves but also for others? Why does it matter?

The theme of wilderness also seems an appropriate one for this Lenten season. The story in Exodus that we read for us puts Israel in the wilderness between slavery and the land of promise. Israel, as one Hebrew Scripture scholar notes, has a rich and embarrassing memory of the wilderness and how it conducted itself in a time of danger and deficit. Note the complaining that is evident in these Exodus verses today: “Why did you bring us out of Egypt to kill us, our children and our livestock with thirst?” They are ready to stone Moses, their leader, with whom they appear to be entirely fed up.

The invitation of Lent to self-examination and reflection can indeed be a wilderness of sorts. Lent is about being in thin places without resources and essentially being driven back to the elemental reality of God, and our capacity to trust God in those thin places where there are no other resources. I was reminded this week that the cross that sits at the very top of this spectacular church is a Celtic one that came from the tiny island of Iona off the west coast of Scotland. This enabled me to recall a pilgrimage I made a number of years ago to Iona, another thin place, with a small group of young people who were without a doubt incredibly anxious about being in a remotely desolate, distant and barren wilderness for almost 10 days. No computers, no cell phones, no creature comforts, the usual suspects of dependency in this day and age were not going to be accessible. Time does not permit to give you more details today, but the short of it is that these young people

were transformed by this experience for many reasons. To be sure, they embodied new capacities and understandings of God and of one another. It was breathtaking.

Themes of wilderness and thin places by way of Lent are still instructive and useful to us now. Writes Walter Bruggemann, scholar and theologian: “Even still, the context of the U.S – in our long seasons of fear, anxiety, and violence – are constantly being driven back to wilderness questions about the reality of God, the reliability of God, and our capacity to trust God in the thin places where there are no other resources for life.”

Bruggemann and others painted a scene that may help us here. The scene in Exodus is at a place called Rephidim in the wilderness. No one knows for sure where that was, but it was simply a place that lacked much of anything. Dry, hot and no water. Imagine no water, the most elemental requirement for life, the scarcest commodity in the wilderness and there was none. There was no way to produce any by themselves, no wells and no adequate substitute that could sustain them. The focus turns to a deep need and upon the way in which perhaps the deepest questions of faith are connected to the deepest material realities of life. I think all of us are acutely aware, now more than ever, as we find ourselves in the most severe drought in California in the last 100 years, that the scarcity of water is a dangerously profound one not only here but also around the world. To that extent, some have suggested, “the next great war will not be about oil but about water.”

So what did the Israelites do? They complained, assuming they were entitled to water. They argued with Moses, who was supposed to be keeping on top of the water supply. Finally, as Bruggemann suggests, they had to come face to face with God, because they had no alternative. Perhaps this is what Lent is about, is it not? To come face to face with God in need because there is no other alternative. “Lent,” writes Bruggemann, “is not about guilt or even about repentance or giving up some convenient extra. It is rather about the raw, deepest need in our life.”

He continues to illustrate that what happened in this transaction is that the water question, the material, concrete support for life, is turned into the God

question of the one who “leads us beside still waters.” As a result, the Israelites dared to ask “Is the Lord among us or not?” The Bible does not everywhere assume that God is present, but knows about the dry places where God’s absence is overwhelming. “The Israelites asked the God question about the water problem,” contends Bruggemann, “because they knew they were up against it in their need and had no alternative. In their quarrelsome challenge, they articulated the song of Eliza Doolittle to Freddie in “My Fair Lady,” – “Don’t talk of love, show me!” Don’t talk of water, show me. Don’t give me theological formulations, do something concrete. It is a demanding, quarrelsome engagement, but the Israelites in their anxiety were exceedingly practical. They did not want a God who would not deliver on the real stuff needed to make life possible.”

As in the story of Exodus, today’s gospel in John is also a story about water. It’s beginning is that Jesus asks for water from a Samaritan woman. In both of these stories, the realities of physical hardship manifested in fatigue and thirst give way to metaphors of spiritual sustenance. It is evident that the conversation changes from literal water to one that concerns spiritual nourishment. To be sure, water is critical to life and survival, good and necessary, but as Jesus so often adeptly does, this gospel story illustrates that it is no substitute for the spiritual life and agency that sustains us in our deepest needs.

This gospel narrative has taken the concrete-material reality of water and transposed it into a metaphor. Water is now gospel; water is the good news. Water is sign and symbol that in Christ we are offered a new quality of life, as the text says, “a spring of water gushing fountains of endless life.” I imagine this was considerable good news in the life of a defeated Samaritan woman, and one who no less was shocked knowing that the power of ethnic division in her time meant that a Jew did not interact with a Samaritan like her. Jesus chose to let go of that rule in a circumstance of division and instigate community by demonstrating that durable quenching is possible. As one preacher puts it: “It was outrageously good news that from a hard rock of a failed life durable quenching happens, good news for ancient

Israel in the wilderness, good news for a woman thirsting for a better life, good news for us in a culture of paralyzing anxiety.”

This Lent has me wondering and pondering, as I move from conversations individually with students, faculty and staff or collectively in meetings with colleagues on campus as we discuss and address the concerns of the landscape of well being and wholeness in the lives of those who inhabit this university as learners and as teachers. I realize that the wilderness description fits for us too through a growing awareness that we live in a world of resources that are thinner than we imagined. I, and others like me, suspect that those of who trust in the richness and depth of what religious traditions and spiritual practices offer, are torn on the one hand. Committed as I am to translating the stories from Hebrew and Christian narratives like today, with metaphors of springs of water that give endless life not just to some but to all to help quench the growing thirst I witness for community and meaning among so many on this campus and beyond. On the other hand, needless to say, others and I remain anxious and uncertain that we seek in many other places for water, not always recognizing, as one writer put it, “that the barren land of anxiety contains many mirages that look like remembered water, but are not really water that can quench.”

A beloved university campus like this one, filled with high-octane scholars, cheerfully capable and endlessly talented are prone to the pressure of securing their own water supply. The list of broken cisterns they have dug for themselves is long be it perfection at all cost, the highest grades, the best of multiple internships, the quick sexual satisfaction in a hook up culture or the endless pursuit of belonging masked in alcohol and substance abuse. For others of us it can be bigger and better houses or cars, larger portfolios, better weapons or what have you. It essentially comes down to the consumer goods of more money, power and violence. Let's name the truth: we know our society remains deep into such mistaken self-security and it is a powerful and relentless temptation to all of us.

So let's return to where we started. Lent is a time to ponder the broken cisterns where we have tried to store our own water supply. Have we noticed that we stay thirsty? Have we noticed that we are not by such resources necessarily made happy, or safe, or satisfied?

What is important to us? Who is important to us? Why does it matter? What can we do better, not only for ourselves, but also for others? What sustains you? Who are the people that treat you with dignity, love, grace no matter who you are, just as Jesus demonstrated to the woman at the well? This season of Lent is a time for noticing and choosing once again, choosing perhaps too what others, even some of us and the world may doubt – a rock in a hard place from which God brings water; a rabbi at a well with a promise never to thirst again.

Now, may we with our deep thirst yet unquenched stand by the well with our own deep yearning and our own penetrating questions. Give us this water, give us this water, so that we may never again be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.

Only our thirst compels us beyond complaint to conversation, beyond rejection to relationship. Pour your love into our hearts, that we may invite others to the living water so freely offered and given to us.

Amen.