

Waters of Life

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The Sixth Sunday of Easter
Offering of Letters
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Lessons
Acts 16:9-15
Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5
John 5:1-9

Text: "Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb." – Revelation 22:1

This morning's readings from the Bible are a reminder that the story of salvation, which is what the Bible is about, begins with water and it ends with water and it has water all through it, even as the headlines for the past ten days have reminded us of how easily God's precious gift of water, with all the variety of life it supports, can be damaged and even destroyed by the decisions we make.

In the beginning, Genesis says, there was watery chaos before there was anything else, with the wind of God swooping down to bring creation from that primeval deep.

And at the other end, according to our reading from Revelation, when creation has been fully redeemed with us as part of it, water will still be there, flowing from the throne of God and the Lamb, to nourish the tree of life, whose leaves heal nations.

We take water for granted, here in our post-industrial, water-rich culture on the shore of Lake Erie, but the writers of the Bible did not. The authors of Scripture, inspired by a divine author, wrote into the story of stories the importance of water. They kept coming back to it. Water keeps appearing in tale after tale, from the Garden of Eden with its four rivers, to Noah and the cleansing flood, to the Israelites passing through the Red Sea, to John baptizing Jesus in the Jordan River.

It's impossible to read very far in the Bible without water becoming part of the story, and that's not accidental, because the divine wind that swooped over the surface of the watery deep before creation swooped also over the writers of the Bible, and brought from them the deepest truths human beings have ever discovered, and one of those truths is that there is no story of life, and no story of salvation, that does not include water.

Lydia, as we heard from the book of Acts, was a cloth merchant, dealing with that luxury item in the ancient world, purple cloth. We don't think purple is particularly special today, but in the ancient world purple dye was hard to come by. In the world of the Bible, it came from an aquatic snail, about twelve thousand of which were required to dye the hem of a single garment. Lydia and other women of the city of Philippi had gathered at the river for worship, apparently because there weren't enough Jewish men in the Gentile city of Philippi to establish a synagogue there. Perhaps the women were drawn to the river because they would normally go there to fetch the day's water for their households, or perhaps they gathered at the river for the same reason humans have always been drawn to flowing water: in its movement, we see the flowing of our lives from birth through life to death and beyond, and we recognize ourselves.

Regardless of the reason, Lydia was at the place where all living creatures, sooner or later, must be, the place of water. And that's the place we see in the reading from Revelation, that sublime and troubling vision of Christian hope. Readers of the book of Revelation so often remember the lake of fire from that book, but they rarely remember that what is there at the end is not fire, which destroys, but water, which gives life. At the end of it all, the Christian vision of hope says, the redeemed creation, of which we are a part, will still be nourished by that precious gift from God that made the whole preceding story possible.

Without the water of chaos there would have been no creation. Without the water God caused to spring up, there would have been no garden of earthly delights. Without the waters of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, there would have been no city of Ur from which God called father Abraham. Without the waters of the Jordan, there would have been no baptism by John for repenting sinners.

The entire story of salvation depended upon there being water, because the story of salvation is drawn from the story of life and there is no life without water. The writers of the Bible knew that fundamental truth about reality and they wrote that truth into the story – into its beginning, into its middle, and into its end – and it's one of those truths the Bible teaches us that we are most prone to forget. We religious people have an unfortunate history of focusing so much on the spiritual that we forget that the whole purpose of the spiritual is to transform the way we perceive and live with the material.

Now I know that sounds a little odd, and in some religious circles it would be considered wrong. Some religions, including many Christians, believe that the purpose of spirituality is to help us escape the material world. The material world, the physical world, in this view, is bad. It's full of the messy business of being born and dying and killing for food and killing for greed and eating and going to the bathroom and reproducing. It's the world that is constantly changing, the world of unpredictability, the world of random chance and accident. It's the world which seems to have no meaning, no purpose, no direction.

The world of meaning, on the other hand, according to this way of looking at reality, is the world of spirit, or mind, the world of pure ideas. Things like God and truth and beauty and integrity and honor and dispassionate love – those are the realities of the spiritual world, and the more you live in that spiritual world, the more you leave the messy physical world behind. And if you put all those spiritual realities together, you call that heaven, and the purpose of religion is to get you through this physical world and into that spiritual world called heaven.

Lots and lots of Christians believe that the purpose of Christianity is to get them to heaven, and some of us saw that view expressed by a local pastor in the Plain Dealer a week ago Saturday. He was articulating the view of the majority of Christians currently and throughout history. Most Christians, I think it's pretty safe to say, believe that the main reason to be a Christian is so you'll go to heaven when you die.

I'm not sure that's a very balanced view of what the Bible teaches, however. Certainly the Bible is concerned with salvation, but the Bible understands salvation much more broadly and much less woodenly than simply what happens to you when you die. For the most part, the Bible isn't terribly concerned about life after death; it's much more concerned about life before death. And, as we all know, there is no life without water, which brings us back to this morning's readings.

Water heals. That's why the crippled man was waiting for someone to carry him into the waters of the healing pool in our reading from John.

Water nourishes. That's why it flows from God, who nourishes everything.

Water allows all the things that we call civilization to develop – commerce,

learning, security, prosperity – which is why the city of Philippi, and Lydia's city of Thyatira and all other cities arose along rivers and lakes and springs.

Water, with God's help, gives life. It's as simple and straightforward as that, and the Bible reminds us of that simple and undeniable fact this morning. Yes, certainly water is used symbolically in the Bible – Jesus refers to himself as living water, for example – and we use water symbolically in our worship, most obviously in baptism.

But unlike us, the Bible never loses touch with the importance of the physical reality as well as the symbolic reality of water. The Bible never spiritualizes the real life-giving meaning out of water. From its opening words to its final chapters, the Bible holds up water as the source from which God draws all life: life from the watery depths of the oceans, life from the clouds that shield our green planet from the sun, life from the water that surrounds us in our mother's wombs, life in the water that makes up nearly 60 percent of our bodies. God our creator has fashioned the world in such a way that all life comes from water, which makes water God's infinitely precious gift to us and to all creation.

In a few minutes, we're going to dedicate the letters we've written to our representatives in Congress, asking them to support and strengthen the existing legislation we have in this country that helps feed hungry people. We want people to be able to feed themselves, and in order for them to have food, those who produce that food must first have water.

As we ask God's blessing on our Offering of Letters, I would ask you to pray not only for the food hungry people need, but also for the water that makes that food possible, not only for the hungry, but for us all.

Pray that the waters of baptism, that make us new creations in Christ, will make our hearts and minds more sensitive to how we use and share God's precious gift of water.

Pray that the waters that flow through Euclid Creek and the Chagrin River and Lake Erie and our seas and oceans can be restored and made clean again by our decisions, especially our decisions about how we secure our energy and how we dispose of our waste, even as we look to those waters to restore us and make us clean.

That which flows from the throne of God flows through our neighborhoods, our cities, our nation, our world, and even through our veins. May we treasure it, use it, and honor it as the precious, life-giving gift from God that it is. Amen.