

Streams of Living Water

OT Reading: Genesis 1:1-5

Gospel: Mark 1:4-11

Baptism of Christ

In the beginning was water. The first chapter of Genesis is a seven day symphony which celebrates the emergence of life on earth. In those verses, water is mentioned fifteen times, first as a formless void, Then becoming the home of “the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm” (1:21).

Water: for nine months, we live and breathe in it. Our bodies are about 60% water, which is crucial for transporting nutrients around our bodies and keeping us alive and healthy. The complexity and power of water is humbling, as is our complete dependence on it. As St. Francis of Assisi wrote eight hundred years ago, “Praised be to my Lord for our sister water, who is very serviceable to us and humble and precious and clean”.

Water is a powerful symbol of God’s relationship with humanity. In preparing this sermon, I spent some time looking for water images in scripture. I found enough to nourish a thirsty world, or to drown a multitude. Four rivers flow out of Eden, watering the world with rain, waterfalls, aquifers and springs. Water flows through scripture like a never ending stream until, in the final chapter of Revelation “The Spirit and the Bride say ... Come ... let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes, take the water of life as a gift” (22:17).

Creation begins in deep darkness, through which the Spirit of God moves over the face of the waters. This is the first in a long series of stories about God creating order out of chaos. The history of Israel begins by the banks of the of the River Nile, in a land that was for the God’s people a “formless void”, as they cried out for deliverance from slavery in Egypt. Their deliverance came through one who as a three month old infant had been placed in a papyrus basket in the waters of the Nile, and was rescued by an Egyptian princess who named him Moses, meaning “drawn out of the water”.

Moses grew up to become the liberator of the Hebrew slaves, leading them through the waters of the Red Sea, as the Spirit of God brought them out of the

chaos of their lives in Egypt into the wilderness. The scarcity of water in deserts is a constant problem, and after six weeks of travelling from one small oasis to another they were parched and angry, demanding that Moses do something – anything to find them some water. And guided by God, Moses did, striking a rock so that water gushed out, satisfying everyone’s immediate need. After a further forty years of wandering, Joshua led them across the River Jordan to the Promised Land. But in the years that followed, many of God’s people returned to spiritual wilderness.

More than a millennium later, John the baptiser appeared by the river Jordan, heralding the coming of God’s new era. John urged the people to prepare for the coming of the Spirit, to turn from their old lives and embrace healing and renewal through baptism in the waters of the river.

Large crowds of people heard the call, and came to be baptised by John. Among them was a young carpenter from Galilee called Jesus. Jesus’ baptism is a further illustration of God’s creative power connecting him back to the deep waters of creation. As he emerged from the waters of the Jordan, with the Spirit descending from above, he moved from being without form to being with form, going back to what God had done in the beginning. He reopened the world, trusting God to continue creating order out of chaos through him.

“Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink”, says Jesus (John 7:37-8). From the day he joined the crowd of sinners in the waters of his baptism, Jesus has revealed the wonder and power of water. His first miracle showed its transformative power, as he changed it into fine wine at the wedding in Cana. Several of his disciples had made their living as fishermen, and knew the power of water to bring life, as fish for food, or death from sudden storms. On the occasion when such a storm threatened to drown them all, Jesus came to them, walking across the water and calming the waves, as he calms the storms which rage in our own sometimes chaotic lives. He offered living water to a Samaritan woman, healed a blind man in the pool of Siloam, and washed clean his disciples’ feet. And he watered the ground with his tears over the doomed city of Jerusalem, at the grave of his friend Lazarus and when facing his own death in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Water refreshes, cleans, renews and heals us. With water God creates, blesses and saves. Today, millions of people suffer with severe water scarcity.

Their need is physical and very real. It also speaks of the deep spiritual thirst in human souls and communities, not only in drought stricken deserts and ghettos, but also in affluent suburbs and tropical resorts. People everywhere are thirsting for God (Taken from *Downstream from Eden*, David L. Knight, 2012. 362). Jesus, the source of living water invites us to nourish our souls with his grace. As our own thirst is assuaged, out of each of our lives a river will flow, taking His grace and love into a thirsty world until the day when “justice roll[s] down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream” (Amos 5:24).

Among the last words that Jesus spoke were also some of the most human. Hanging on the cross, the one who proclaimed himself as the spring of living water called out through cracked lips, “I thirst” (John 19:28). Scourged, mocked and hung out to dry, Jesus died sharing the anguish of people throughout all of history: the neglected and forgotten, thirsting for justice, dignity and hope; children, dying of thirst in droughts and deserts; a mother, weeping for her lost children; a refugee, desperate for safety and compassion; families at home, unable to say good bye to dying loved ones. Taking the collective weight of human suffering unto himself, thirsting for God, Jesus cried out on behalf of those who have no voices of their own.

In response, the soldiers gave him sour wine, and having wetted his lips, Jesus bowed his head and returned his Spirit to his Father. Then, as Barbara Brown Taylor has put it, “He dove into the stream of living water from which he had sprung and swam all the way home (*Home by another Way*, p. 105).

Amen

Martha Taft Golden
Benefice service during Lockdown
10th January, 2021