

LENT 2 “GROUNDED: FINDING GOD IN THE WORLD”

“Water: The Blood of the Earth”

by Rev. James C. Ramsey

Texts: Genesis 1:1-2
John 4:7-15

Preached: 3/17/19

This Lent we are exploring the possibilities for “Finding God in the World.” Even if you imagine your life as “ordinary” and your everyday world “mundane,” we are invited this season to open ourselves anew to God...to entertain the notion that we are actually surrounded and infused with God’s numinous presence. By paying attention to God’s creation and to the people and relationships in our lives, we can learn to be grounded, confidently rooted in God’s world.

Our theme is based on the compelling book GROUNDED: Finding God in the World, by Diana Butler Bass. *(In fact, I have used Diana’s words verbatim, throughout the sermon, mixing them with my own reflections and illustrations. I have bolded the words that come directly from the book.)*

Last Sunday, we considered “dirt.” Today our subject is water! We all have a different relationship and connection to water, but it has been, is and will be integral to our life, not only our life, but the life of our planet. What if we thought of water as “The Blood of the Earth?”

Such a designation is not a modern concept. The Chinese Tao master Chuang Tzu said this in the 4th century B.C.: **Water is the blood of the earth, and flows through its muscles and veins...It is accumulated in heaven and earth, and stored up in various things of the world. It comes forth in metal and stone, and is concentrated in living creatures. Therefore it is said that water is something spiritual.**

I was introduced to Chuang Tzu through the writings of one of my spiritual heroes, Thomas Merton. Of course, we don’t need a Chinese master to convince us that there is something spiritual, even holy, about water. Most of us have sensed this in our souls. Maybe it was sitting at the beach, looking out over the expanse of the ocean, walking along a peaceful creek or by a quiet pond. It could be the feeling of boating on a wilderness river. But you need not be outside, or off the beaten path, you can have the same sensation in your own shower, or in a swimming pool, or simply by drinking a glass of cool, refreshing water on a hot day. We even get the sense in church. One of the holiest and most spiritual things we do as Christians is baptize with water.

There is an odd remark at the beginning of the Gospel of John. A man named Nicodemus asks Jesus how a person might enter the kingdom of God. Jesus answers, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.” Some Christians have interpreted “water” in this story as baptism, certainly a legitimate reading of Jesus’ response.

In the history of preaching on this verse, however, it is a rare sermon or commentary that emphasizes the water as literal rather than as symbol. Most interpreters jump quickly to the Spirit, relegating water to theological runner-up. Jesus did not do that. He twinned water with

Spirit (Spirit often depicted as “wind” or “breath”), seemingly placing the two on equal footing.

Could Jesus have been speaking of God as water? As a Gospel writer, John uses many metaphors for God – Word, light, vine, door, bread, shepherd, love. Just a few pages later, Jesus declares, “God is spirit.” Why not water? Water need not be important only as an element in religious ceremonies. Water might just be water. And perhaps God is water as well as spirit. It is easy to imagine Jesus saying, “We enter into the sacred presence through water and wind.”

Water covers 71 percent of the earth’s surface and is vital for life on this planet. Our bodies are nearly 70 percent water as well (depending on our size), and we cannot survive without it. Plants, and therefore all our food, depends both on the water cycle and an appropriate supply of water. Water is the continuing source of life for this planet. This tiny blue marble, as the first astronauts called it from space, so fragile from afar, is a planet of azure-endued life. “How inappropriate to call this planet ‘Earth,’” noted science fiction writer Arthur C. Clarke, “when it is clearly ‘Ocean.’”

Despite the fact that there is so much water on the planet, very little of it can be used directly by us. About 96 percent of the earth’s water is saline, in the oceans and seas. Although the salty oceans are the source of evaporation in the water cycle and their water supports marine life and vital ocean plankton, we can neither drink it or farm with it. A little less than 2 percent of the earth’s water is ice. And that leaves 2 percent as fresh water, the usable sort of water for us humans...but most of it is trapped underground. Only a very tiny fraction of the world’s water, less than .3 percent, is readily available freshwater, our rivers, lakes and streams—which we drink, wash in, and use to raise our food. Water is plentiful and necessary, but rare in usable forms. Yet we often take water for granted, especially those of us who live in developed countries, where clean, safe water flows through taps and hoses.

They do not take safe water for granted in countries like Haiti, which is plagued with a contaminated water supply and frequent cholera outbreaks. Water comes out of taps and public fountains and pumps, but the water is full of bacteria and, if not treated, makes you sick, sometimes fatally so.

We at East Union have a sensitivity and an awareness to Haiti’s water issues. And we’ve done something about it. I love this picture from 2014, of the water building which houses the solar-powered water purification system in Ecole Evangelique in Bas Limbe. What is remarkable about this photo is that the water building was just barely finished and not yet opened for customers. While we were in the church with Pastor Agaam, before it was ever announced to the community, in the midst of the water system’s dedication service, word had spread throughout town and people lined up, waiting for the service to be over, desperate for the chance to get clean water. We came out of the service, expecting to relax in the heat of the day and maybe enjoy a quiet lunch. Instead, for the next several hours, Pastor Agaam, the leaders of his church (with us observing), passed out free water to the community!

This sermon very nearly lands on the United Nations’ World Water Day...which is March 22nd every year. One of the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals is "water for all" by 2030. It seems an ambitious goal, but we are certainly a small part of that through our Haitian partnerships and our

connection to the Presbyterian organization Living Waters for the World. You can celebrate World Water Day this year by following Living Waters for the World on Facebook and Twitter as we celebrate the people and communities now drinking clean water from a LWW system...there are thousands, now, across the globe, our two systems in Haiti included!

I have always been drawn to water – and have a deep resonance with Celtic spirituality, which is so deeply tied to earth and water, this notion of being grounded in God's creation...the natural world. Several years ago I was thrilled to visit the ancient Iona abbey – the heart of Celtic spirituality in Scotland. To the far right of the photo you can see the water. Iona is an island off the western edge of Scotland. You have to leave the mainland on a ferry to the island of Mull, travel across Mull, and then take another ferry to Iona.

Sometime around the year 565, Columba, the missionary abbot who had founded the Iona abbey, was traveling through the Scottish highlands and came across a notorious well, which can still be visited outside the village of Invermoriston. According to local legend, the spring was once toxic and people feared the water, believing it was possessed by evil spirits. When people drank from it, they sickened and developed ulcers. The bad water killed many. Columba prayed over the spring and the evil spirits fled...the spring ran clear, and the water became fit to drink, and even acquired healing powers.

Columba's ancient biographer wrote, "Since that day the demons have kept away from the well. Instead, after the saint blessed it and washed in it, many elements among the local people were cured by that well. Columba's story is only one of many such tales recounted in Christian church history, where prophets and saints interacted with and performed miracles with water.

At the very beginning of his teaching ministry, Jesus meets a woman at a well, called Jacob's Well, and strikes up a conversation with her. Jesus asks for a drink. She wonders how he expects to get water, since the well is deep. Jesus speaks of living water: "Everyone who drinks of this well water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life."

Jesus implies that he is water, not just a well. As Jesus and the woman talk, Jesus layers on spiritual metaphors for water: liberation, yearning for salvation, hospitality, healing and as a source for life. With each poetic turn, his invitation to these waters becomes more compelling. Wisdom, like a spring, bubbles up through his insights. He gives water and he is water. Just as John indicated earlier, the kingdom comes through water and spirit.

[IMAGE – Jesus and the woman] when video finishes!

There is a striking parallel here between this story of the Woman at the Well and the story of Eve. In Genesis, the devil tempts the woman to eat forbidden fruit to gain divine knowledge. At the well, Jesus invites the Samaritan woman to drink God's water to gain spiritual wisdom. The entire story is a reversal of the one recounting original sin! Here, Jesus and the woman reenact Eden with a different result. The woman's eyes are opened; she understands. Yet, instead of being banished out of the garden, she runs and tells her friends that she has met the one who is Living Water. She is not cursed. Rather, the woman is blessed and offers

blessing! Water is present at creation...and here, also, at the world's re-creation through Jesus!

[IMAGE – Gods wind]

It is widely known that **the Bible begins with God's spirit sweeping over the waters. From wind and the seas comes all of creation.** It is less widely known that **the Bible also ends with water, in the last paragraphs of Revelation: "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 through the middle of the street of the city."** The final scene in the book of Revelation is the river of God, the water that **heals and washes away all sorrow.**

"Let everyone who is thirsty come," the last words of Jesus invite, **"Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift"** (Revelation 22:1-2; 17). **Water in the beginning, water at the end...and memorable stories of water all throughout the pages of the Bible. Water is life; life is water. Living water is God; God is living water.**

When we get close to water, especially in its natural forms, creek, pond, river, lake, ocean...when we get close to water by interacting, appreciating, protecting, enjoying, even revering...it grounds us, helps us know God in the world! Jesus said, "The one who believes in me, out of that one's heart will flow rivers of living water."

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.