

Sermon for July 11, 2021

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Water. Water is everywhere. 71% of earth's surface is water. Your body is 60% water. The five minute shower you took this morning took about 20 gallons of water. Every pound of beef you consume needs 1,800 gallons of water to produce and that favorite pair of jeans you like to pull on took 2,900 gallons of water to create. We turn on water to wash dishes, to water our lawns, to provide for our animals. We have water connected to our fridges, ice cubes in our drinks, bottled water available in every store. We flush and bathe and protect our health through access to water. We celebrate the beauty of the waters of Lake Superior, which provide recreation and industry. We visit the scenic waters of Gooseberry, fish in many lakes in our backyards, stroll along the shores of Chester Creek and Lester River. Water is a resource central to the living of our days.

Yet about 2/3 of the world is affected by water shortage at least one month a year. 758 million people lack access to clean water, which is one in 10 people on the planet, one in 5 children without access to water. Woman and girls spend an estimated 200 million hours hauling water every day. Still everyday more than 800 children under the age of 5 die from lack of clean water.

The United States is experiencing the worst drought in 1,200 years and in the month of June 100% of Minnesota was listed as abnormally dry. Nearly half of the country from the Pacific coast to the Great Plains and upper Midwest are experiencing moderate to exceptional drought conditions. Californians are in a state of emergency with mandatory restrictions.

In today's Bible text there is a shortage of water. A little history – the Israelites are a people who had been captive under Pharaoh, slaves in Egypt. God heard their cries and sent Moses to free God's people from the hand of Pharaoh. After many requests and resulting plagues, Pharaoh tells Moses to take the people and leave Egypt. As they begin their journey out of slavery, Pharaoh changes his mind and sends his army to retrieve the Israelites. The Israelites, who have been following God in a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, come to the edge of a wide river as the soldiers approach from behind. God tells Moses to raise up his staff and the waters part, allowing the Israelites to pass through before the waters come crashing down upon the Egyptian forces. The people celebrated - praising God for their freedom and then began a journey through the wilderness to the promised land.

Now in today's reading, a period of time into their wilderness journey, their delight at their newly received freedom wanes as they discover the effort and endurance that is now required for life in the wilderness. Their praise for all that God has provided turns to grumbling about the things God has not yet provided. While they have celebrated Moses leadership, in their thirst, they now turn against him, complaining "have you brought us out of Egypt just to kill us." Discouraged Moses turns to God "What shall I do with these people that are about to stone me?"

Two things catch my attention in God's reply –

First, God instructs Moses to take in his hand the staff with which he struck the Nile and parted the sea. He is to go ahead of the people holding this staff. Why? It is just a staff. The staff, held in front of the people, is to serve as a visible reminder of God's presence and activity in the past; remember where you came from, remember all that God has done, remember God has provided. God has led them out of slavery by cloud and pillar of fire. God has parted the seas and crushed their oppressors. God says "I will be standing there in front of you." Hold the staff out in front of the people that they may remember my presence and promises.

In the times that we thirst, what are the "staves" that are held up before us to remind us of God's presence and promises? In our times of drought, when the abundance of God's blessings seem dried up, when we are weary from wilderness experiences, what is visible before our eyes that urges us to remember and trust that God will provide for all our thirst? For Moses's people it was the staff that reminded them of their deliverance. For Christians, we turn our eyes to the cross and remember Christ.

The second thing, God tells Moses, is to bring some other people to lead with him. The elders are to be given responsibility for taking action as well. God most certainly could have just opened the skies to rain or caused water to gush up at people's feet right where they stood grumbling. But God requires something of the people. They must take some action as well. They must develop leaders, they must follow, the rock must be struck before the water pours forth.

Like the Israelites we are quick to grumble at what we do not have, at the absence of abundance, at the hardships of life around us. God provides but invites us to take action as well. We are to develop leaders, to follow God's commands, to take up the tools God provides and bring forth God's goodness in the world.

Today, as our Witness Within Team invites us into our three week theme "River of Life" we celebrate the work of ELCA World Hunger response. If you join Heidi outside you will have the opportunity to hear the story of one group of people in El Salvador developing leaders, following God's command and taking up the tools God provides to bring forth clean water for the people in their area.

Most days we can't imagine life without the gift of water. We have the privilege of taking it for granted. Consider that during Covid, our public safety commercials provided instructions for how to wash our hands for the length of time it took us to sing the ABC's, while in other parts of the world, public health officials were struggling to figure out how to provide clean water for any hand washing at all. Individuals feeling called to lead, worked with World Vision to provide hand washing facilities at 4,780 schools, 2,480 health care facilities, and nearly 1 million households during the pandemic. Now every 10 seconds a new person is reached with clean water access. God provides but urges God's people to develop as leaders, follow God's commands and take up the tools to bring forth God's goodness that none may be left to thirst.

How, instead of just joining the grumblings, might we respond to the droughts among us today?

Interestingly Moses calls the site where water came from rock by a name that means “Is the Lord among us or not?” The Israelites thirsted for water but maybe more importantly they thirsted for God – for a renewed sense of God’s presence, strengthening them to journey on. Moses stands before them reminding them of who God has been and who God promises to be. Then as leaders come forth and lead, as people follow, as the tools are used as God commands and the physical thirst of the people is relieved, their thirst for God is quenched as well.

“Is the Lord among us or not?” May you hold the cross in your sights and be reminded of who God has been and who God promises to be. May you dare to develop as a leader, to follow as God commands, and use the tools that God provides to quench thirsts that all may know the Lord is indeed among us.