

September 17, 2023

Liberating Water

The Rev. Amanda Gerken-Nelson

I want to first acknowledge that our intern, Mary, was slated to preach this morning but has tested positive for COVID and so I'm pinch hitting

This week, when Mary and I met – via Zoom – she started to tell me some of her thoughts about her sermon and the texts and themes for today and I have taken much of my inspiration from Mary's wisdom

So, Mary, if you're watching – thank you for your insights and I hope this sermon does your ideas justice and that you're feeling better. We're praying for you.

Our Season of Creation this year is weaving together our experiences of water in God's creation and our experiences of water in our holy scriptures and faith

This morning, we heard the powerful story of how God saved the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt by parting the mighty waters of the sea

A story of liberation that has reverberated throughout the centuries in our Christian tradition and is tremendously important to our Jewish siblings

We also read the story of Jesus at Jacob's well – remember, I told you wells were important last week! – where he met and dialoged with a woman from Samaria

Both texts tell stories of how water has been associated with the idea of liberation – freeing the Israelites from the bondage of slavery and giving life to those pushed to the margins

The Exodus text is, perhaps, a bit more well known and so I'd like to spend time with the woman from Samaria

A little context – at the time when Jesus was living, the Jews in Jerusalem and the Jews in Samaria were in a bit of a conflict

That might be an understatement, the Jews and the Samaritans were deeply in conflict

This is what makes the parable of the Good Samaritan, where the Samaritan is the hero of the story, so powerful and it's part of what sets up this story at the well so powerfully, too

The meeting between Jesus, the Messiah, and this woman, a Samaritan, at the well is a meeting that would have the original audiences of this story squirming in their seats

This woman's ethnic identity is reason #1 why this dialog shouldn't have happened

And, the second reason is, of course, her gender

As a woman, she was vulnerable to the structures of society that diminished her power and took away her agency

We hear this in Jesus' exchange with her in which he points out her many husbands

Sometimes thought to be ridicule, other scholars point out that Jesus' comments may have been more those of recognition and solidarity

You see, there were laws in the ancient Jewish communities that said that women were the property of their spouses and should they lose a spouse they lose all their means of being provided for

Therefore, if a husband died, his wife was to be married by the husband's brother

The woman in this story's many husbands may not be presumed to be an indication of any kind of promiscuousness of the woman, but rather the result of multiple tragedies: passed from man, to man, to man, and finally to a man who isn't even her husband was not her choice, but rather the circumstances of life that diminished her

But, Jesus doesn't diminish her – Jesus engages her, asks her for water, and promises her “living water” – a water that quenches all thirst and brings eternal life

A liberating water that sets this woman free from her marginalized life

No wonder her reaction is: “Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.”

Give me living water, so that I might be alive!

I can't help but hear some of our very siblings today crying out this very lament: give me living water, so that I might be alive!

There are places around the world and in our very nation where living water, tap water, is not an option for people to drink

Flint, Michigan and Jackson, Mississippi are two of the largest profile communities that you've likely heard about in the news each declaring a state of emergency in their towns over the status of their drinking water

Shannon Marquez, Dean of Global Engagement and professor of Water, Sanitation and Hygiene at Columbia University, was interviewed by John Yang on the PBS News Hour on this topic at the beginning of this year

She noted that there are two major factors that are contributing to these emergencies: 1. aging infrastructure, and 2. climate change.

But, to leave the causes at these two factors would be a gross understatement

“communities that have been historically underfunded or underserved are disproportionately being impacted” Dr. Marquez noted, “environmental racism...the historical disinvestment in communities of color really mirrors the institutional racism and other barriers that have existed in our country”<sup>1</sup>

In other words, because our nation has historically undervalued and diminished the lives of people of color, they have neglected the very infrastructures that are meant to serve them and have let them, instead, crumble

“communities who are facing these challenges,” Dr. Marquez noted, “where there's a water emergency, they are having to plan their day, plan their livelihood, plan their life around accessing safe water”

communities who are vulnerable to the structures of society that diminish their power and take away their agency are having trouble accessing living water – like the woman from Samaria

The Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, after the city of Flint declared their state of emergency, recognized that “in addition to likely health effects from lead exposure, there [might be] concerns about behavioral health of Flint residents, including feelings of anxiety or depression and substance abuse.”

And so, to assess these concerns, the CDC conducted a Community Assessment for Public Health Emergency Response survey and the results are staggering:

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/why-american-cities-are-struggling-to-supply-safe-drinking-water#:~:text=Residents%20of%20Jackson%2C%20Mississippi%3B%20Flint,problems%20with%20their%20drinking%20water%3F>

- 66% of households reported that one or more adult members reported experiencing at least one behavioral health issue “more than usual”
- 54% of households reported that at least one child experienced at least one behavioral health issue “more than usual”
- 51% of households felt that the physical health of at least one member had worsened due to Flint water crisis<sup>2</sup>

Not having access to safe water doesn't just affect one's body, it affects their mind and their spirit, too

As I said last week, water is the image this Season of Creation, and it is the issue at hand

The communities of Flint and Jackson, and the many smaller communities across our nation and around the globe who are facing the effects of poisoned water, are crying out for change

Praying that the waters will part for them the way they did for the Israelites and that they will make it to the land of promise

Demanding the right to drink living water from their wells and taps once more

Dr. Marquez noted in her interview that “Water is not a commodity that's properly valued in our country. People really take for granted that it's going to be readily available and safe and they do not realize what it truly costs to protect water systems and make them reliable.”

We do not realize the costs to protect water systems and we don't witness to the systems that perpetuate their brokenness

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<sup>2</sup> [https://www.cdc.gov/nceh/casper/pdf-html/flint\\_water\\_crisis\\_pdf.html#:~:text=On%20April%2025%2C%202014%2C%20the,contaminants%20into%20municipal%20drinking%20water.](https://www.cdc.gov/nceh/casper/pdf-html/flint_water_crisis_pdf.html#:~:text=On%20April%2025%2C%202014%2C%20the,contaminants%20into%20municipal%20drinking%20water.)

But God heard the cry of the Israelites and Jesus recognized the woman from Samaria and named the structures that held her back, and in doing so the woman got her first taste of that living, liberating water

Acknowledging the cries of our siblings and recognizing the systems that keep them in despair are holy acts of justice and liberation, holy acts of love and grace

Committing to the liberation of our siblings from such damaging systems is how we let justice and peace flow

It's how we connect to the living water of Christ

It's how we quench a seemingly unquenchable thirst

The waters do part, and in Christ there is living water.

From our baptismal fonts to the underground basins of municipal water departments, let justice and peace flow from our community and from our discipleship.

Amen.