

Third Sunday of Lent, A  
OSP 2023

It is probably not kosher for a preacher to admit  
that he doesn't read a lot of theology anymore  
especially if he is a retired theology professor.

While I read some, a lot of it for me,  
seems either very theoretical and unrelated to Christian living  
or unnecessarily narrow, even colonial  
and inattentive to the ever-expanding diversity  
that is a hallmark of human existence.

Maybe that is why the scientific world fascinates me so much  
where curiosity and unsolved mysteries take the lead  
and so many of my unexplored presumptions are exploded  
with new discoveries that give us hints  
about the world and cosmos that we inhabit  
but about which we know so little.

It doesn't take a genius to perceive that the key metaphor  
flowing through today's readings is water:  
stories of gushing streams from rocks  
wisdom refrains warning against dried up hearts  
Pauline allusions to the Holy Spirit being poured out  
as an antidote to desiccated lives  
and liquid Jesus  
spiritually shape-shifting as a Samaritan friend  
a bucket-less font of wisdom  
and a purveyor of living water.

Awash in such aquatic imagery a preacher could ponder  
all of the biblical references to water  
and there are well [over 700 of them to study](#)  
from the very beginning of Genesis to the end of Revelation.

But I have to admit that what captivated me more  
is water's role in the survival of every known species:  
from scorpions to rattle snakes  
and tuna fish to tigers.

That doesn't mean, of course, that all creatures "drink" water.

Some, like freshwater fish or desert lizards, absorb water into their bodies from their environment through a process of osmosis.

As I got absorbed in this water thing

I learned how some creatures can survive for days, weeks, months, even years [without water](#):

- cheetahs for 10 days
- bats for 6 months
- desert tortoises for a whole year
- and a kangaroo rat for up to 10 years.

Human beings don't have that kind of physical tolerance.

We can survive for a month or longer without food, if we are in relatively good health, but when it comes to water, it is more like 3 to 5 days and dehydration can occur when losing as little as 3% of our body water.

When it comes to understanding why water is so critical for our biological survival

scientists point to its [many characteristics](#), e.g.,

- its cohesive capacity to bond with other molecules,
  - sometimes called the universal solvent
- its ability to support cellular structure
- and its buffering power against dangerous effects of acids and bases.

Folk wisdom teaches that you can't get blood out of a turnip yet scientists are now [genetically modifying plants](#) to produce human blood proteins.

Similar folk proverbs contend that

you can't squeeze water from a stone though scientists are proving that wrong as well with astrophysicists extracting water from meteorites and hydrogeologists extracting it from the earth's crust.

One could metaphorically suggest that the exodus people in the first reading

"squeezed" water out of the rock at Massah and Meribah where they "tested" the Lord.

On the other hand, the Samaritan woman in John's Gospel did not have to squeeze life-giving water out of Jesus.

No one did!

Rather Jesus freely gives his life-giving water  
which ironically squeezes the truth out of her  
liberating her for true worship and discipleship

In this encounter, the notable and essential characteristics  
of Jesus' life-giving water  
for sustaining Christian living are clearly on display.  
Jesus-water, like it's physical counterpart,  
also has a cohesive capacity,  
not for the cohesion of molecules  
but for the cohesion of people  
allowing even strangers and enemies  
Samaritans and Jews to bond.

And his gracious abundance has its own buffering power  
against the acidic prejudice, violence and hatred  
that too often poisons our environment.

These effects permeate today's gospel  
Where his countercultural hospitality  
not only transformed one woman's life  
But revealed the beauty of the stranger to his own disciples.

Furthermore, the "holy hydration" of this one woman,  
triggered a kind of sacred osmosis through which  
an entire community was transformed  
into a gathering of believers.

It may be more than fanciful theologizing to suggest  
that water is a gift from heaven.

Some scientists believe water is an [alien visitor](#) to earth  
arriving 4 billion years ago when a heavy bombardment  
of countless meteors delivered oceans to earth

Supporting evidence is the existence  
of huge amounts of [water in asteroids](#),  
which scientists are hoping to extract  
in order to establish infrastructures for surviving in space.

Others believe, however, that water was inside our planet  
from its origins, coming to the surface over time.

Supporting evidence of this theory are  
the hydrous materials recently discovered inside the earth  
prompting some to believe  
that there is more water below earth's surface  
than the oceans above [up to [6 quintillion gallons!](#)]

While I have no idea which theory is scientifically accurate  
in Christ both have to be theologically true.  
Jesus is the life-giving water come down from heaven.  
He is the divine meteorite who bombards the world  
with torrents of grace and love.  
He is God's Word that  
the [prophets foretold will rain down upon us.](#)  
He is the ascended one who pours out his Spirit  
on disciples of every age.

But this is also the Word made flesh  
revealed in earthbound wells, rivers and seas  
who unsealed the way to eternal life in his own baptism  
who turned a seashore into a recruitment center for disciples  
and who in teaching and healing,  
welcoming and embracing  
quenched the thirst of everyone from the high born  
to God's most beloved divorcee  
as long as they were willing to drink of his gospel truth.

The season of Lent can be appropriated in many ways  
with its ecclesial permission to cut back on chocolates and liquor  
and drop a few pounds in the process;  
or invitation to reflect upon our sinfulness  
and schedule that annual confession.

But this third Sunday of Lent,  
which the church designates as the premiere day  
for the first public scrutiny of the elect  
moving towards Easter sacraments  
  
reminds us that Lent is first and foremost  
a font journey  
a well-drawing opportunity  
a rock-striking moment for those thirsting for life eternal.

Scrutinies are an immersion into life-giving water  
with its cohesive capacities to bond us together in Christ,

its abilities quench every spiritual thirst  
and its buffering power against greedy living  
toxic prejudices  
and every form of violence  
that confront us with such distressing regularity.

Furthermore, it is not simply the elect  
who benefit from these pointed rituals  
for when Trent, Aaron, Sunayana and Kelly  
step forward for exorcism and blessing  
they grace the whole of the church  
with their courageous witness.

They rehydrate those of us who have strayed  
from that baptismal well  
and in a miracle of holy osmosis  
allow those of us spiritually parched  
even scorched by the demands of everyday living  
to be vicariously renewed, revived, even restored  
so that we might take up again  
the mission of the Samaritan affirming Christ

to proclaim good news to the poor  
freedom for prisoners  
healing for the afflicted  
and freedom for the oppressed.

While not as difficult as cajoling water from a rock  
this “well journey” is still demanding.  
And so, for the elect as well as for those of us  
washed in the gracious overflow of their journey

with the [poet](#), we stand at the edge of that Samaritan well  
And pray:

## MUSIC

If you stand  
at the edge  
of this blessing  
and call down  
into it,  
you will hear  
your words  
return to you.

If you lean in  
and listen close,  
you will hear  
this blessing  
give the story  
of your life  
back to you....

Sit at the rim  
of this blessing.

Press your ear  
to its lip,  
its sides,  
its curves  
that were carved out  
long ago  
by those whose thirst  
drove them deep,  
those who dug  
into the layers  
with only their hands  
and hope.

Rest yourself  
beside this blessing  
and you will  
begin to hear  
the sound of water  
entering the gaps.

Still yourself  
and you will feel it  
rising up within you,  
filling every emptiness,  
springing forth  
anew.