

**SLD04.20.08 Fifth Easter Earth Day
Emory Presbyterian Church
Various scriptures
Jill Oglesby Evans with James Fuoco**

“The Water of Life”

Water... the source of life for all creation. A fundamental component of the world's ecosystems, water is a vital ingredient for both the diversity of life on Earth and for human well-being.

God makes springs pour water into the ravines; it flows between the mountains. They give water to all the beasts of the field; the wild donkeys quench their thirst. The birds of the air nest by the waters; they sing among the branches. God waters the mountains from upper chambers; the earth is satisfied by the fruit of God's work. (Ps. 104:10-14)

Arising from a semi-arid part of the world, the Bible exhibits a keen understanding of how essential water is to life, as well as of the dire consequences arising from too much or too little of it. From the waters of the deep referenced in the book of Genesis to the “river of the water of life” in Revelation, water plays a prominent role in our scriptural and liturgical tradition.

In Genesis, wells were built near altars to remind those who passed of God's provision. Watering holes were the meeting places of Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel, Jesus and the Samaritan woman. When Hagar and Ishmael were perishing from thirst, God opened Hagar's eyes to see a well. Moses repeatedly uses water to perform miracles in God's name to free the Hebrews from Pharaoh's bondage. Jesus describes himself as “living water,” saying that those who drink of him will never thirst again.

For us followers of Jesus Christ, water is the central symbol of baptism, in which we die and are raised to new life with Jesus. Every Sunday we're reminded that

through the generous waters of baptism, God claims us as God's beloved ones, not because we have behaved well or performed good acts but because God forgives and loves us just as we are. And through that unearned, abundant expression of divine grace, God keeps on loving us toward who we can be, continually washing us clean, rescuing us from drowning, giving us a fresh start, and setting us free.

***As Paul writes to the church in Colossae,
...when you were buried with Christ in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised Christ from the dead. ...therefore let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts...and be thankful. (Col. 2:12, 3:15)***

For people of faith, water is an essential element of both our physical and spiritual life, and a sacred gift from God. So not only do we all need to drink 6-8 cups of water a day to lubricate our bodies, distribute nutrients and essential elements, enable appropriate biochemical reactions, and regulate body temperature, not only do we need water daily for washing, cleaning, manufacturing and transporting, recreation and refreshment, but we also need water for the spiritual experience of redemption and renewal. Water is a vital link to life in our bodies AND in our spirits.

And so, today, on this Earth Day Sunday, we celebrate through song and symbol God's sacred gift to all creation of clean, refreshing, renewing water, lifting praise and gratitude and thanksgiving.

At the same time, however, as a broken and complicit people, we also acknowledge before God today our privileged and profligate use of water in this country, in this region, in our homes, in this church. For although there is plenty of water on this earth to meet human need, not only is it often distributed unevenly but overuse, drought and water quality issues continually threaten existing freshwater supplies for many, many people.

1/3 of the world's households use water sources outside the home. Girls and women in West Africa now walk an average of 21 minutes from home just to use water.

One toilet flush in the U.S. uses as much water as the average person in a developing country uses for a whole day's drinking, cooking, washing and cleaning.¹

The average American uses about 100 gallons of water each day – almost double the amount used by Europeans, who consume about 53 gallons daily.²

Through the prophet Isaiah, God says:
When the poor and needy seek water,
I will open rivers on the bare heights
and fountains in the midst of the valleys;
I will make the wilderness a pool of water,
and the dry lands springs of water. (Is. 41:17-18)

But the poor of the world are thirsty.

Closer to home, we're thirsty, too, some of us for the first times in our lives. Or if not personally thirsty, we cannot help but witness the affects of shrinking lakes and thirsty landscapes, of dehydrated lawns and shrubs and trees. "When the well is dry," said Benjamin Franklin, "we learn the worth of water."

Our normally wet region continues to suffer from the worst drought in 100 years. Following a week in which beneficial rain fell over most of the drought-affected southeast, the National Drought Summary reported on April 15 that "although topsoil conditions have improved significantly during the past two to three months, subsoil conditions, which are important for crop development, have very likely not recovered from the exceptional drought conditions that affected this area since last summer."

Of the water that is available in the world, much of it is not safe to drink. Internationally, 1 of every 6 people lacks access to safe drinking water. Two million people – most of them children – die each year from waterborne disease. In fact, in the 1990's the number of children who died as a result of unsafe water exceeded the number of people killed in armed conflicts since World War II.

¹ <http://www.churchworldservice.org/worship-resources/worship-water.html>.

² <http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2007/11/drought.html>

Studies have found that levels of toxins in samples of breast milk of Inuit women of the Arctic are many times higher than levels found in the milk of women in the countries where the chemicals were produced.

Here at home, soapy water, chemicals, motor oil, yard wastes and trash pollute stormwater runoff, which further poisons our streams, rivers and lakes.

Through Ezekiel, God asks:

Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture? Must you also trample the rest of your pasture with your feet? Is it not enough for you to drink clear water? Must you also muddy the rest with your feet? (Ez. 34:17-18)

Over a hundred years ago, Mark Twain said, “Whiskey is for drinking. Water is for fighting over.” With the global shortage of water, competition for water all over the world turns to conflict.

Palestinians suffer from a permanent water crisis due to Israeli restrictions on their access to the limited water resources in the region.

Here in our part of the world, Georgia, Alabama and Florida continue to wage war over the shared waters of Lake Lanier in northern Georgia. Its waters, which are funneled through federal dams along the Chattahoochee River, provide water for the 2.8 million people in the Atlanta metropolitan area, a nuclear power plant that supplies the power for most of Alabama, and marine life and the seafood industry in Florida’s Apalachicola Bay.

Our local droughts increase the desire to import water from other, wetter basins in the country. (We) thirstily eye the Great Lakes, which are the world’s largest body of fresh surface water. Some Southern politicians warn the Great Lakes states that if they go forward with a federal ban on water transfers, the Southern states won’t bother buying the water; rather they’re (quote) “going to be stealing it.”³

Isaiah writes,

The earth dries up and withers, the world languishes and withers; the heavens languish together with the earth. The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants, for they have transgressed laws, violated statutes, and broken the everlasting covenant. (Is. 24:4-5)

In sum, access to clean, safe water, always a challenge globally, is now also a severe challenge locally.

³ www.americanprogress.org, p.4.

Our own federal government projects that, due to a combination of rising temperatures, drought, population growth, suburban sprawl, and waste, at least 36 states will face water shortages within five years. Says Colorado water manager Peter Binney, “It is wrong to assume that cities can continue to grow without experiencing something akin to a religious awakening about the scarcity of water.”⁴

In the face of such sobering statistics and prophecies, what can we do?

Well, as people of faith we can certainly pray for divine intervention. But as people of faith we can also act out of our conviction that, as earthly followers of the risen Christ, our minds and hearts and hands are God’s instruments for the stewardship and healing of God’s creation. Using a scarce resource more efficiently is almost always cheaper, faster, and technologically more feasible than expensive and grandiose schemes to create more supply.⁵

As primary users and chief sources of incentives for change, water utility companies, power plants, industry, and the federal government have major roles in reducing water consumption. Examples of recent initiatives include the following:

The Energy Policy Act of 2005 offers federal tax credits for purchasing energy-efficient appliances and products.⁶ The State of Georgia offers an Energy Star Tax Holiday every October so consumers can purchase qualified energy efficient products free of state and local sales tax. The Metropolitan North Georgia Water Planning District offers a residential toilet rebate program as an incentive to replace older inefficient toilets.⁷ Atlanta Gas Light offers rebates for the purchase and installation of tankless water heaters.

⁴ Ibid. p. 1.

⁵ www.americanprogress.org p. 4

⁶ http://www.smarterwayinc.com/federal_hvac_tax_credit.asp.

⁷ <http://www.northgeorgiawater.com/html/315.htm>.

On the local business front, Atlanta’s Hartsfield-Jackson Airport plans to adjust the automatic sensors in its bathrooms so they use less water. In an airport that has 78 public restrooms used by 86 million people every year, such a small change could lead to big water savings.⁸

Such incentives and changes are a certainly a step in the right direction, but more far reaching schemes for improving energy efficiency and fuel economy standards are in order, as are vastly increased investment in the research and development of clean energy technologies such as wind, solar, and geothermal power.

Still, don’t underestimate the impact you and I can make individually through relatively minor investments and alterations of personal behavior.

The Environmental Protection Agency reports that as much as 3 trillion gallons of water and \$17 billion dollars could be saved each year if every American family were to install water-efficient appliances in their homes. This includes the installation of low flow showerheads and other simple devices on toilets and sinks that reduce the use of water while maintaining full flow.

Other simple steps include turning off the tap when not in use, installation of native plants on lawns to replace non-native species that require more water, capturing rain water in rain barrels, and the use of recycled “gray water” where appropriate.

Exploring alternatives to toxic pesticides in our gardens, recycling wherever possible, and purchasing organic products and produce, can dramatically reduce our personal “carbon footprint” on the earth. Here at the church we can scrape our plates well before putting them in the sink, avoid putting grease or toxic chemicals down the drain, and recycle when we can.

⁸ Ibid. p. 5.

Water is God's precious gift to *all* people, indeed, to all *creation*, not a commodity to be fought over or traded for profit. Access to fresh water supplies is an urgent need for the 1.2 billion people currently suffering from a lack of adequate water and sanitation.⁹ Even in this country, extreme drought conditions threaten our access to water. But in these times of water shortage, we also gain a heightened awareness about our use of water, which moves us personally to change profligate behaviors, to lobby for community and legislative action to conserve and protect clean water, and to increase our compassion for those in the world who lack adequate access to potable water.

If my people, says God, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land.
(2 Chronicles 7:13-14)

By calling on God's name in confidence and trust, by humbling ourselves with a deep mindfulness of the needs of the world, by taking seriously the scarcity of water and turning from our own profligate ways with it, this is how we human members of God's creation celebrate God's sacred gift of clean, refreshing, renewing water. This is how we followers of Jesus Christ lift praise to our Giver, in both faith AND action.

To the glory of God. Amen.

⁹ From National Council of Church of Christ Eco-Justice Programs. www.nccecojustice.org/ecustate.html 2005.