

“The Water of Life”

John 4.5–14

The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong’l UCC, 24 Feb 2008

When you were born, roughly 78 percent of your body weight was water...for most adults it’s typically about 60 percent. Water is not only around us and in us, but it runs through us, as well. Water comprises about 83 percent of the blood that carries oxygen throughout your body.

Seventy percent of the planet on which you and I live is covered by water, but only about three percent of earth water is fresh, and of that tiny three percent, nearly 70 percent is locked in glaciers and icecaps¹ (at least for the time being).

So, water is not just something we cook, drink, and bathe with, it is a sacred substance: a compound that keeps us alive – and of course it is a source of contention in this part of the country, where water rights and irrigation are hotly debated. And it is no accident that water is a powerful religious symbol as well.

In Judaism, water carries the symbolism of purification. The *mikva* is a ritual bath that is coming back into vogue among some Jewish women as a cleansing ritual to be used after menstruation and childbirth. And when John baptized his followers in the River Jordan, it was a cleansing ritual for the removal of sin.

And water is used in one of the two sacraments observed by all Christians: baptism. As Sharon discussed in a sermon a few weeks ago, some Christians interpret baptism as the cleansing of original sin – the genetically transmitted disobedience of Adam and Eve, which some think that only baptism can cure (and some people regard as non-biblical and invalid). Today, many of us interpret baptism as a mediator of the sacred – a sacrament – used to welcome new persons into the full life of Christian faith.

A wonderful hymn by Jeffrey Rowthorn presents these wonderful words: “At the font we start our journey, in the Easter faith baptized.” And it is for this reason that our Deacons decided that our new baptismal font – designed by our own Brian Betsill – is located where you walk into the sanctuary. So, every time you walk in, you are reminded that of your baptism into the Easter faith: the faith that promises the water of life. And if you wish, you can dip your hand into the water as a tangible, kinesthetic reminder to yourself that you are part of the body of Christ through your baptism.

For the ancient Celts in Britain and Ireland, springs were the source of living water – and the early Christians co-opted and rededicated most of these wells, blessing them in the names of Christian saints. You see today in place names: Bridewell is a section of London that was the site of the well of St. Brigid (or St. Bride). Marywell is a town in Scotland, where an ancient well is dedicated to Mary, the mother of Jesus. In Gaelic, the word *tober* means well, so Tobermory, on the Isle of Mull in the inner Hebrides, is the translation of Marywell. There are *seven* towns in *seven* counties in Ireland called “Tober.” The waters of these wells were thought to have curative powers, and last September I visited a well dedicated to Mary on the Aran Islands. Today, islanders still walk seven clockwise circles around the well and then sip the water and leave a small stone in the well.

Last summer, I invited folks to collect a small sample of water from any body of water they were near and to bring it back to Plymouth to mingle in the baptismal font. (So, if anyone has brought water from someplace, would you please come forward and tell us where the water is from?) We bring water to symbolize the life-giving force of God through

¹ source: US Geological Survey. <http://ga.water.usgs.gov/edu/earthwherewater.html>

Christ and remember that wherever we go, we belong to Christ through baptism. ... May the water that flows through this font bless all who touch it.



Living water. What an interesting concept: living water that will satisfy a lifetime of thirst. “As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for the living God.” These words of Psalm 42 were well known to Jesus and to the writer of John’s gospel.

It isn’t hard to imagine water being integral to life – being a part of our bodies and our planet – but I wonder if you can imagine water as being *a part of God’s body*. That’s a stretch for some of us...to think of water, in fact all of the cosmos, as the body of God. Sallie MacFague, a wonderful Christian thinker who deals extensively with eco-theology, wrote a book called *The Body of God*,² which I recommend to you. What if we were to think of this common compound – water – as part of the body of God?

As some of you know, I swim laps, and this led me to a thought a few years back: what if we thought of God as the water we swim in...not just in the pool, but all the time. (Don’t get too literalistic with this: it’s a metaphor!) What if God is flowing in us and around us and through us and God is the water that holds us up as we float? Imagine yourself for a moment along the shore of the Dead Sea, which has incredible salinity and so gives those who bathe in it incredible buoyancy. Imagine yourself floating and being held up, suspended, supported, virtually weightless, because the water is holding you up. That’s a comforting, reassuring thought, isn’t it? And in a very real sense, I think that it is a true and valid metaphor: we are being held aloft and kept alive by God.



There are times in each of our lives when we are spiritually parched...nearly dying of thirst...and we need to revisit the well to receive a sip of that living water. I don’t know what the times are for you, so think of a moment in your life when you’ve felt a dry and desiccated sense in your spiritual life...a time when it was difficult to access the sacred. (We all have those times.) And know that you can come to well again and visit, be in touch with the living water of the living God. Touch it. Feel its coolness. Taste its sweetness. Drink in its refreshment.

There are times when our own reservoirs are low and even running dry. Moments of grief. Times of trial and stress. In the midst of physical or mental illness. Days that may seem unbearable. And at those times when our own supply of water is low, we can come back to the well. We can smell the freshness. See the glimmer on its surface. Hear it lapping the edges of the shore. Touch it. Splash around in it. And refill our reservoirs with living water of the living God.



Water is holy. For millennia, Christians have seen it as such, and in the last 300 years or so, we have forgotten its holiness and taken it for granted. In its substance, it is hydrogen and oxygen. In its symbolism, it represents the presence of the living God. It was so for Christ and the woman at the well...may it be so for you.

Will you pray with me? God of the living water, may all those who thirst for you find refreshment. May those who need healing, find wholeness with you. And may we all visit the well as we need, and fill our own reservoirs with living water for the journey. Amen.

² Sallie MacFague, *The Body of God*. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1993).