

For Her Children

A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC, Lexington

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Text: Exodus 17:1-7

17 From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the Lord commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. **2** The people quarreled with Moses, and said, "Give us water to drink." Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?" **3** But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?" **4** So Moses cried out to the Lord, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me." **5** The Lord said to Moses, "Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. **6** I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink." Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. **7** He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, "Is the Lord among us or not?"

Sermon

Her children are thirsty. She has traveled with them, mile after mile, one eye looking back over her shoulder. Will Pharaoh's army follow them here? They have crossed a sea, parted just long enough for her family and her people to escape, to escape slavery, to be liberated. They have walked and walked carrying what little they could find in the middle of plagues and with the voices of soldiers following them, dropping bits and pieces as they go further and further into the wilderness. It seems like they will be here for years. And her children are thirsty. She goes up to Moses and she says, give us water. Her children are thirsty.

2022, Ukraine. Her children are thirsty. She has traveled with them, mile after mile, one eye looking back over her shoulder. Will the invaders follow them here? She is in the wilderness, and her children are thirsty. They have boarded a train to escape, taking so little with them, finding just on the other side of the border people offering welcome, safety, water. Her children are thirsty.

2015, Flint. Her children are thirsty, but she cannot give them the water from her faucet. There is lead in those pipes. She will walk, she will drive, to the church, to the fire

station, to wherever there is help. She will line up and carry home bottles of water, for her children. And she will go up to the city council, and she will go up to the news cameras. She will cry for justice. Her children are thirsty.¹

2010, Cambodia. Her children are thirsty, and the water that they usually drink is from dirty ponds. She either boils and filters it herself, or her children get sick. But (y'all know this story) now, she has a well.²

2005, New Orleans. Her children are thirsty. There is water literally everywhere around them, but none of it is safe to drink. The waters have risen. Her children are thirsty.

1978, Warren County, North Carolina. Her children are thirsty, and she wants to keep their water safe to drink. PCBs were on the way, and she and five hundred people say no.^{3, 4} Dollie Burwell is her name, and she and her pastor and her UCC church and the national UCC gather to say no to toxic pollution in their soil and waterways. The UCC's work right there in Warren County is the start of a new understanding of the links between toxic wastes and race.⁵ Dollie's daughter walks with her, because she is thirsty, and Dan Rather picks up her story. Because no one's children should be thirsty.

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Water is precious and we are entirely dependent upon it. Human beings are mostly water. Our bodies are like the oceans, the same mix of salinity. Through luck or good fortune, a lot of us may never have gone without it. But we can't live without water, not for long. And we can't live with polluted and or dirty water for long either. We are, in that way, very fragile. We are fragile like the water systems that we depend upon. When drought comes, humans suffer. When waters are polluted, humans suffer. When storms rage and rivers overflow their banks, humans suffer. Water is precious, and fragile, and wonderful, and a gift.

Is it any wonder that the story of creation starts with God's own spirit brooding over the waters?

¹ <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2016/01/mother-exposed-flint-lead-contamination-water-crisis/> and it turns out there are water problems in Flint right now.

<https://www.wnem.com/2022/03/12/flint-asking-residents-conserve-water/>

² <https://cambodiancocoon.weebly.com/>

³ https://www.ucc.org/pollinator_a_case_for_the_mother_of_the_environmental_justice_movement/

⁴ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-environment/interactive/2021/environmental-justice-race/>

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https://www.ucc.org/what-we-do/justice-local-church-ministries/justice/faithful-action-ministries/environmental-justice/environmental-ministries_toxic-waste-20/

“IN THE BEGINNING God created the heavens and the earth. 2 But the earth became chaos and emptiness, and darkness came over the face of the Deep—yet the Spirit of God was brooding over the surface of the waters. (The Inclusive Bible)...

Then God said, “Waters under the sky: be gathered into one place! Dry ground: appear!” So it was. 10 God called the dry ground “Earth” and the gathering of the waters “Sea.” And God saw that this was good.”

She gave water to creation, to her children, and saw that creation was good, but God was not done yet. God created people, and

“God blessed them and said, “Bear fruit, increase your numbers, and fill the earth—and be responsible for it! Watch over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and all the living things on the earth!””

One of my favorite Christian songwriters imagines God’s instruction this way: “Take good care of the land and the water, take good care of the creatures too, take good care of one another, and I’ll take good care of you.”⁶

And when God’s people walked through wilderness, walked so far in to the desert that they ran out of water again and again, they called out to God, and God provided water from a rock. Because her children were thirsty.

Water is so beautiful and precious and life giving that Jesus describes himself as living water. With Jesus, on a spiritual level we will never thirst. So many of us have been baptized into that precious living water.

And.

And, on a very concrete level, we have been invited to be partners and deputies of God in the care of all creation, from the seas to the rivers, the lakes to the water tables, the fish and marine life, and all the rest, and especially our fellow human beings who depend upon these beautiful and precious waters.

We have come to understand how precious safe and clean water is. We cannot live without it. Our children cannot live without it.

And so we are learning to build a new theology and a new ethic around water.⁷

We are learning - and we need to learn faster - how to keep plastics out of the ocean, how to keep lead out of the pipes, how to dig wells, how to keep bacteria out of the

⁶ Bryan Moyer Suderman, “Take Good Care”

⁷ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/worship/the-living-ocean-season-of-creation-week-1>

lakes. We are learning, and we must learn, for today there is no staff that will bring clean, fresh water out of a rock. And our children are thirsty.

Here is a bit of good news, and it comes from an insight in our Bible Study this past week.

When God responded to the people crying out in thirst, and told Moses what to do, God did not ask Moses to go alone. Moses did not go alone - he took the elders with him, to the rock, and God met them there, to give water to her children.

Thanks be to God, for the gift of water. Living water, precious water.

Thanks be to God, that we are not alone. We are never alone.

Amen.

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Each week in Lent, I'm going to offer a word of challenge, and a word of good news, on our creation care theme.

This week the word of challenge is simply this: learn about your water system. Lexington lies at the intersection of the Charles River Watershed and the Mystic River Watershed. Learn about them. What lives in these water systems, and what endangers them?

And this week, two good news stories about water. The first is about the Charles River, and you probably know this one: it used to be very very dreadfully polluted, but concerted efforts have improved the water quality in the Charles so much that sometimes, when conditions are right and water quality tests are done, it's even possible to swim in the river. (You need a permit; don't try this at home.) This is just one local example of major waterway cleanups. The second is also a story many of you know. Cambodian Cocoon, which this congregation supports, has helped hundreds of households build wells for safe drinking water.

Lent 2022 Benediction

This season, let us have a heart for the earth, for all its creatures and all our neighbors.

Let us dig our hands into the dirt,
Walk upon the earth lightly,
And renew this precious gift.
Let us turn toward the one who created us out of the earth.
Doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with the one who created us all.
Amen.