

What does our relationship with water have to do with God?

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Last week, we planted our feet on the ground - in our own churchyard - as we celebrated the theme of land for creation season. This week, we turn our attention to water.

What is your relationship to water?

To be honest, it is not something I think about a lot, perhaps because water is always available to me. I choose when and how to interact with water, and it is usually when it meets my needs or interests: filling up my water bottle, taking a shower, going to the beach - stuff like that.

What is your relationship to God?

Now that is something I think about quite a lot. I believe God is always present with me. I have oriented my life around this relationship. It guides me in everything I do.

I take water for granted because it's always around. I take God seriously because God is always around. There's something out of sync here for me.

And it got me thinking: What does our relationship with water say about our relationship with God?

In our texts today, water and God are intimately linked. The story of Hagar and Ishmael in the desert connects their need for water with their need for God. The Psalmist is full of wonder as they consider the seas and all that is in them. That wonder is expressed as praise for God, the Creator. Our gospel highlights the power and mystery of water...and also the power and mystery of God in the person of Jesus the Christ.

This link between God and water should not be surprising. Water is sacred. Not only do our bodies need water, as Christians, we believe our souls do too. Water is prominent in our sacred stories about life with God. It is the outward sign of inward grace in our sacrament of baptism.

Like any true symbol, water points to and participates in something greater than itself. As we prayed in our opening collect, water reveals the attributes of God. It points us to God while also participating in the life of God, in the truth of who God is. As a symbol that draws us deeper into life with God, it is a gift.

We know that more often than not, we treat water as a commodity, not a gift. We view water through the economy of scarcity we have created instead of the economy of abundance promised in God's kingdom. In doing so, we have misused water so that it is an increasingly scarce resource. Our fear of scarcity has increased the reality of scarcity, steeping us even more in our practices of hoarding, instead of widespread efforts of conservation or renewal.

This is the same dynamic we see in the story of Hagar and Ishmael's exile. Sarah sees her son, Isaac, playing with his half-brother, Ishmael, and she worries that Ishmael might take away from her son's power and inheritance. One of the consistent hallmarks of God's covenant with Abraham is the promise of abundance: Abundant land. Abundant resources. Abundant descendants. Even with this promise, Sarah sees the possibility of scarcity. The possibility of conflict. She uses her fear of the possibility of these things to justify her decision to send Hagar and Ishmael into the desert. Just like that she becomes the perpetrator of the things she feared. For those less familiar with this family story, Sarah played a pivotal role in Abraham sleeping with Hagar and getting her pregnant with Ishmael. Ishmael's existence, now a problem for Sarah, was at one time Sarah's hope. Throughout all of it, the power dynamic made it so Ishmael and Hagar were disposable. In so many ways, this story follows the framework of those in our world without enough clean water.

For over a century, the Flint River was an unofficial waste deposit site for local industries. The people of Flint depended on those businesses, so they accepted the misuse of water and the city funneled in clean drinking water from Detroit. But those businesses left, the city's value dropped, and the Detroit-based water system was seen as too costly. A state-appointed emergency manager decided to go back to the Flint River as the source for citizens' water. This water was not properly treated as it flowed into people's sinks and bathtubs and changed the lives of tens of thousands of people, including 30,000 schoolchildren. Here, like in Genesis, there was an unequal infrastructure that enabled the misuse of resources until those in power decided this system no longer worked and was too costly. At which point, the most vulnerable were treated as disposable. Hagar was given a skin of water. The mothers of Flint were given plastic water bottles.

In the story of Hagar and Ishmael, when their water was gone and they were about to die, God showed Hagar a well. A deep and stable source of clean water.

For God, water is not a commodity for humans to hoard or withhold. No matter who you are, for God, water is a right. A sacred gift we all need and we all deserve.

Maybe that's why Jesus says, "I am the living water." He identifies himself with water because he knew how important water was to the people around him. They understood water was crucial, nourishing, and sacred. They knew what it felt like to be thirsty and then be nourished. To sweat and walk in dust. And then be cleansed. Now, Jesus taught, imagine what it's like to experience that nourishment and renewal in the deepest parts of yourself. In your heart. In your life. He met the people in their physical need for water and proclaimed he was the one to fulfill both their physical and spiritual needs. *Our* physical and spiritual needs.

Now consider the Flint River, the waters of Standing Rock, the water fountains in many Philadelphia schools and ask yourself, "Would Jesus compare himself to that?" The water so many people see and use everyday does not point to what God is like. Our misuse corrupts this living symbol of God's love.

My friends, we too are symbols of God's love. In our baptism, we are brought into the body of Christ and marked as God's own forever. Our call as disciples is to love God and love our neighbors as ourselves. And we are told that others will know us as Christ's disciples by how we love one another.

What does our relationship with water say about our relationship with God? Do we take our baptismal water seriously? Do the ways we use water reveal Christ's love to others? Do people see Christ in us?

Water is a great teacher for us. God is preaching to us in every storm water drain, every urban canal, every estuary, every dam, every river, every stream, every ocean and ice cap. In the beginning the Spirit hovered over the waters and so may the Spirit of God hover over the waters today and bring order out of our chaos. See creation's prophetic value. Listen. What are the waters saying to us?

With the current state of our planet, reckoning with our relationship to creation is an important part of the creation season. It is a time to struggle with how we are or are not fulfilling God's call for us to care for the rest of God's creation as co-laborers.

Another important part is to have space to experience the gift of God's creation as God intended it. Just as Christ challenges us, Christ also gives us rest and renewal. We hopefully change our relationship with creation, with water, not out of shame for what we've failed to do, but out of a hope that tells us things do not have to stay this way. And as I prayed for that hope this week, the word that kept coming to me was "float".

The experience of floating in water. It is both so different from how we spend most of our time and yet it is natural. Peaceful. We are connected to and effortlessly a part of the water. Held up. Still, while also moving. Open to where it carries us.

Just like we rooted our feet in the ground last Sunday, I want to invite you to close your eyes and float. Let your arms loosen, lean your head back, and pray with me.

Jesus, as I accept you as the Living water and respect you as the living water, I will start to respect the physical water which you chose to identify yourself with, I will value it as Sacred. I will see the characteristics that you have revealed in water, as a life lesson for who you are to me and how you work in my life, and I will accept that as sacred. And I will treat water as a revelation of your love for us. With the respect and honour that it deserves. In your name we pray, Amen.