

“Water is Life”

Exodus 17:1-7

A sermon preached by the Rev. Douglas M. Donley

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Water is life is the title of this sermon. Mni Wiconi is the Dakota word for this sacred concept. Way back in July, I chose this topic and title for this sermon. I was thinking about the confluence of world communion Sunday and all those people who share water as a common source—even more holy perhaps than bread and juice. Who knew that this sermon would come one day after the 1000 mile Line 3 oil pipeline would be turned on, flowing dirty raw fossil fuel across hundreds of aquifers, and over the objections of so many treaty holders. Mni Wiconi is the word from the underside, the dismissed, the water protectors who see ensuring clean water as sacred duty. For without it, we will surely die.

We’ve taken some steps to preserve this sacred space on the corner of 13<sup>th</sup> and University, channeling water into the grounds that can feed plants and pollinators while filtering it on the way to the mighty Mississippi. Along the way, we preserve and enhance this last Dinkytown greenspace as a place of reflection, hope and peace. It’s like an oasis in this growing urban jungle. We can only do this effectively if there is water nearby. In a non-drought year, there is plenty of water, but how do we transform water from a nuisance that floods our basement, into something that brings life—nurturing plants and protecting wildlife? That’s our part in this experiment in grace.

Mni Wiconi. Water is life.

In desert places, water is life. There is a group of people who strategically place water jugs in New Mexico and Arizona for people who make the arduous journey north. The way is marked with graves of people who were not so lucky, who did not have Moses to give them water in the parched desert.

Mni Wiconi. Water is life.

The Hebrew Bible has water is life as a theme. It’s part of the desert context. There’s a reason Jesus begins his ministry coming out of the water. It symbolizes life. Birth, rebirth, hope.

We first encounter Moses as a little baby pulled out of the water. He later parts the Red Sea so people can cross over its dry bed to escape slavery. He almost makes it to the River Jordan on the edge of the Promised Land. We’ll talk about that next week. And in today’s scripture he draws water out of a stone and restores the people to life. Mni Wiconi. Water is life.

Today’s story from Exodus is a bit humorous, if you think about it. The people are grumbling against Moses and against God. Get a group of people together and there is bound to be some grumbling. And if it touches you personally, it’s like a drug. It’s hard to shake it. There is solidarity in suffering. So, the grumbling gets louder.

This is one of several murmuring stories in Exodus & Numbers. The story is mirrored in Numbers 29:1-13, but the emphasis there is why Moses and Aaron didn’t make it to the promised land. In both versions, the people are hungry, thirsty, discouraged, demoralized and they all blame poor old Moses.

Moses had led them out of the racially-based system of slavery under the monarchial stranglehold of Pharaoh. But that was weeks ago, or was it years ago? Now, in the desert, the people started getting downright nitpicky about every small and big thing. The desert was not the promised land. There was little food or water. There were hostile tribes that didn’t appreciate

their presence. Sure there was grace in the wilderness, but there was also grumbling, revolutionary discontent, internal strife, rebellion against Moses, and worst of all, lack of faith.

The book of Exodus is as much a story of the people's internal conflicts on the way to the promised land as it is the story of a people's liberation from slavery. If you have only known abuse in your life, it's easy to see everything as abuse. It's hard to leave behind an oppression that has been internalized. It may take generations, just ask the descendants of disappeared boarding school children or those who have been denied rights and dignity because of their skin color.

But this was the first generation. The people started to recall with fondness the fleshpots of Egypt. They even said, "Weren't there enough graves in Egypt that you had to bring us out here to die?" In many ways, Moses was a scapegoat. If Moses spoke for God, then Moses was responsible for God's silences, too. "Why did you bring us out of Egypt? To kill us and our children and our cattle with thirst? Why are you withholding God from us? I think what they were really asking was, 'has God forgotten and forsaken us?'"

Sometimes we don't know if God is here among us. Why are you doing this to us? Why is there such violence and bloodshed in our world? This is the constant theme of Lamentations, Psalms and Jeremiah.

We wonder where God is and we thirst for an answer to why someone is taken out in the prime of their life.

We wonder where God is as God's name is tossed around at rallies and their social media echo chambers when the discussions seem far from godly.

We wonder where God is as people suffer under the brutality of sexism, racism, homophobia and xenophobia. We seek a respite, an oasis where people really are not considered Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female for we are all one in Christ Jesus. A green space where we drink in the divine succor of hope and light. Mni Wiconi.

And we seek to quench the thirst of our city, our nation, our world.

The people wanted Moses to wave his magic wand and quench their thirst.

I bet Moses was thirsty too. But his thirst was more than about a lack of water.

Moses was thirsty for people to know that God had not left them.

Moses was thirsty for people to have faith in the God who had delivered them.

But mostly he was thirsty for some of them to realize that Moses was not God.

He was human. He wanted them to get off his back. Moses was thirsty for some others to take the heat too.

In Moses' own thirst, he bellowed to God, "What shall I do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me."

I bet Moses imagined an oasis. We would all like it too.

People who tend herds live from oasis to oasis.

Without it, animals and people die.

We all want an oasis. A place for us to take a breather and get our heads screwed back on straight. We need those places to reconnect with the source of our lives and our hope, instead of the constant bickering that seems to pervade our world.

But the story is not only about the grumbling or the water out of the rock. Let's look a bit deeper.

Moses prayed in verse 4. It was a brief frightened and humble prayer and it only lasted one verse. Hallelujah. But the prayer was an honest one. "What am I to do with these people? They are about to stone me." We imagine God responding, "that's funny, I wonder the same thing about you."

God reminds Moses that he has the tools to save the people. “Take in your hand the staff which struck the Nile and go.” (v.5) like Dorothy’s ruby slippers. Do what you know will work, maybe instead of trying to be innovative or risky. You know how to take care of people. You know that a hot meal or a nice note will make all the difference in the world. We were reminded of this this past week as people sent us condolence notes after the death of our beloved dog, Berry. This was like drinking in love amidst the desert of our despair.

You know how the story ends, God told Moses to strike a rock with his rod. But it wasn’t just any rock. It was a rock near Horeb, the mountain on which he encountered God in the burning bush. Didn’t God tell Moses back in the 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter that if he brought people back to Mount Horeb, they would know that God was there?

Moses struck the rock of Horeb with his staff, and water came out. With this same staff, he had parted the waters and the red sea. It must have been a divining rod of some kind. But Moses made sure that the miracle of water from the rock is done before the elders, meaning there is accountability and the uniqueness of God’s action is not about one person. And this time everyone saw it. Mni Wiconi.

The people found an oasis in the desert near the mount of God. People were satisfied—for a while. Was Moses’ thirst really quenched? Maybe not, for he called the oasis *Massah* which means “test” and *Meribah* which means “fight”.

Moses was not alone in his thirst for people to “get it”. He wasn’t the only one to wish for the people to drink of the spirit of God and be satisfied.

Jesus spent his whole life trying to instill a sense of faith among the people. He had turned some people to God, performed miracle after miracle, prophesied, preached, and demonstrated a new life of love and service to his fellow human beings. And after all of it, when his hours were numbered, in his greatest need, when he needed help, some of his closest friends denied him and stayed away from him in fear. Jesus hung on the cross in his last moments of bodily life and said the words that pierce our hearts today, “I thirst.” Was he just saying that he was thirsty for water? Possibly, but I bet he was also thirsty for friendship; for support in his time of need; for an assurance from God in his time of brutal tragedy; a thirst for those who were laughing at him below the cross; that no one would have to go through what he was going through; a thirst for salvation for a world which is today still somehow bent on destroying itself.

Robert Heinlein’s classic “Stranger in a Strange Land” is a book about the clash of cultures. In its science fiction narrative, a Martian comes to earth and looks upon the people with fresh eyes, especially the foolishness of their conflicts. One of the Martian customs is to share water with another. For water is intimate. It represents life. It represents respect. It represents holiness and sacred relationships. Mni Wiconi.

Is God here or not? Is the key question of the story. It’s the key question of our lives, too.

The Babylonians destroyed the temple and had to ask, where’s your God now?

When Herod’s temple was destroyed, the Hebrew people had another crisis of faith, where is your God now?

When Jesus was killed on a cross, the Romans said, “where’s your savior now?” And the sustainable answer has not been that God was in a place or even in a person, but that God was everywhere. And no temple destructions and crucifixions could cancel that part of the religious culture.

When the colonizers came, too many sought to wipe out the first inhabitants rather than live in harmony. They cut them off from their sacred stories, tried to expunge their language and move them on countless trails of tears. And ever since they have searched for water and told whomever would listen about the sacred connection that we all share. For if we never forget about water, and we can never forget about God. For water is life. Or maybe water is the

reflection of God. We can see God looking back at us as we gaze in still waters or an everflowing stream. On a crisp autumn day, visit some of the sacred sites around here. Go to Cold Water Springs near the airport, holy to the Dakota. Go to B'Dote the confluence of the Mississippi and Minnesota Rivers where the Dakota believe that life began. Wade in the Minnehaha creek and gaze up at the laughing water falls. Or take a walk back in time after church today, going from site to site of our old church buildings, ending at our first site on the banks of MniRara, later known as St. Anthony falls. Imagine the baptisms along the way where people committed themselves to a new way of life. Mni Wiconi.

Where is God? God is here, even in the desert of our discontent. Even in our despair. Even in our triumphs. Even more in our humility. God is here in our laughter and our tears. God is here in the rain and the snow and the mist.

And most importantly, God is here when we recognize the beauty of another. When we act to protect and enhance life. When we give of ourselves so that another may live. When we share intimate hope. We echo Amos' hopes that justice flows like a mighty water and righteousness like an everflowing stream.

As the old hymn says God is here as we your people meet to offer praise and prayer. May we find in fuller measure what it is in Christ we share.

My friends we have the tools in our very hands and our very hearts to make a difference in our world. One small drop at a time. And each drop is a reflection of God. Mni Wiconi, my friends. Water is life.