

Connecting with God: Water

A few years ago, I attended a conference about Creation, and the speaker asked us to gather in small groups and introduce ourselves with our names and the name of the watershed we lived in. A number of us sheepishly admitted that we didn't know what watershed we lived in, that is, the area of land from which all the water drains into one place. I now know that I live in the Shoal Creek watershed which feeds into the larger Colorado River watershed. The speaker made his point: most of us are pretty clueless about our water. We just turn on the tap and out it flows; we don't notice it.

Yet water is essential; as the children told us this morning, we use it for drinking, cooking, watering plants and animals, washing, recreation, transportation by boat, hydroelectricity. The human body is about 60% water and humans can live only 3 or 4 days without it. And water makes this planet livable.

Water is an essential gift of God's creation and care, and so it connects us with God. That's important because, as Richard Rohr says, "the greatest dis-ease facing humanity right now is our profound and painful sense of disconnection." We're disconnected from one another, from nature and from the ground of our being, the meaning and value given to us by the God "in whom we live and move and have our being."

I've been reading a book by Rachel Held Evans about her experience losing and finding her connection with God. She grew up in Tennessee immersed in evangelical Christianity. She was passionately committed and devout as a teen. But then as a young adult she began to question the belief system that was required in her church. Could the Bible really only be interpreted absolutely literally? Were non-Christians really doomed to hell? Was judging others and keeping up a mask of perfection really what Jesus wanted of us? She finally had to leave the church, and yet she found herself still searching for Jesus. What drew her back to the church was a community that focused less on beliefs and rules and more on experiencing the love and grace of God. "Taste and see that the Lord is good" says psalm 34, and that's what Rachel did in the practices of sharing the bread and the cup, the oil of anointing, the honest conversations about struggles with faith, the hands-on caring for others. Each of these things opened her eyes to the presence of God all around her in the common things of life.

Taking a page from her book, I want to spend the next several weeks in worship on the search for connection at the intersection of God's presence and those common elements we find around us—and that brings us back to water.

The Bible begins with the ancient story of creation, the spirit of God sweeping over the waters, gathering some into oceans and rivers and pushing the rest up to form the vault of the heavens, so that all life was cradled in water like a baby in the womb. God parted the waters for the Hebrews to escape slavery and provided water in the wilderness to sustain them. The prophets spoke of justice rolling down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream—water signs of God's care for us.

And then there's baptism. As our scripture reading shows, baptism for purification was practiced before Jesus came along, and when he showed up to be baptized, John the Baptist resisted. "You should baptize ME," he said. But Jesus says, "no, we should do this to fulfill all righteousness." Righteousness has a negative sound to many of us; it sounds self-righteous. But it just means "right relationship to God." So baptism here is less about sin and more about connection, experiencing our relationship to God. And when Jesus comes up out of the water, he sees the Spirit of God descending like a dove alighting on him and hears a voice. This is my son the Beloved with whom I am well pleased."

My friends, baptism has many shades of meaning—cleansing from sin, expression of faith, initiation into the church—but at its most fundamental, baptism is God's declaration of love for us, not just as one bit of all humanity but as the unique individuals that we are. That's why we name aloud the person being baptized. Baptism is a declaration of our fundamental identity as a beloved child of God.

It's impossible to overstate the importance of this in the world we live in. You know, when our baptismal vows include renouncing the spiritual forces of wickedness, rejecting the evil powers of this world, resisting injustice and oppression, they're describing the world around us. When we say in the vows that we repent of our sins, we're talking about the hate, greed, jealousy, fear, lust, materialism, pride that are the demons that undermine our peace. Evans writes, "these sins join in a chorus of voices locked in an ongoing battle with God to lay claim over our identity, to convince us that we belong to them...Where God calls the baptized *beloved*, demons call her *addict, slut, failure, faker, worthless*. Where God calls her *child*, the demons beckon with *rich, powerful, pretty, esteemed, important*." We all long for someone to tell us who we are. The great struggle of the Christian life is to take God's name for us, to believe that we are beloved and to believe that is enough." (RHE 19) There's nothing we have to prove to validate ourselves; God has already done that.

Here's a weird fact about early Christianity: many of the first baptismal fonts were shaped like coffins. Descending into the water represented a death to the old way of living and emerging from the water a new life. Cyril of Jerusalem told the newly baptized, "by this action you died and you were born, and for you the saving water was at once a grave and the womb of a mother." That is the bizarre and beautiful truth of the Christian identity: we stand in the presence of evil and death and declare that they are finally powerless against God's love. The great reformer Martin Luther in the 15th century would claim that identity when feeling assaulted by demons of depression and fear; he would shout "I am baptized."

This morning you are invited to reaffirm your baptismal vows and reclaim your identity as you come forward to receive the sign of the cross in water on your forehead. If you haven't been baptized, you're welcome come and receive the water as a blessing, a gift of God's love.

But that's not all. I hope that all through this week when you have a cool drink of water or take a hot shower, walk by Lady Bird Lake or make a pot of soup, you will remember and cherish God's gift of water for all of God's creation. Let us pray.