

**The Power of Water**  
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Water plays such an immense role in the pages of the Bible that the wonder is how we have managed to overlook it, as if the waters of the earth were a prop in a play, when in fact, those waters are an actor, offering healing, salvation, rescue, safety, and blessing, all in the name of God, whom the waters, in story after story, rise to serve.

Noah, and the Ark of creation, are saved by waters, waters which also rise up at God's command to rid the world of the wicked. Moses and the people of God walk through a sea in which Pharaoh's army drowns.

Jesus walks on the Sea of Galilee in a storm, to calm his frightened friends. At his word, the sea lies still, and on another day, fills fishnets full, and on another day, swallows a herd of demon infested pigs, and on another day, becomes a pulpit, holding Jesus up so that he can preach to a crowd gathered on the shore. Again, he covers the eyes of a man born blind with mud he has made with his own spit for water, and tells the man to go to a nearby pool and wash, and when the man does, sight is born into him. At Jesus' word, large vats of water become wine for an embarrassed bridegroom, and a cup of well water becomes a chalice of eternal life for a woman whose sins are all too well known.

Water was there at the beginning of Creation, according, as Genesis tells it - the earth was without form and void, and the Spirit hovered over the face of the waters, and God spoke. And it was by walking into the River Jordan that Jesus received his holy name, Beloved, and dripping wet, he was announced to the world as the Anointed One by words of God.

Water, then, has not only power but desire to do God's will, to be God's agent in the great work of Creation. And today we read more tales of water, how it heals, no matter who you are or where you are from or what you believe, provided you do not believe your healing is something you can buy, or earn, or own. What Naaman has to learn is his place in the nature of things, in the world he has spent his life striving to conquer.

And then, there is another leper, whom Jesus heals, by touch and by being touched. Jesus, "moved with pity" Mark says, touches this untouchable man. In doing so, he, Jesus becomes unclean, and enters into the outcast reality of this man, moved to grief by this man's suffering, moved in the place where his own tears are, moved to do what will strike horror in the minds of all who hear of it. Moving past all these restraints,

Jesus compassion flows like water to this man. Greek readers and Biblical scholars say the word used for pity here is so strong as to mean that Jesus is angry in this story, and even "snorts" like a horse. His touch flows out of him with a force that sweeps away the laws, the disease, the outcast reality, the fear, and the force of this touch wipes it all clean. But it is not his skin that heals, it is Jesus' heart, that water pump inside him that keeps the river of his life coursing through his veins, his mind, with Beloved written in every drop of his life, the name that binds him to God, and to us all.

The great argument of the English reformation was about this, about the nature of salvation, whether it is individual and personal, or social and covenantal. A man was healed, but he was healed in a relationship, and it wasn't with Jesus alone, it was with the whole of the covenant which God has made with people, beginning with waters of the earth and the rainbow sign. And we in the United Church of Christ, coming from the Congregational tradition, have held firm on this point, that together, we live, and together, we are called to engage, as Jesus did, in the healing of this world.

It is in this understanding of faith that Bill McKibben, who spoke here two weeks ago, was raised, in the UCC Church in Lexington MA where his parents are still active leaders. McKibben, who now attends a Methodist church, because, he says, it is just down the street from our house and we don't have to get in the car to go to church, now preaches the healing of the planet from the disease of climate warming which threatens all the waters of the earth in ways that will drastically alter human life. McKibben, who teaches environmental science at Middlebury College in VT, **says** there are three numbers we need to really understand about global warming, 275, 392, and 350.

350 parts per million is what many climate experts, are now saying is the safe upper limit for CO<sub>2</sub> in our atmosphere. Parts per million is a way of measuring the concentration of different gases, and means the ratio of the number of carbon dioxide molecules to all of the molecules in the atmosphere.

Accelerating arctic warming and other early climate impacts have led scientists to conclude that we are already above the safe zone at our current 390ppm, and that unless we are able to rapidly return to below 350 ppm this century, we risk reaching irreversible impacts such as the melting of the Greenland ice sheet and major methane releases from the melting of the polar permafrost in which these gases have been encased for millions of years.

From the beginning of human civilization up until about 200 years ago, our atmosphere contained about 275 parts per million of carbon dioxide.

Beginning in the 18th century, humans began to burn coal and gas and oil to produce energy and goods. The amount of carbon in the atmosphere began to rise, at first slowly and now more quickly. Many of the activities we do every day like turning the lights

on, cooking food, or heating or cooling our homes rely on those fossil fuel energy sources that emit carbon dioxide and other heat-trapping gases into the atmosphere. We're taking millions of years worth of carbon, stored beneath the earth as fossil fuels, and releasing it into the atmosphere. By now – and this is the second number – the planet has about 392 parts per million CO<sub>2</sub> – and this number is rising by about 2 parts per million every year.

And we're already beginning to see disastrous impacts on people and places all over the world. This morning's news included a marine scientist explaining that climate warming has caused the mass strandings of dolphins on Cape Cod this winter, so far, 140, of which 100 have died despite intense rescue efforts. Polar bears are drowning because they cannot find icebergs to climb on for rest. Glaciers everywhere are melting and disappearing fast – and they are a source of drinking water for hundreds of millions of people, who, when they are gone, will be desperately in need. Already Mt Kilimanjaro has lost its snowcap cover. In the summer of 2007, sea ice was roughly 39% below the average before 2000, a loss of ice area nearly five times the size of the United Kingdom.

Mosquitoes, who like a warmer world, are increasing and spreading to new places, and bringing malaria and dengue fever with them. Drought is becoming much more common, making food harder to grow in many places. Sea levels have begun to rise, and scientists warn that they could go up as much as several meters this century. If that happens, many coastal cities, island nations, and farmland will be underwater. The oceans are growing more acidic because of the CO<sub>2</sub> they are absorbing. Along with increased intensity of extreme weather, such as hurricanes and blizzards, these impacts are combining to exacerbate civil conflicts and security issues in poor regions around the world.

In a recent New York Times article titled *A World in Denial of What It Knows*, Geoffrey Wheatcroft talks about our deep malaise of choosing not to know what is harming us. He asks, *"What kind of willfull obtusity ever suggested that subprime mortgages were a good idea? An intelligent child would have known that there is no good time to lend money to people who can obviously never repay it."* Bill McKibben has left his classroom to plead with all of us to learn the plain, simple true things we need to know about global warming, so that the healing waters of the earth may be saved, and with them, our lives.

We need to stop taking carbon out of the ground and putting it into the air. Above all, that means we need to stop burning so much coal – and start using solar and wind energy and other such sources of renewable energy. If we do, then the earth's soils and forests will slowly cycle some of that extra carbon out of the atmosphere, and

eventually CO<sub>2</sub> concentrations will return to a safe level. Scientists believe we could get back below 350ppm by mid-century. But the longer we remain in the danger zone – above 350 – the more likely that we will see disastrous and irreversible climate impacts.

So – the healing we need is personal and it is covenantal. We all need to care enough to reach across the barriers that separate us from this need by encouraging our personal patterns of consumption to keep on increasing, as we turn on more and more machines each day.

When Naaman the Syrian came to Elisha, he brought silver, gold, and expensive presents, in huge amounts, to buy his healing. But Elisha refused his money, refused his gifts. Naaman, humbled by what he was powerless to buy, powerless to seize by force, rule, or plant his flag in, he was humbled by the availability of the healing power of water, which is there for everyone, as true divinity always is. Naaman came to terms with his own ordinariness in the Jordan river. Unable to pay Elisha, Naaman then begged for two mule-loads of earth from the riverbank, so that when he returned to his home he could worship the true God, whose love is free and for or us all, even in the land where he had always worshipped false gods, the gods of power and control, of war and force, of money and status. Every day Naaman could remember, through the touch of dirt, how he had been healed. May we, too, renew our deep connection to the earth, and make our way toward healing. Amen.