Third Sunday of Lent, A

OSP 2023

It is probably not kosher for a preacher to admit

that he doesn’t read a lot of theology anymore

especially if he is a retired theology professor.

While I read some, at lot of it for me,

seems either very theoretical and unrelated to Christian living

or unnecessarily narrow, even colonial

and inattentive to the ever-expanding diversity

that is a hallmark of human existence.

Maybe that is why the scientific world fascinates me so much

where curiosity and unsolved mysteries take the lead

and so many of my unexplored presumptions are exploded

with new discoveries that give us hints

about the world and cosmos that we inhabit

but about which we know so little.

It doesn’t take a genius to perceive that the key metaphor

flowing through today’s readings is water:

stories of gushing streams from rocks

wisdom refrains warning against dried up hearts

Pauline allusions to the Holy Spirit being poured out

as an antidote to desiccated lives

and liquid Jesus

spiritually shape-shifting as a Samaritan friend

a bucket-less font of wisdom

and a purveyor of living water.

Awash in such aquatic imagery a preacher could ponder

all of the biblical references to water

and there are well [over 700 of them](https://sites.duke.edu/theconnection/2014/06/05/remembering-gods-gift-of-water/) to study

from the very beginning of Genesis to the end of Revelation.

But I have to admit that what captivated me more

is water’s role in the survival of every known species:

from scorpions to rattle snakes

and tuna fish to tigers.

That doesn’t mean, of course, that all creatures “drink” water.

Some, like freshwater fish or dessert lizards,

absorb water into their bodies from their environment

through a process of osmosis.

As I got absorbed in this water thing

I learned how some creatures can survive

for days, weeks, months, even years [without water](https://gulpmatrix.com/how-long-can-animals-live-without-water/#gsc.tab=0):

* cheetahs for 10 days
* bats for 6 months
* desert tortoises for a whole year
* and a kangaroo rat for up to 10 years.

Human beings don’t have that kind of physical tolerance.

We can survive for a month or longer without food,

if we are in relatively good health,

but when it comes to water, it is more like 3 to 5 days

and dehydration can occur when loosing as little

as 3% of our body water.

When it comes to understanding why water is so critical

for our biological survival

scientists point to its [many characteristics](https://sitn.hms.harvard.edu/uncategorized/2019/biological-roles-of-water-why-is-water-necessary-for-life/), e.g.,

* + - its cohesive capacity to bond with other molecules,
      * sometimes called the universal solvent
    - its ability to support cellular structure
    - and its buffering power against dangerous effects of acids and bases.

Folk wisdom teaches that you can’t get blood out of a turnip

yet scientists are now [genetically modifying plants](https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/1999/07/990715134714.htm)

to produce human blood proteins.

Similar folk proverbs contend that

you can’t squeeze water from a stone

though scientists are proving that wrong as well

with astrophysicists extracting water from meteorites

and hydrogeologists extracting it from the earth’s crust.

One could metaphorically suggest that the exodus people

in the first reading

“squeezed” water out of the rock at Massah and Meribah

where they “tested” the Lord.

On the other hand, the Samaritan woman in John’s Gospel

did not have to squeeze life-giving water out of Jesus.

No one did!

Rather Jesus freely gives his life-giving water

which ironically squeezes the truth out of her

liberating her for true worship and discipleship

In this encounter, the notable and essential characteristics

of Jesus’ life-giving water

for sustaining Christian living are clearly on display.

Jesus-water, like it’s physical counterpart,

also has a cohesive capacity,

not for the cohesion of molecules

but for the cohesion of people

allowing even strangers and enemies

Samaritans and Jews to bond.

And his gracious abundance has its own buffering power

against the acidic prejudice, violence and hatred

that too often poisons our environment.

These effects permeate today’s gospel

Where his countercultural hospitality

not only transformed one woman’s life

But revealed the beauty of the stranger to his own disciples.

Furthermore, the “holy hydration” of this one woman,

triggered a kind of sacred osmosis through which

an entire community was transformed

into a gathering of believers.

It may be more than fanciful theologizing to suggest

that water is a gift from heaven.

Some scientists believe water is an [alien visitor](https://scitechinstitute.org/earths-water-where-did-it-all-come-from/) to earth

arriving 4 billion years ago when a heavy bombardment

of countless meteors delivered oceans to earth

Supporting evidence is the existence

of huge amounts of [water in asteroids](https://www.space.com/30582-asteroid-mining-water-propulsion.html),

which scientists are hoping to extract

in order to establish infrastructures for surviving in space.

Others believe, however, that water was inside our planet

from its origins, coming to the surface over time.

Supporting evidence of this theory are

the hydrous materials recently discovered inside the earth

prompting some to believe

that there is more water below earth’s surface

than the oceans above [up to [6 quintillion gallons](https://www.latimes.com/science/sciencenow/la-sci-sn-modern-groundwater-20151116-story.html#:~:text=Hidden%20in%20the%20Earth's%20crust,in%20glaciers%20or%20ice%20caps.)!]

While I have no idea which theory is scientifically accurate

in Christ both have to be theologically true.

Jesus is the life-giving water come down from heaven.

He is the divine meteorite who bombards the world

with torrents of grace and love.

He is God’s Word that

the [prophets foretold will rain down upon us](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Isaiah+55%3A10-11&version=NIV).

He is the ascended one who pours out his Spirit

on disciples of every age.

But this is also the Word made flesh

revealed in earthbound wells, rivers and seas

who unsealed the way to eternal life in his own baptism

who turned a seashore into a recruitment center for disciples

and who in teaching and healing,

welcoming and embracing

quenched the thirst of everyone from the high born

to God’s most beloved divorcee

as long as they were willing to drink of his gospel truth.

The season of Lent can be appropriated in many ways

with its ecclesial permission to cut back on chocolates and liquor

and drop a few pounds in the process;

or invitation to reflect upon our sinfulness

and schedule that annual confession.

But this third Sunday of Lent,

which the church designates as the premiere day

for the first public scrutiny of the elect

moving towards Easter sacraments

reminds us that Lent is first and foremost

a font journey

a well-drawing opportunity

a rock-striking moment for those thirsting for life eternal.

Scrutinies are an immersion into life-giving water

with its cohesive capacities to bond us together in Christ,

its abilities quench every spiritual thirst

and its buffering power against greedy living

toxic prejudices

and every form of violence

that confront us with such distressing regularity.

Furthermore, it is not simply the elect

who benefit from these pointed rituals

for when Trent, Aaron, Sunayana and Kelly

step forward for exorcism and blessing

they grace the whole of the church

with their courageous witness.

They rehydrate those of us who have strayed

from that baptismal well

and in a miracle of holy osmosis

allow those of us spiritually parched

even scorched by the demands of everyday living

to be vicariously renewed, revived, even restored

so that we might take up again

the mission of the Samaritan affirming Christ

to proclaim good news to the poor

freedom for prisoners

healing for the afflicted

and freedom for the oppressed.

While not as difficult as cajoling water from a rock

this “well journey” is still demanding.

And so, for the elect as well as for those of us

washed in the gracious overflow of their journey

with the [poet](https://paintedprayerbook.com/2017/03/18/lent-3-we-will-find-wellsprings/), we stand at the edge of that Samaritan well

And pray:

**MUSIC**

If you stand  
at the edge  
of this blessing  
and call down  
into it,  
you will hear  
your words  
return to you.

If you lean in  
and listen close,  
you will hear  
this blessing  
give the story  
of your life  
back to you….

Sit at the rim  
of this blessing.

Press your ear  
to its lip,  
its sides,  
its curves  
that were carved out  
long ago  
by those whose thirst  
drove them deep,  
those who dug  
into the layers  
with only their hands  
and hope.

Rest yourself  
beside this blessing  
and you will  
begin to hear  
the sound of water  
entering the gaps.

Still yourself  
and you will feel it  
rising up within you,  
filling every emptiness,  
springing forth  
anew.