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.