

“Water Is Life”

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Water Communion
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N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

“Mni Wiconi.”

It was a phrase Lynn, and Danielle, and I heard repeatedly last year when we journeyed to Standing Rock, to take part in the Interfaith Day of Prayer.

Responding to the invitation of Chief Looking Horse, of the Sioux Nation, we gathered in solidarity at Standing Rock with the Water Protectors and leaders from other religious traditions to affirm “Mni Wiconi”—that “Water Is Life”.

Now, this is not some cliché slogan in the campaign against the pipelines that would carry oil across the river that is the primary source of drinking water in that desolate landscape.

Instead, it is, fundamentally, a statement of fact: water is life. For every living thing depends on water for its very existence.

This is something we honour, something we celebrate, each year as we gather for our Water Communion service.

In pouring forth our water, gathered from every corner of the globe, we affirm in ritual what we know in our hearts to be true: that this most precious resource is essential to our lives, and that, as a result, we must reverence it, and the vast and fragile web of life, of which we are a part.

And, yet, the truth is that our relationship with water is far more complicated than knowing it simply as a crucial source of sustenance.

Recent images of hurricanes and floods have reminded us that it can also be a source of destruction, something to fear mightily, and for good reason.

Water is life, and water is death— which is to say that it is part of life, part of the whole of human experience, for better and sometimes for worse.

Though, as Ian Brown said this week in *The Globe and Mail*, in his article, “Hell and high water,” that is something we seem so prone to forget.

We humans are so often caught off guard when flood waters rise. As though we didn’t quite imagine it to be possible. Not here. Not to us. Not again.

I don’t know about you, but for the life of me, I struggle to understand why people so often drive their cars onto clearly flooded streets.

I guess they’re thinking that speed and luck will somehow carry them through the waters, maybe like Moses parting the Red Sea.

Those dramatic scenes we see on the news, after every flood, of people being rescued from their cars, make for enduring images of our human capacity for denial. Signs of our resistance to see the world as it really is— a place where the flood waters, both literal and figurative, do, indeed, rise, at least from time to time.

To come to terms with such a world, is, I believe, to accept the “terms of agreement” that come with being alive.

Yet, we often resist this, too, reluctant to accept that suffering is part of the bargain of our birth.

And, so, when we find ourselves surrounded by water,
swimming or flailing about in the swirling swell,
it's not uncommon that we look to the heavens,
maybe while shaking our fist for good effect,
and call out, "Why, God? Why me?!"

I can only imagine how many people in recent days,
in the face of so much devastation,
have done this—this most primal human response to suffering.

It is natural to want to know why bad things befall us.
To wonder if we've done something to bring it on ourselves.
To ask if there's anything we did
to deserve what feels to us like such severe punishment.

Hopefully, if and when we find ourselves
in such questioning moments,
we might do better than those who speculated
that the floods in Houston were the wrath of God
for the city having, in 2010, elected a lesbian mayor.

(If that is the case, if they are right..., it would certainly confirm
that God is slow to anger... Very slow.)¹

All of that said, when we are suffering,
or, better, when our suffering has subsided,
it can be useful and healthy
to look at what part we may have actually played
in bringing it about.

In terms of the literal flood waters of late,
it's a question we have to ask.

In the face of such intensifying storms,
we are right to wonder about what is going on,
and to grapple with how human behaviour
is contributing to our changing climate.

¹ Psalm 145:8 – "The Lord is gracious and merciful; Slow to anger and great in lovingkindness."

With dramatic floods
in the American South, and in south Asia,
in BC and Manitoba, and, of course,
around the Toronto Islands this summer,
we would do well to ask why,
and to give serious thought to what can be done.

There is, of course, substantial reason to believe
that what we're seeing and experiencing
is the natural consequence of human impact on the environment.

Which means there's really no need
to chalk all of this up to divine punishment.
We are seemingly reaping what we have sown.

But there is also the question, in all of this,
especially with the prospect of more floods to come,
of what happens next.
Of how we are to respond
to the unfolding human tragedy that may become more common.

In *The Book of Genesis*, after the great flood described there,
we are told that God establishes a covenant with Noah,
promising never again to destroy all life by flood.

(In the wake of recent storms,
I'm sure there are people who might debate
whether the God of the Hebrew Bible
has kept that particular promise!)

What we see in that ancient text is a promise,
a covenant with life, that is worth taking up as our own.

There are countless ways we can do this.

All summer, I've been reflecting on an image—
the one printed on the front of your Orders of Service.

The photo was taken on July 8th, in Panama City, Florida.

What you can't see is that 100 metres off shore,
ten people, including a family of six, are fighting for their lives,
as a strong riptide saps all of their energy,
making it impossible to swim to safety.

It started with the two boys in the family getting pulled along first.
And then others went out to help them,
but got swept up in the riptide, too.

With no life guards on duty, and no rescue equipment at hand,
the people on the beach looked on in horror,
until someone had the idea that they form a human chain.

A woman named Jessica Simmons described her resolve,
saying that in the heat of the moment, she was determined
that, "These people are not drowning today.
It's not happening. We're going to get them out."

The effort started on the beach,
with the human chain forming with, at first,
a small handful of volunteers that grew and grew,
and then moved steadily into the churning surf.

In the end, there were some 80 people stretched out into the ocean.

The strongest two impromptu rescuers headed past
each link in this human chain
until they reached the ten swimmers stranded by the current.

They first pulled the two boys to the end of the chain,
and then moved them along that long strand of love,
passing the boys all the way to the beach.

Next came their mother, who was struggling
to keep her head above the water.

She was sure she was going to drown.

By the time she made it to the beach, she had blacked out.

When she came to, she heard that her mother, still in the water,

was having a heart attack.

As everyone in the chain was being battered by the waves, the grandmother told the rescuers “to just let her go” so they could save themselves.

But the chain grew.

Anyone who could help was linking their legs and arms with their neighbours.

In the end, after an hour of incredible effort, everyone, those rescued and each link of the chain, had made it safely back to the shore.

Not knowing what else to do, they began to applaud—each other and the overwhelming grace they all felt in that moment.

If you’ve been attentive to the news in recent days, amid all the horrific scenes, you have also seen powerful images of people doing what they can to form human chains, to reach out, to rescue, to save and uphold life, wherever and whenever they can.

It is the covenant with life in action, on full display, with very human hands.

The covenant that demonstrates the best of who we are, the best that we can be in the face of catastrophe.

The covenant that makes tangible the love that will not let us go.

With floods around the world,
with the earthquake in Mexico,
with fires blazing in BC,
we are living this morning in a world of hurt.

May we find our own ways to reach out and serve life,
by playing whatever part we can
in forming human chains of love,

be it by providing emotional support to those who are suffering,
be it by volunteering to help with the clean-up,
be it by giving generously of your resources to aid the relief effort.

May we reach out, in times of natural disaster,
may we reach out any time others are reeling from disaster,
of whatever sort, that we may do our part to tend the fabric of life,
knowing that our lives are interconnected with everything else,
and trusting that the hand we extend to others in their time of need
may return to us when we, ourselves, need it most.

So may it be. Amen.