

Water in the Wilderness

Sermon by Fred Joblin, September 28, 2008
St. Paul's United Church, Orillia

Have you ever been thirsty—I mean, really thirsty? Maybe it was on a hike or a trip when you forgot to bring water with you. Maybe it after eating some salty or spicy food, and you thought you'd die if you didn't get some water, and fast! Maybe you were travelling in a country where water resources are scarce, and there just wasn't much potable water around to drink. Maybe you were watching a movie like *Lawrence of Arabia*, and seeing those dry, desert scenes sent you dashing for a glass of water. Maybe it was just a hot day, and your body cried out for some refreshing water.

Whatever thirst you and I have experienced, it's probably not the same kind of thirst experienced by the 25 million people around the world displaced by contaminated water last year—more people than were displaced by being in a war zone! Or by the fifth of the people on the planet without access to safe drinking water. Or by the Israelites, and all the millions of wilderness desert wanderers history has seen, for whom the search for water goes on day by day, with no guarantees of now, or tomorrow.

So when we hear about the Israelites quarrelling and complaining to Moses and to God about the lack of water, day after day, it's important not to be too harsh on them for being this way. I don't know that I'd feel or react any differently if I were overwhelmed with thirst as they were, and if it were my children who might die for lack of water.

The wilderness journey of the Israelites is a classic example of great hopes and expectations getting dashed, of the reality turning out very differently from the hype. For after all the excitement and relief and joy of escaping from slavery, the reality now sets in of the need to meet life's most basic of needs on a daily basis.

You might think of times in your life when you escaped an awful situation and entered a new and exciting part of your journey in life toward new goals: a new job, say, or a new relationship, or a new business venture, or a new life in a new town. It usually doesn't take long for reality to set in, however, and for the "honeymoon" period to be over. That new job has its share of challenges. That new relationship requires ongoing work to make it succeed. That new business venture eats up all your resources and time—and patience. That new life in a new town brings with it many of the same problems you faced before.

We're in the midst of two important elections, with confident leaders making reassuring promises. Yet as Ralph Milton said on his *Rumors* website, "The safest prediction I can make is that after the elections are over, the reality will not live up to the promises." Milton goes on to say, "If you've ever been in a leadership role, or followed a leader, you'll know how initial dreams and expectations tend to dry up in the desert of reality."

Even if we cut the Israelites, and ourselves, a break by realizing it's understandable to complain, that is not what God wants us to do. The people are called to remember what God has done for them, and is doing for them, and to be grateful. They are called to continue on, day after day, trusting that God will provide and give them everything they need for the journey.

Just so, we are called to go through our life journey, being thankful and trusting that we also have been given, and will be given, all that we need to make it to our “promised land,” whatever that may mean for each of us.

To the Israelites, finding water in a rock was a miracle, a sign of God’s presence and care. It may sound miraculous to us as well, except that it’s true that water can be found in the Arabian desert when certain limestone rocks are struck in a certain way—if you know where and how—to open the pockets within them containing stored rainwater. Then again, even if it’s possible and even if it’s a common occurrence, it’s still a miracle of God’s creation, just as water itself is a miracle.

Such a seemingly impossible blessing can be a metaphor for all those times and places we have found water in the wilderness—or something life-giving in our most challenging moments.

I recall when I was in a serious car accident in 1968, along with members of the Emanuel College hockey team. I woke up in a hospital in Burk’s Falls, and the first face I saw was my dad’s. I’d been in a personal wilderness of having a troubled relationship with my dad at that time, so to see him there was like thirst-quenching water, to know that he loved me that much to come and be there when I was hurt.

I also remember the wilderness I was in when I first came to work at St. Paul’s 4 years ago. Since it was my first time ever working in a church, I had a huge amount to learn, and there was Karen, every step of the way, mentoring me daily. It was like drinking water in the desert to have her guide and support me as I learned what it meant to be a minister and to journey with you, the people of St. Paul’s.

You might think of those wilderness moments in your life, and who was there for you, to offer you the blessing of spiritual water for your journey.

Perhaps it was a time when you suffered a great loss, and you felt lost, but someone was miraculously there for you. Perhaps it was a time you felt disappointed and angry that your best-laid plans didn’t go as planned, and someone was there to remind you that life goes on, and new hope can be found. Perhaps it was a time you were thirsty for direction in life, and someone was there to point the way. In these, and I’m sure in many other situations you can think of, it’s amazing and miraculous that the right person shows up at the right time to cheer you up, or be with you through your grief, or offer you an opportunity, or keep you attuned to God’s presence with you in all times and places.

Another of those people for me has been Fred Fallis, who has supported me and sent students my way through the six years of my time teaching gerontology and religious studies courses with Laurentian at Georgian. The summer course I’ve taught for four years was dropped from the program. Then I learned that the fall course I’ve taught for six years—and co-designed—was being given to a full-time person, which can be done to part-timers like myself. Things that had nourished me and gave fulfillment, were lost, and I’ve done a fair share of complaining and groaning about these losses! But all through this time, Fred has been there, encouraging me and finding me a course to teach this fall with Georgian College. He’s been, and is, a true friend as well as colleague.

I mistakenly had today’s scripture reading in the bulletin as Exodus 17:1-17 instead of 1-7. Mistakes are opportunities, so I thought I’d look at those verses to see how they might relate to today’s theme. What happens is that Moses sends Joshua to fight against Amalek and his people, who attacked the Israelites at this same spot where they had found water. Commentators infer that this may have been a

fight over water rights. Not only do the Israelites defeat Amalek, but they interpret the victory as God bringing complete destruction upon them, blotting out the remembrance of Amalek for all time. This additional part of the story points to the water wars that are happening now in places around the world and that will likely become more common in the future as water resources dwindle. Let's hope we can not only find ways to assure water for everyone, but also avoid the bloodbaths that have been so common throughout history, and the attitude that has God on our side, obliterating our enemies for us.

The scripture story points to the broader issue of making sure all of our brothers and sisters on the planet have sufficient water. As mentioned, a significant number of them are refugees due to water contamination, or are living without clean water to drink.

How to address this serious issue is a complex topic that involves climate change, political will, industry, agriculture, water systems, pollution, and groundwork efforts by many organizations to find solutions to water problems, both local and global. We might feel discouraged, feeling we are in a hopeless wilderness on this issue, and that there is little or nothing that we can do. But there's lots we can do, including conserving water, reducing pollution, electing politicians who are truly dedicated to the environment, mobilizing communities to protect water resources, and taking part in specific projects such as Ryan's Well Foundation, which has so far dug 432 wells in 15 countries, supplying safe drinking water for over 500 000 people.

This project began back in 1998, when Ryan Hreljac, from the Ottawa area, learned in grade one from his teacher that people around the world were dying because they didn't have clean water to drink. He worked for four months to raise the \$70 needed to dig a well at a school in a village in Uganda. That first well was built in 1999, and it still serves thousands of people.

Ryan is now 17, and he has visited over two dozen countries, spreading his message about the need for clean water around the world. He has made presentations to hundreds of schools, churches and civic clubs, and more than two dozen international conferences and global events including Rotary International and the World Water Forums.

As it says on the Ryan's Well foundation website: "Ryan's vision is to help provide clean water and related health services to people in African countries and in other developing nations through cooperative partnerships with indigenous organizations. Along with providing clean water, it is essential to ensure that adequate sanitation is available and that families and communities are made aware of the importance of proper sanitation and hygiene practices in storage, transport and use of clean water on a daily basis." Pretty awesome vision for a teenager! When he speaks, he has two messages: "that every person on the planet deserves clean water, and one voice (the power of one) can make a huge difference."

Ryan represents a growing number of children, youth, and adults, who, like Moses, are leaders miraculously helping people find water in the wilderness, whether it's literal water like Ryan, or metaphorical water, like Craig Kielberger and *Free the Children*, dedicated to freeing children from child labour; or Jack Spong and Dominic Crossan and others helping people release themselves from oppressive ideology to find the Christ spirit of compassion alive in our world and in our lives; or our St. Paul's community offering spiritual blessings through all of our programs and worship and small groups; and each one of us in our own daily lives, offering care and love to those around us.

Public awareness is increasing world-wide about the importance of water and its effects on health, community life, and world stability. In Mozambique, a famous rock star by the name of Feliciano dos Santos grew up in a remote village, not only poor, but also disabled by polio as a result of poor sanitation. He sings songs about these things, knowing that in Africa, music is a way of reaching people and passing along important messages. Feliciano has been instrumental in helping communities protect water from contamination, build low-cost, composting toilets, use water effectively to improve soil and have better crops, and so to ensure the health and well-being of the people.

The word “wilderness” has many meanings. It can be a place of beauty, and peace, and closeness to God. It must have been this at times for the Israelites, but more often than not, in their journey to the Promised Land, it appears to be more a place of worry and fear. And yet in the midst of this, and despite ongoing challenges and times of despair, they are recalled again and again to put their trust in God to provide what they need. Throughout their history since then of ongoing exile, oppression, and extermination, they survived and thrived because of their faith in God and in God’s promise to be with them and give them they need: the spiritual gifts of hope, inner strength, resilience, and remembering their calling to be a servant people.

As Christians, we have inherited these gifts and found them to be embodied in the life of Jesus, who also said that God would provide for our needs—our deeper, spiritual needs of community, compassion, forgiveness, and love. With these gifts, we become stewards of the land and water and air. If people are hungry and thirsty, it’s up to us ensure these basic needs are met. If people are enslaved or oppressed, it’s up to us to ensure freedom and justice. If people are following the way of love, whatever their culture or religion, it’s up to us to learn from them and work with them to make a better world. In doing so, we take on the leadership role, give up our grumbling, and get on with the work God calls us to do.

Water in the wilderness. It’s needed literally around the world so safe water is available for all. Imagine what could happen if, for example, the US government were as quickly willing to spend \$700 billion for safe water projects as it is for bailing out the ailing financial markets!

Water in the wilderness is also needed spiritually around the world as people everywhere seek nourishment of heart and soul, and a deep sense that God is with us on the journey, providing the resources, the know-how, the right people at the right time, and the inner strength of spirit, to bring true peace on earth.

This peace will come when the world’s resources are justly shared, and all can meet their daily needs for food and water. This peace will come when we are so thirsty for God’s love to be known and felt by all, and so filled with the passion of Jesus, that we become wellsprings of sustenance to our brothers and sisters here and around the world. It took the Israelites 40 years of wilderness living to make it to the Promised Land. It will need to take us a lot less time than that, if we are to make it to the Promised Land of a sustainable, just, and peaceful home for all.

By the power of the Spirit, may we do our part in making it so. Amen.

Sources: Ralph Milton, *Rumors*: <http://ralphmiltonsrumors.blogspot.com/> for September 28, 2008; Ryan’s Well Foundation: <http://www.ryanswell.ca/> ; and Feliciano dos Santos: *New Internationalist* magazine, August 2008