
Water When the Well is Dry

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A sermon by the Rev. Bill Harkins
3 Pentecost Year C
1 Kings 17: 8-24

In the Name of the God of Creation, who loves us all, Amen. Good morning, and welcome to the Cathedral on this Third Sunday after Pentecost. It's getting hot now—that real down home southern heat and humidity—and those of us who are getting ready for the Peachtree Road race are hearing the well-known refrain, stay hydrated, drink plenty of water, and when you think you've had enough, drink some more. Water is both essential to life, and is a powerful symbol in our faith, and that of many other belief systems. Water is so very precious in so many ways. Three-quarters of the Earth's surface is covered with water, yet 98 percent is salt water and not fit for consumption. Less than one percent of all the water on Earth is freshwater available for human consumption. The human body is more than 60 percent water. Blood is 92 percent water, and our DNA contains a combination of stardust and the oceans from which we came. The brain and muscles are 75 percent water, and bones are about 22 percent water. Water is mentioned some 350 times in the King James Bible, and it is from the waters of our Baptisms that we rise, like Jesus from the Jordan, transformed by the Spirit. Each year during the Peachtree Road Race we runners drink a lot of water, and we are blessed by Holy Water right outside these walls. Both of these are deeply important to me, and to so many.

So for these reasons among others, I try to follow this good advice, and strive to drink plenty of water, and often carry it with me on the trails where I run. Just a few days ago I was on my familiar trail at Kennesaw Park, and it was the first really hot day of the summer. It is not unusual, once school is out, for local high school cross-country teams to train there during the summer. I typically hear them coming up behind me, and they are generally very polite, and the lead runner will shout "On your left," letting me know to move to the right to let them pass. On this day, I heard them coming, and moved over, and heard the respectful request, and I was a bit chagrined to find that they passed me as if I was standing still. 12 or 15 runners flew by me in a colorful, rapidly departing blur, and left me choking in a cloud of Kennesaw Mountain dust. I stopped, and grabbed my water bottle, and took several big swallows, watching the runners disappear into the deep, Pentecost green woods. As I stood there, I had two thoughts. The first was, "When did middle-school girls get so fast?" And the second was, "This water is really good, but it cannot quench the thirst I'm really feeling now. For that, I need water from a deeper well." I needed water, that is, something like the God-given grace to accept that the days when I could, just maybe, have stayed with those runners is long gone, and will never return.

Today we heard readings from both 1 Kings and from the Gospel in which miracles occur, and we are given to wonder how these stories relate to our own life of faith. Water figures powerfully in one of them, and has primarily to do, I believe, with hospitality, and compassion, and maybe, with miracles often unseen. I don't know about you, but sometimes I find that stories that have miracles in them can be hard to take. This is especially true when we are vulnerable—walking in darkness through the valley of the shadow of death—when we are lost, and do not know where to turn, and we look for Jesus to provide the great miracle that will deliver us out of our despair. Sometimes we get the great miracle when we pray—the mother of two young children whose cancer, against all odds, simply disappears. The father whose heart stops on the operating table is brought back from the brink of death. And then there are times when one's best friend, a fiercely gifted runner, dies of melanoma at age 38, despite the prayers of so many. Or the young man whom one mentored for years dies

in an accident his freshman year in college. And like the Psalmist, one wonders out loud where one might find God in *those* narratives. We may cling to the vision that all our miracles will be like those we heard this morning, when God shows up so clearly and unequivocally””so unambiguously having heard our lamentation””and delivers us from our pain. I get it. I’ve been there. I suspect many of you have, too. And yet, in proscribing in this way the forms that miracles may take, we risk missing those moments when miracles may occur on a smaller scale. Moments, that is, when God’s compassion enters our chaos, our despair, our moments of vulnerability, those places where our most hidden and unexpressed pain lives, and gives us glimpses of resurrections like those we see in full form in today’s texts, and this gives us resilience, and hope. And hope is a good thing. It may be the very best of things. So I want to suggest that our readings this morning contain miracles both large, and small, and they contain hints at where our hope may lie, no matter what may happen. And water may be one of the forms these minor miracles take.

In the passage from 1 Kings, we hear a small section of what is in most every way a rollicking good tale, filled with an evil king, a woman named Jezebel, a Wildman prophet in Elijah, who is an archetype of all such wilderness encounters, lots of ravens””to me the most fascinating and intelligent of birds which I refer to as Labrador retrievers with feathers””and the miracle of water that does not run dry in a time of drought, and food that is, against all odds replenished. Indeed, this text from 1 Kings, complete with the resurrection narrative, in some ways parallels that of the Gospel for today from Luke, and it is a story that in some ways changed history. The story of Elijah and the widow of Zarephath is really about the miracle of divine compassion, a miracle that occurs every day, often through us, and often in ways unseen or acknowledged. In the reading from Kings, it all begins with a request for water.

In the 9th century BC, when Elijah was quite young, Ahab became King of Israel. 1 Kings 16 summarizes his reign by saying: "Ahab did more to provoke the anger of the LORD, the God of Israel, than had all the kings of Israel who were before him." Ahab was not a benevolent king, he complicated his own story when he married Jezebel, whose father was the King of Sidon--a region north of Israel in what is now Lebanon. Jezebel and her family were committed to Baal worship and Ahab soon embraced this idolatrous faith. The first time that we encounter the prophet Elijah, he is being sent to warn Ahab that what he is doing was destructive to the heart and soul and culture of Israel. This was no doubt a tough assignment for the inexperienced prophet from the backwoods of Gilead. There was nothing in Elijah's background which would induce Ahab to listen. He wasn't from a powerful family, he wasn't wealthy, nor was he a priest. During his very first encounter with Ahab, Elijah announced that because of Ahab's evil behavior it wouldn't rain again until Elijah said so. No doubt this provoked much laughter among the elite. Elijah then disappears, fading back to Gilead into a mountainous wilderness that he knew so well. Ahab and his friends may not have even remembered the seemingly inconsequential prophet from Gilead, except that the spring rains never came that year. And as summer came it was evident that a drought was upon them.

Elijah was tucked away in his hideout beside a mountain stream, where he was fed by food dropped by a flock of scavenger ravens. But as the drought deepened, everything became more serious, and anxiety deepened, too. The crops didn't grow. People became hungry. And Ahab began to look for Elijah. Elijah, of course, was affected by the drought, too. Eventually his stream dried up, and the ravens quit coming. What would happen now? Could Elijah trust that God would provide? Elijah was challenged to trust in God's care, but imagine his consternation when God sent him to a new location--100 miles away--to the little village of Zarephath. I can only imagine Elijah's conversation with God and his fear as he journeyed to this small village. Wendell Berry, in one of his short Sabbath poems, says:

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Sit and be still
until in the time
of no rain you hear
beneath the dry wind's
commotion in the trees
the sound of flowing
water among the rocks,
a stream unheard before,
and you are where
breathing is prayer.

Berry is calling us, I believe, to pay attention to a different kind of water—water which replenishes the soul—and to imagine the source of that water having something to do with our spiritual journey, and perhaps with small miracles often unseen. And so there in Zarephath, Elijah encountered a poor widow—a single mom—which meant she was in the most vulnerable position in her culture. Elijah asked her for a cup of water and a small cake of bread. The widow was collecting sticks to light a fire so she could bake a small cake out of the last bit of flour and oil that she had, fully expecting that after this she and her son would starve to death. Nevertheless, at the word of Elijah she was willing to provide hospitality one more time. So you see, this wild-man prophet asked first for water from a desperate widow whose family was at the point of starvation, and against all odds the water, and the meal, and the oil were replenished day after day. This may provide a clue about God's abundance when we seek to provide hospitality—that context within which compassion is born.

Liston Mills, my mentor and primary professor who taught faithfully at Vanderbilt for 40 years, once said to me, "William, over the course of your time with us you have studied a lot of theory, and theology, and the integration of the two. But remember that sometimes the most and best we have to offer is being present, and creating hospitality. It's like giving someone a cup of cold water on a hot day." I thought about that often in the years that have since passed, and I have asked myself over and over what he was trying to tell me. I think it was something about grace, and humility, and compassion. Buddy Miller, a wonderful singer/songwriter in Nashville, wrote a fine tune in which he says:

*I need a drink of something like water
I need a taste of love divine
Sometimes you just gotta do what you oughtta
Sometimes you bring up the water when the well is dry.*

I think Liston, and the widow in Zarephath understood this, and as the Gospel says, small miracles can happen, even with a cup of cold water. I suspect that this ordinary, humble widow in Zarephath couldn't have imagined what her quiet act of hospitality would ultimately accomplish or that we might be hearing her story nearly 3000 years later. Every day as Elijah and the widow and her son ate their small cakes of bread, they were reminded that God could be trusted—for another day. And every day their faith grew. There would come a day when Elijah would need all of these lessons, because life would contain many twists and turns, and yet, on the day of the Transfiguration, Jesus talks with Moses and Elijah on the mountaintop, and together they ratify a Gospel that is both radical obedience, and fierce compassion.

My sisters and brothers, small acts of hospitality and compassion can make a difference far beyond what we imagine. With the help of the Holy Spirit, as Wallace reminded us in his fine homily last week, they can transcend the limits of our spiritual imaginations. And when this happens, all are transformed. And this need not come from our positions of greatest strength. Rather, as the social science researcher Brene Brown has noted, it paradoxically comes from our own places of vulnerability: She writes "*When I ask people what is vulnerability, the answers were things like sitting with my wife who has Stage III breast cancer and trying to make plans for our children, or my first date after my divorce, saying I love you first, asking for a raise, sending my child to school being enthusiastic and supportive of him and knowing how excited he is about orchestra tryouts and how much he wants to make first chair and encouraging him and supporting him and knowing that's not going to happen. To me, vulnerability is courage. It's about the willingness to show up and be seen in our lives. And in those moments when we show up, I think those are the most powerful meaning-making moments of our lives even if they don't go well. I think they define who we are.*"

The vulnerable widow in Zarephath showed up, and kept showing up, and kept giving out of her places of vulnerability, with compassion. And so can we, and there are opportunities right here, right now, such as the Habitat House, or the "Smart Lunch" "Smart Kids" program, or serving as a lay eucharistic minister, and on and on. Metaphorically speaking, these are opportunities to provide a cold cup of water on a hot day. And, if it's both literal and metaphorical water which inspires you, check out the website for Episcopal Relief and Development and our efforts to provide clean drinking water. Because the average American uses 176 gallons of water per day compared to 5 gallons of water the average African family uses each day. An estimated 2.4 billion people lack adequate sanitation, and 1.1 billion people are without access to safe water. There are 1.6 million deaths per year attributed to dirty water and poor sanitation according to the World Health Organization. In the past ten years, unsanitary water has killed more children than all the people lost to armed conflict since WWII. Water is essential for life. But the quality of the world's fresh water resources is threatened by improper sanitation, agricultural runoff and lack of treatment facilities, as well as, disasters and environmental changes. Every 15 seconds a child dies from a water-related disease. In parts of the world where women and girls bear the primary

responsibility for finding and collecting water, degradation and scarcity of this precious resource is an even greater challenge. Often, young girls can't go to school because they have to walk for miles to find fresh water for cooking, bathing, drinking and other critical needs. Episcopal Relief & Development is committed to ensuring that safe and clean water is accessible even in the most rural communities. In partnership with local organizations, they support communities in developing clean sources of water. Having safe water has a tremendous impact on daily life. With these systems in place, people no longer have to spend hours fetching water from polluted lakes, rivers and streams near their homes. Girls can go to school, and women are able to care for their families and pursue education and employment—creating a better future for themselves and their communities.

Well, soon after he retired from the faculty at Vanderbilt, my dear friend and mentor Liston Mills developed an aggressive form of carcinoma. Despite a vigorous experimental treatment protocol, the cancer spread rapidly. Several times during his last year I would leave early in the morning, drive to Nashville, and take him to lunch. "We'll go anywhere you like," I said. "I'll pick you up, and you just tell me where to go. Each time, the answer was the same: Waffle House out on Charlotte Avenue, near their neighborhood. When I protested, and offered something with a menu more, well, elaborate, he said that he preferred Waffle House because the food was simple, and consistent, and did not upset his stomach during chemotherapy, and the waitresses knew him and called him "Sweetheart," and said, "More water, honey?" We would sit there, eating waffles, and drinking water, and talking and giggling, until it was time for me to take him home, and head back to Atlanta. The last time we went to Waffle House, shortly before he died, I noted how the waitress "perhaps she was a single mother, I do not know" watchfully kept his water glass filled. "A very wise man once told me that sometimes the most we can do is to give someone a cold cup of water, and that would be enough." A tear formed in his eyes, and he said "Now William, you know that wasn't original to me. Sometimes we claim to know all the right notes of the Bible, but can't hum the tune of it. That's what the Gospel is all about, humming the tune of compassion. Keeping the miraculous water flowing."

Yes, and yes, and Amen.