

The Journey to the Sacred, Part 1
“What is Holy Water?”

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Countryside Community Church
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Scripture: Genesis 2:4-7; Numbers 20:1-11

Note: Manuscripts for this series contain a portion of the sermon that is actually preached. For the full sermon, visit Countryside’s video channel on YouTube.

The Holy Spirit has a curious way of testing me when I make claims about the inclusivity of God’s love by sending me someone who challenges me to be as loving as I claim God is.

For instance, when a handful of us walked across the country in 2006 proclaiming a message of God’s love for all people – gay or straight, black or white, rich or poor, Christian or non-Christian – a homeless man named Mark Creek-Water showed up on the day we were to set out on our journey asking if he could join us. How could we turn him down, given our platform? He walked with us the entire way from Phoenix, Arizona, to Washington, D.C. Mark was a great guy but suffered from certain emotional challenges. Along the way, he managed to push every button we had. And we found out that he had been kicked out of four previous cross-country walks! But we kept Mark with us. As challenging as he was to get along with at times, Mark ended up being an enormous, unexpected blessing to the walk and to our spiritual growth. He has been a friend ever since.

Mark also serves as a reminder to me that the belief that God loves all people doesn’t really mean anything until a particular person comes into focus. Somehow, the belief that God loves all people isn’t nearly as powerful as the belief that God loves all people, *including the person who is presently making me uncomfortable.*

Just as the Spirit likes to test me when I make broad claims about God’s love, the Spirit also tends to challenge me when I make broad claims about God’s Presence – or, where God can be found in the world. It’s like the Spirit says, “Oh yeah? Well, can you find me *here?*”

Case in point: This week I was preparing to preach this sermon about holy water. I wanted to challenge the assumption that holy water can only be found in certain places – like holy springs or wells – or that holy water can only be created when consecrated by

a priest or minister. The case I was preparing to make is that holy water is *any* water that reminds us that *all* water is holy.

Now, this message that *all* water is holy sounds very nice and inclusive – just like the message that God loves all people. It sounds very “progressive.” But just as the belief that God loves all people is pretty meaningless until a particular person comes into focus – preferably a challenging person – so the belief that all water is holy doesn’t really tell us much until the focus is refined, and perhaps even challenged.

This week, I was provided a perfect challenge to refine my definition of holy water. As I was preparing this sermon a water line froze and burst at my house. Gallon upon gallon of frigid water spewed from a pipe in the ceiling until I was able to shut off the water supply. Melanie and I were lucky. The leak was caught relatively quickly so the damage amounted to several hundred dollars, not several thousand. By the way, the American Muslim Institute on the Tri-Faith Commons also experienced water damage from a burst water line that day, only their damage will likely amount to tens of thousands of dollars.

If all water is holy, is it holy even when it is destroying your home (or your mosque)? If so, why bother making a distinction between ordinary water and “holy water” if both are going to ruin your furniture just the same?

Surprisingly, the passage from the Book of Numbers – concerning an incident that is said to have happened over 3,000 years ago as the Hebrew people crossed a barren, desert wilderness on their journey from Egypt to the Promised Land – sheds some light on this perplexing question.

According to the story, the Israelites had gone so long without water as they crossed the wilderness that Moses’ own sister, Miriam, died. Many of the thirsty Israelites longed to go the way she went. “Would that we had died already,” they said. “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to bring us to this wretched place? It is no place for grain, or figs, or vines, or pomegranates; and there is no water to drink.”

Then Moses and Aaron went away from the assembly to the entrance of the tabernacle, which is the tent-shrine they used for worship in the wilderness. It is said that Moses and Aaron fell on their faces, and the glory of the Lord appeared to them. God spoke to Moses, saying: “Take the staff, and assemble the congregation, you and your brother Aaron, and command the rock before their eyes to yield its water. Thus you shall bring water out of the rock for them; thus you shall provide drink for the congregation and their livestock.”

So Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock twice with his staff. Water came spewing out (as if from a frozen, burst pipe!). The congregation and their livestock drank and rejoiced.

This story teaches me something about what makes ordinary water "holy water." If one of us happened to be on the scene that day and asked one of the Israelites if they considered the water that flowed from the rock holy, surely they would have said, "Absolutely yes!" But if we were to conclude that they considered the water holy simply because of the miraculous way it was drawn from the rock they would have said, "Absolutely not!" They would have considered this water holy because it saved their lives.

For one who is dying of thirst, *all* water is holy whether it is poured from a rock or poured out of a plastic jug from Hy-Vee.

For those Israelites in the wilderness, that water was like liquid love. And the benefits they would have derived from it were surely not limited to bodily survival alone. The water gave them life, but it also gave them joy, inspiration, assurance that God was with them, and courage to face the journey ahead. In all these respects, the water was holy for them. And the water would have been holy no matter how it was produced or where it came from.

Recently, I read that nearly a billion people worldwide have limited access to clean water. On average, women in developing countries walk 3.7 miles per day just to collect water. It is little wonder, then, that when organizations like The Water Project install clean water wells in remote African villages, the people rejoice. They dance. They sing. They pray and offer praise to God. And they receive not only water but hope.

Setting all this in the context of my burst water pipe, I realize that, while all water may be holy, it is not really holy *to me* in any way that matters unless I treat it that way. For me, that leaking water was a curse ... until I thought about the scripture story, and the people throughout the world who will never have an opportunity to be "cursed" by a broken water pipe. Having water spew out of my frozen pipe was far more of a privilege than a curse. Given the choice between a leaky pipe spewing water and an oil derrick spewing "liquid gold", anyone without access to clean water would choose the water.

As I mopped up the frigid water the night my pipe burst, I realized that I was standing in liquid holiness, provided I had eyes to see it. The opportunity to see the water on my floor this way cost me a few hundred dollars. That's quite a bargain, really. After all,

what price do we pay when we have as much clean water as we could ever want and never really recognize how holy it is?