

“When We Weren’t Watching”

Genesis 1:1-10 & Isaiah 41:17-18 – April 22, 2007

INTRO: Our reading from Genesis is one of the stories of creation. We find that out of chaos, God created an orderly world, giving boundaries to the waters and the lands, and calling it all good. The writer of Isaiah reminds us that the God of creation, after creating our universe, continues to be involved in the work of providing and conserving creation.

When I owned a little RV, one of the great joys was to drive into a campground and if there were water and electric hookups at the campsites, simply hook up those connections and start to cook supper. A number of times though, I would have electric, but no water hookup, so I’d need to use the water which was in my fresh water holding tank. I remember one time I was camping where that was the case, and turned on the faucet at the sink in my camper, only to find that awful stinky water came out. I thought maybe I had something on my hands, so I used more soap, but that didn’t help--the water was the problem. This was the water I was going to wash my carrots in. It was the water I was going to use to wash my dishes. Because I had put a few gallons of water into my freshwater tank as I entered with the campground, I just blamed the smell on that particular water supply. But, I left the van and filled up a jug from that camp water source and don’t you know, it didn’t smell! What I quickly realized was that I had had water in my fresh water tank for a number of hot summer weeks, which by now was no longer fresh. I blamed my problem on the water supply at the campground, yet I’d created the problem myself. While I wasn’t paying any attention, while I wasn’t looking, the water had gone bad and could no longer be used. When I got home, I found the solution was to totally flush the tank, put bleach in the tank for a few days, flush the tank repeatedly, and finally the tank could be used again. Let me tell you, a process you want to avoid if you can!

Sometimes we have really good resources available to us, and when we aren’t paying attention, suddenly those resources have become depleted, or ruined, and are no longer there for us.

We hear in both of these readings today, about the wonderful gift of water, given to the world in the creation of the world—water in our oceans and seas, in our lakes and rivers, fresh clean water to drink. God’s intent is, not only that we have that water to sustain our lives, but that the generations to follow, also have this resource. In biblical times, as well as today, drought is a terrible reality. “It was one of the most (awful) calamities that could fall on ancient Israel.” (Claus Westermann)

Scriptures described it is as a time that cisterns were empty, the earth was cracked, and there was no rain falling on the land. (Jer. 14:2-6) It is believed that this passage from Isaiah includes a promise to people who were in a kind of spiritual drought. These Jewish people were in exile in Babylon, away from their homeland and Temple—it was as though they were parched with thirst. “God extravagantly responds, promising them abundant provisions of water and life.” (Warren Carter)

In creation God provided these resources, and still has the capacity to give them what they need.

My question is not, “does God provide for our needs?” because God DOES provide, but instead, it’s “what do we do with the resources God gives us?” What has been happening in our world and to the world’s natural resources when we haven’t been paying attention? Scientists have told us that some trends which we tend to overlook, will continue into the future—drought in many places in the world, rising seas and extreme weather. “By 2040, 1.8 billion people will live in areas of extreme water scarcity.” (*Nature Conservancy*, Oct-Nov, 2015)

Fortunately it seems there is a little more willingness than in the past, to face into these realities, since 175 global leaders gathering at the UN this past week signed the historic Paris climate accord—an agreement that is seen as the blueprint for rescuing the planet. (*The Journal Sentinel*, 4-23-16)

Where else didn’t we pay attention? For almost two years, the people in Flint had complained to authorities about the color, taste, odor of their water. But they were assured their water was fine. Previously their water supply came from Lake Huron and the Detroit River, but was changed to the Flint River, to save money. Because of the change in their water chemistry, the supply pipes were now corroding, with lead leaching into their water supply. An estimated 6-12 thousand children have been exposed to these high lead levels. Some are already experiencing health problems, and others have the potential for health problems in the future. Flint is a community where the majority of the people are African American and where 40% of the people live in poverty, which probably didn’t help the rest of us pay much attention.

Many of us may not be aware that it's not just Flint, Michigan. In smaller communities throughout our nation, there are places where they are still trying to clean up their water supply, and even get a municipal sewer system established. Places where sewage treatment plants need to be improved and upgraded to avoid overflow into nearby lakes and streams. (PBS shows *Beyond the Tap & Liquid Assets*)

For awhile we weren't paying enough attention while the drinking water supply of Waukesha and some surrounding communities was being contaminated by radium. Just this week, they have gone before the Great Lakes group, in hopes of purchasing drinking water from Oak Creek. Their water would then come from Lake Michigan. A final decision is to be made in May.

And while we have been busy with our lives, the water infrastructure beneath our feet is growing old and wearing out. It's not just people who age, but the pipes which supply our water may be heading towards their 75-100 birthdays. But they are buried, invisible and we take them for granted. Tosa has 203 miles of pipe and they can replace about 30 miles of the aging pipes a year. So if your street is torn up, or the streets downtown, or around the church are torn apart to replace water pipes, just be thankful they are being upgraded.

It's been said that water is our greatest liquid asset. "Here in Milwaukee, we have the distinct geological benefit of living near one of the world's largest reservoirs of fresh water. The Great Lakes fuel our lives with water that sustains the ecosystem that surrounds us. If neglected or abused, the resource will suffer in quality and affect us all." (*Tosa Connection*, Spring 2016)

Too often, I think because we can't see the lake every day, we may forget about the incredible resource it is to our lives. We may think that the Great Lakes Compact is something that has little to do with our lives, but I for one think it does. If you have friends in California, Nevada, or Arizona, ask them sometime where their water comes from and whether they keep track of how that water supply is holding up. I could imagine they know more about their water supply than we do, because water is a much more limited resource for them. We, on the other hand, may take it for granted that living right along Lake Michigan, we'll always have plenty of water. But there are facts we need to be aware of and things we can do to ensure our water supply will last:

- The average use for a person in our country is about 300 gallons of water each day.
- Faucets, toilets, and washers constitute 70% of our household water use.
- A dripping faucet can waste up to 2000 gallons of water a year.
- When we wash dishes and clothes, we need to wash a full load.
- If we took a 1 minute shorter shower, it is said that would provide water for Philadelphia, Chicago, and LA for 2 months.
- A shower uses 3 gallons per minute, compared to a bath which uses 36 gallons per tub.
- One toilet flush in the US uses as much water as the average person in a developing country uses for a whole day's drinking, cooking, washing, and cleaning.
- We might consider installing a rain barrel or two. In a typical rainstorm, more than 1250 gallons of water run off the roofs of most homes. A rain barrel will not only reduce the storm water runoff destined for the sewer system. It reduces the demand from other water sources. since the rain barrel water can be used in flower beds and gardens. (OutpostCoop)

I believe we are going to start hearing more about the "Water Drop Alert" on our weather reports, in the months ahead. If we are expecting 2 or more inches of rain, we will be advised of this alert. What they are asking is for us to observe the alert by not running our washing machines or dishwashers during the alert. The hope is that we will lessen the water going into our sewer systems, which are already getting a workout during a heavy rain. It will cut down on the amount of overflow wastewater being dumped into the lake.

Barbara Kingsolver tells a story about creating a pond in her backyard in Arizona. Several years ago, she talked a man she knew who was handy with a bulldozer, into damming up the narrow wash behind her house. It was not a creek, but a little strait where, two or three times a year when the rain kept up for more than a day, water would run past in a hurry on its way to flood the road. Barbara cleared out the brush and her bulldozer friend made a little hollow. They waterproofed the bottom and lined the sides with rocks and when the rains came her pond filled. "Its level rises and falls some, but for years now it has remained steadfastly *pond*, a small blue eye in the blistered face of the desert." Within hours of its creation, the pond teemed with life. "Backswimmers, whirligig beetles, water striders, tadpoles, water beetles. Dragonflies hovered and dipped their tails, laying

eggs. The eggs hatched. I can't imagine where all these creatures came from. There is no permanent water for many miles around. How did they know? What jungle drums told them to come here? Surely they are not, as a matter of course, aquatic creatures dragging themselves by their elbows across the barren desert just in case?" *(High Tide in Tucson)*

Whatever Barbara's motivation for creating that little pond, she paid attention to her environment, to the resources at hand, and determined a way to use those resources, that without much thought, gave life to other creatures. She was alert, watchful, of the ways she could support creation. Barbara says we need to "make an agreement to enter into a conspiracy with life." What a wonderful phrase—a conspiracy with life, so that we conserve and support life, in our universe, in every way possible. May we do what we can to be a part of just such a conspiracy.

--Sue Burwell