

THE SECRET LIFE OF WATER<sup>1</sup>  
Exodus 17: 1-7; John 4: 23-26  
A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens  
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**Water is so primal, so essential for life,** that the ancient creation stories just assume the presence of water before anything else is created: *...the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.*<sup>2</sup> More than three-quarters of the earth's surface is covered with water, but only 3% of the water on earth is fresh, drinkable water. There is no more fresh water on earth than there was when Moses struck the rock at Horeb; no more fresh water on earth than when Jesus spoke to the woman at Jacob's well. Yet each year 80 million people are added to the earth's population. It should not be a surprise to hear some foreign policy experts claim that the next great war will not be over oil, but over water.

I

**Now we are all intensely interested in reports from Japan** about the amount of radiation in their water. Is it safe to drink? What will happen to the fresh water if clouds of radiation travel across the Pacific to our shores? The thought of fresh water supplies being contaminated from radiation from the other side of the globe is enough to send shivers down the spine of any nation.

**We all know how important water is.** Each year 3.5 million people die from water related disease. The second leading cause of death among children under five in the world is diarrhea due to lack of safe drinking water, sanitation, and hygiene. It kills more young children than AIDS, malaria, and measles combined.

Fresh water has become a national security issue. There is a whole section of the Pentagon that deals with how to secure water supplies in case of national emergency. Water is also an economic issue: is water to be treated

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<sup>1</sup> ©Thomas R. McKibbens, March 27, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 1: 2.

as a public good or as a commodity to be bought and sold? As water shortages become more severe, the debate over whether water is a basic human right or a commodity to be owned and sold will become one of the great national debates.

**We use water even more wastefully than we use oil.** Thirty-six states now face serious water shortages, some verging on crisis. An adult body is composed of about 2/3 water, and that is the same regardless of race or gender or income. Everybody needs water. We need it frequently and in large supply.

## II

**So it should come as no surprise that water plays** an important role in religious faith. Water is used in initiation symbols such as baptism, and Baptists are known for using more water than most! Water is often used as a metaphor: the writer of the book of Revelation says, *...the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life....*<sup>3</sup> And we all know instinctively what he means.

**Throughout the long biblical narrative,** water continually plays an important role—not surprising when you consider that our religious faith was born in an arid or semi-arid climate. Absolutely central to the Old Testament story is the account of Moses leading the people out of slavery toward the Promised Land. But between slavery and the Promised Land was a wilderness where water was in short supply.

**This theme of wilderness and the need for water** is appropriate for Lent, for Lent is about drawing us back to the fundamental reality of our need for God. In those wilderness places of life, it is a reminder of the reliability of God and of our need to trust in God when our own resources seem depleted.

**That is the issue we face in this ancient story of Moses** and the people clamoring for water. They had been freed from slavery, but now they were in a dry, hot place, and they lacked what was absolutely essential for life—they lacked water. So they complained to the one person who was

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<sup>3</sup> Revelation 7: 17.

supposed to make sure they had adequate water. They complained to Moses. After Moses managed to free them from the despotic rule of the Egyptian Pharaoh, now the people imply that Moses is incompetent because he cannot produce drinking water in the desert.

**So finally they come face to face with God** because they have no alternative. Is that not what Lent is about? To come face to face with God with our need because there is no alternative? Lent is not so much about guilt or giving up something. Lent is about coming face to face with God in our lives because we cannot solve some issues alone. There are elemental needs, like the need for water, that only God can meet. As Walter Brueggemann commented on this text, the Israelites turned the water question into the God question.<sup>4</sup> They dared to ask the question that we often ask in every generation: *Is the Lord among us or not?*<sup>5</sup>

**There are times in our lives when we feel like we are in a desert** without water, without God. There are times when we feel dried up and dried out, and we long for One who will *lead us beside still waters*, as Psalm 23 so beautifully phrases it. The Israelites in this story are saying, “Don’t just talk about water, show us! Don’t just give us pious language, give us something tangible! Give us some water!”

**So the story goes on to say that God instructed Moses** to go ahead of the people and to meet God at the rock of Horeb. Moses strikes the rock with his staff, water comes gushing out of it, and the people are saved. Their deep question is answered: yes, the Lord is among us after all. God really is reliable; God is faithful; God will not leave us without the resources we need to thrive. The story does not try to explain the water coming out of a rock, any more than the Bible tries to explain Easter after Good Friday. It just declares that God’s presence is sufficient for us to meet whatever a day may bring. God is a water-giving, rock-splitting, life-sustaining Creator who loves humans even when we complain and blame and gripe and grumble and fume.

**When this whole episode is over, and Moses looks back** on it as a distant memory, he remembers that he gave that place a double name. He called it *Massah* and *Meribah*, which is translated into English as “Test” and

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<sup>4</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Inscribing the Text* (Augsburg Press, 2004), p. 138.

<sup>5</sup> Exodus 17: 7.

“Quarrel.” In other words, he remembered it negatively as a time when people did not in fact trust God, but tested God by requiring God to meet their demands. They were trying to make religion pragmatic. I will believe in God only if God provides water. God had to perform at their behest. If not, they would not believe.

**This is the level of much religion these days.** I am sick; if God heals me, then I will believe. I have many bills to pay; if God provides me with cash, I will believe in God. I have prayed for something; if God supplies it, then I will believe. This is not faith; this is attempted bribery! In Israel’s history, this story became a warning to them. It is reflected in Psalm 95:

*O that today you would listen to his voice!  
Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah,  
As on the day at Massah in the wilderness,  
When your ancestors tested me,  
And put me to the proof,  
Though they had seen my work.<sup>6</sup>*

God apparently does not like to jump through our hoops because God will supply our needs without coercive demands. Material gifts are not the measure of God’s goodness. God’s grace is free. The secret life of water is the secret of God’s grace.

### III

**That, of course, is the link between the story of Moses** striking the rock and the story of Jesus speaking with the woman at Jacob’s well. Jesus says to her, *Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.*<sup>7</sup> Then the woman, not a literalist herself and clearly seeing that Jesus is using water as a metaphor, says, *Sir, give me this water, that I may never be thirsty....*

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<sup>6</sup> Psalm 95: 7b-9.

<sup>7</sup> John 4: 13-14.

**This story is making the same claim as the story of Moses:** only God can supply some things. God's presence can become like *a spring of water gushing up to eternal life*. That was good news indeed if that woman had been defeated repeatedly by a culture that rejected her. That is good news to anyone in any age who experiences an intangible thirst that only God can quench.

#### IV

**Our culture promotes a wild variety of substitutes** for that water gushing up to eternal life. Our endless pursuit of larger portfolios or better weapons or the latest fashion or the clearest skin or the greatest physique or the latest technological gizmo will not substitute for the real thing. Coke is good, but it is not the real thing! Coors may come from pure Rocky Mountain spring water, but it will not satiate our deepest thirst.

Nothing we can purchase will quench a thirst that can only be satisfied by the real thing that God gives. The woman at the well said it for us: *Sir, give me this water, that I may never thirst again.*