

OASIS OF HOPE

Rev. Gusti Linnea Newquist

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Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

Based on Exodus 17:1-7. Migrating Israelites Cry Out for Water

It is amazing what a difference water can make when it is bound with God's Word and God's Spirit.

In the beginning, our Scriptures tell us, in that first chapter of Genesis, the Spirit of God hovers over the deep waters of primordial existence as the Word of God speaks life into being. In that very first chapter of Genesis we find Water, Word, and Spirit bound together in the creation of the world, bringing order out of chaos, ushering in abundant life.

It is amazing what a difference water can make when it is bound with God's Word and God's Spirit. We know this here in our own Eastern Panhandle towns dotted along the Potomac River. Our very presence as a congregation is, in fact, linked directly to the rising and falling of water, the ebbing and flowing of water, year after year, decade after decade, bringing order – and, yes, chaos – along what has been called “The Nation's River.”

From the Potomac Highlands to the Chesapeake Bay, with that all important District of Columbia in between, this life-giving water, bound together with God's Word and God's Spirit, has literally formed the Body of Christ, SPC version, as our forebears gathered and prayed and baptized their children – and even some adults – along this river of the water of life.

We, who live along the Potomac, revere this binding of Water, Word, and Spirit from the perspective of water's *abundance*. We expect the waters of the Potomac to flow. And the waters of the Shenandoah. And the Opequon. And the Antietam. We have every reason to expect those waters will last forever.

That is *not* the expectation of the ancient Israelites in the wilderness of our Scripture lesson this morning. Their reverence for Water, Word, and Spirit is bound up with water's *absence*.

Sure, it is great to be free from slavery, they admit. But we are THIRSTY! We could die! Is that what you want, they demand of Moses. Of God. To kill us in this desert? And our kids and our livestock, too?!

They cry out with good reason, these ancient Israelites making their way through the Sinai peninsula. In a lucky year, annual rainfall in this desert reaches only five inches. Five inches! In a *lucky* year! We get that here by Valentine's Day!

Imagine life here without snow, sleet, rain, or hail from about mid-February onward. Sure, we might be grateful for a few weeks not to scrape the snow and ice from our cars. I know I would. But how long would that last? If water became scarce in this land where entire communities—including our congregation—trace our development to the rise and fall of water, how would we feel if that gift disappeared?

We have been taking for granted this water, I am afraid. We have been taking for granted this Word, this Spirit, this life, this precious gift of creation and re-creation that carries us all. We have been taking for granted this gift in the ways we treat one another, in the ways we treat our own selves, in the ways we perpetuate despair and anger and violence in our common life as a country and as a world.

I know I, personally, took for granted the gift of water bound up with God's Word and God's Spirit right up until I served a congregation in southern Arizona. The desert southwest. Like the Sinai peninsula, our own nation's desert is a land of very little water. Where flesh literally faints, as the Psalmist laments. And life literally withers for much of the year. At least mine did.

Like the Sinai peninsula, our own desert southwest is a land of modern day Israelites migrating north from Mexico. Led to freedom, by God, but demanding now to know if God has brought them there to die. They are right to cry out. Just last year four hundred ninety-seven of them *did* die in the desert on their own exodus journey. Migrants die in the desert, on their journey to this land of promise and plenty, every single day.

Did you bring us out here, O God, they find themselves praying, to kill us? And our kids and our livestock, too?

Until we learn how to pray like the migrants do, in our Scriptures and along our southern border, we who still live in this land of promise and plenty will continue to take for granted the gift of water, the gift of grace, the gift of creation and re-creation. When we learn how to pray like the migrants do, bound up in the absence of water, far from home, uncertain and afraid, we no longer take anything for granted. When we pray like the migrants do, we find we have nothing left to put our hope in but God. We have nowhere to turn but to a God whom we trust will somehow, someday finds a way to make a way out of what seems like no way.

When we learn how to pray like the migrants do, in our Scriptures and along our southern border, we cry out with parched lips and cracked eyelids and a "dehydration headache" we can never shake for water, for grace, for hope, as if our lives depend on it. Because, truth be told, they do.

At least that is what happened for me, in my own sojourn along our southern border, through a literal and spiritual desert of despair. After months of no rain, months of no grass, months of no trees, months of no shade, I came to pray like the migrants do: for water, for grace, for hope. And then one day, as the summer heat began in earnest, I finally felt three drops of water on the crown of my head. My own special trinity ...

It was not, in the strictest sense, a liturgical re-affirmation of the baptismal covenant. But I sure did celebrate anew the grace of God anointing me with each precious drop of water in the desert. And I sure did desire that grace for the rest of our dried-out creation.

Which, let's be honest, is all of us.

Sometime, someday, someday, as the poet describes, drought prevails in a desert-place of life. For everyone. A lost job. A lost love. A barren womb. A too early tomb.

Sometime, someday, someday, as the poet describes, we all learn to pray like the migrant does. For the waters of baptism, the waters of grace, the waters of life, to flow like an eternal stream amid the burning sand.

The good news, in these desert times, my sibling sojourners through the wilderness, is that the will of God never leads us where the grace of God is not able to hold us.

Three drops of water come to us in the desert. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Or, if you prefer, as I do, Source, Font, and Stream.

You are not alone. That is our baptismal promise.

Three drops of water come to us in the desert. Essential for us to thrive in the harsh landscape of this life. Essential for our hope in the moment of despair. Even floating us through, when we are desperate for help, and can no longer even carry ourselves.

Which is what happens, in the end, for the Israelite migrants in our lesson for today. Their leader hears their cry. And turns to the God who has led them this far by faith. And God provides. Using the same staff of liberation that has led them to freedom. And the river flows. And their thirst is quenched. And they carry on.

We at SPC are doing our part to do the same, these thousands of years later, for the modern-day Israelites migrating through the desert along our southern border. Last week I shared good news that funds from our Alternative Gift Market have helped secure an asylum seeker's freedom from detention. One more person now feels her innate human dignity as a result of the jubilee giving of this community. Through you, God's grace has held her where God's will has led her. And now just this past week we have met yet another request for assistance from our partners with Catholic Charities to do even more for those still wandering in the wilderness.

It is amazing what a difference water can make when it is bound together with God's Word and God's Spirit. We know this here in our own Eastern Panhandle towns dotted along the Potomac River. In our baptismal promise – Source, Font, and Stream – we are bound with all of creation into an oasis of hope that flows forever for us from a stream of promise and plenty.

And the Spirit of God says, "Come."

And let everyone who is thirsty come.

And let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift.

Amen.

Notes:

1. *For more on SPC efforts to support modern-day migrants, please contact the church office.*
2. *For more on Presbyterian ministry along our southern border, visit <http://fronteradecristo.org/>*
3. *For more from the Presbyterian Office of Immigration Issues, visit <https://oga.pcusa.org/section/mid-council-ministries/immigration/>*