

“OH, THE WATER”

Exodus 17:1–7

John 4:7–15

A homily given by Larry R. Hayward on March 19, 2017, the Third Sunday in Lent, at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, Virginia.

Exodus 17:1-7

From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the LORD commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. The people quarrelled with Moses, and said, ‘Give us water to drink.’ Moses said to them, ‘Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?’ But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, ‘Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?’ So Moses cried out to the LORD, ‘What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.’ The LORD said to Moses, ‘Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink.’ Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarrelled and tested the LORD, saying, ‘Is the LORD among us or not?’

John 4:7-15

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, ‘Give me a drink’. (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, ‘How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?’ (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, ‘If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, “Give me a drink”, you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.’ The woman said to him, ‘Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?’ Jesus said 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.’ The woman said to him, ‘Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.’

In 1957, at age 12, the Irish folk singer Van Morrison had a brief but powerful religious experience which lead him to compose, in his early twenties, the song that would become the lead to his album *Moondance*. It is entitled “And It Stoned Me” and is more often referred to as “Oh, the Water.”

Half a mile from the county fair
And the rain came pourin' down
Me and Billy standin' there
With a silver half a crown

Hands are full of a fishin' rod
And the tackle on our backs
We just stood there gettin' wet
With our backs against the fence

Oh, the water
Oh, the water
Oh, the water
Hope it don't rain all day

And it stoned me to my soul
Stoned me just like Jelly Roll
And it stoned me
And it stoned me to my soul
Stoned me just like goin' home
And it stoned me

Then the rain let up and the sun came up
And we were gettin' dry
Almost let a pick-up truck nearly pass us by
So we jumped right in and the driver grinned

And he dropped us up the road
Yeah, we looked at the swim and we jumped right in
Not to mention fishing poles
...

On the way back home we sang a song
But our throats were getting dry
Then we saw the man from across the road
With the sunshine in his eyes

Well he lived all alone in his own little home
With a great big gallon jar
There were bottles too, one for me and you
And he said Hey! There you are

Oh, the water
Oh, the water
Oh, the water
Get it myself from the mountain stream

And it stoned me to my soul
Stoned me just like Jelly Roll
And it stoned me
And it stoned me to my soul
Stoned me just like goin' home
And it stoned me...¹

At age 40, Morrison granted an interview that gave the background to this song. A couple of dimensions stand out to me as he describes his experience.

First, the provision of water leads Morrison – even at age 12 – to silence.

We used to go to a place called Ballystokart to fish. We stopped in the village on the way up to this place and I went to this little stone house, there was an old man there with dark weather-beaten skin, and we asked him if he had any water. He gave us some water which he said he'd got from the stream. We

¹ Available at <http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/vanmorrison/anditstonedme.html>.

drank some and everything seemed to stop for me. Time stood still. For five minutes everything was really quiet...²

Second, the silence leads to an awareness of dimension beyond water and thirst and countryside and rain and fishing with a friend.

“I was in this ‘other dimension,’” Morrison says in the interview.

And it stoned me
And it stoned me to my soul...

Third, Morrison’s religious experience involves memory.

When he sings, “Stoned me just like Jelly Roll,” it is thought he is referring to jazz musician Jelly Roll Morton, whose recordings he listened to with his father as he was growing up.

And it stoned me to my soul
Stoned me just like Jelly Roll...
Stoned me just like goin' home...

Van Morrison’s religious experience as a teenager involved *silence*, *otherness*, and *memory*. “It stoned me to my soul.”

I.

The two Biblical stories we have read on this Third Sunday in Lent involve experiences of God in and around water.

(a)

Prior to our joining them, the people of Israel have recently been freed from 430 years of slavery in Egypt by crossing of the *waters* of the Red Sea.³

- Under the leadership of Moses, his brother Aaron, and his sister Miriam, the people move from the Red Sea and into the wilderness of Shur, where for three days they lack *water* and cry out to God. God responds by showing Moses a tree, which Moses throws into the brackish *waters* of Marah leading them to become safe and sweet for drinking.⁴
- The people next come to Elim where they find twelve springs of *water* and seventy palm trees as they camp by the *water*.⁵
- Two weeks later they arrive in the wilderness of Sin, where they panic about lack of food and complain to Moses, “...you have brought us out into the wilderness to kill us with hunger...” they say. But then they see God begin to *rain* – notice the verb – from heaven a sweet, hoary substance known as manna, which arrives on the ground each evening that the people might have daily bread each morning.⁶

² Steve Turner, *Too Late to Stop Now* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 102.

³ Exodus 14.

⁴ Exodus 15:22-26.

⁵ Exodus 15:27.

⁶ Exodus 16.

When we join the people of Israel in our passage, they are camped at Rephidim, where again there is no *water*.

- They complain to Moses who cried out to God: “What shall I do with this people? They are ready to stone me.”
- God says: “...take in your hand the staff with which you struck the waters of the Nile...I will stand in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock with your staff, and *water* will come out so the people may drink.”
- Once again, the people have *water*.

Oh, the water
Oh, the water
Oh, the water
Let it run all over me.

(b)

Moving forward into the Gospel of John, we find Jesus coming to Samaria, a region with people of mixed ancestry not accepted by either Gentiles or Jews.

- It is noon.
- Jesus is hot.
- He sits down by Jacob’s well, and a woman of Samaria comes to draw *water*.
- Jesus asks her for a drink and she expresses astonishment that he, a Jew, is speaking in public, to her, both Samaritan and female.
- The conversation proceeds on two levels: Jesus talking about *living water* as a “gift of God” that “gushes up to eternal life” and leads people “never to be thirsty”; and the woman talking about *water* that requires a bucket to be drawn out of the well.

II.

Over 3500 years span the calendar between the people of Israel in the wilderness, Christ and the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well, and Van Morrison in the Irish countryside. But each experiences *water* as an entry point – even symbol – of a deeper experience of God.

- For Van Morrison, the experience is marked by silence: “Everything seemed to stop for me. Time stood still. For five minutes everything was really quiet...I was in this other dimension.”
- For the people of Israel, it is marked by Moses articulating the question they had not yet asked or faced themselves: “Is the Lord among us or not?”
- For the woman it is marked by what she says later in the passage, as she goes back into the city after her encounter with Jesus at the well: “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?”

In each of these stories – thousands of years apart – the singer, the people of Israel, and the woman experience a defining sense of being known by God in a wilderness that is deeper than by symbolized by the absence of water. It is an experienced that provides each of them with the “blessed assurance” they need to keep on their journey, to sing their song, to tell the story of what they have encountered.

- “He told me everything I have ever done!”
- “Is the Lord among us or not?”
- “I was in this ‘other dimension.’”

III.

Though these stories are not simple, my purpose in sharing them is simple: It is to encourage us intellectually-oriented, proudly educated, congenitally private, reserved, and less-than-demonstrative Presbyterians to allow ourselves the *time* and *space* and *quiet* to be known and touched by God. If we allow ourselves such time and quiet and space, I believe that we will eventually experience what Van Morrison experienced in the stone house in the Irish countryside, what the people of Israel experienced in the wilderness, what the woman experienced at the well: *Living water*.

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I am told that about 10% of the world’s people do not have access to safe drinking water. I am also told that that percentage has been cut in half since 1990, which is terrific, but this still leaves twice as many people as live in our country in danger.⁷

The crisis they face around *water* is not one we face. The crises we face are more spiritual, more related to what we have rather than what we lack.

- Ours is a crisis of not stopping long enough in the countryside to draw *water* from a stone house and then not pausing long enough in silence to enter the divine dimension from which the water has ultimately come.
- Ours is a crisis of not looking deep enough within ourselves to ask “Is God with us, or not?”
- Ours is a crisis of hearing “*water*” and thinking “buckets and wells, tap water or bottled water, plain water or sparkling water,” rather than recognizing the living water of eternal life.

Ours is a wilderness in which “water is not all that is lacking,” a place in which we face a sprawl of “possibilities” to which we have not opened ourselves and which therefore have been “absent” even to our awareness and imagination, a place where at the first whiff of “unmiraculous” time we complain to the point that our hearts and minds miss seeing the miracles that do come.⁸

Oh, the water
Oh, the water
Oh, the water
Let it run all over me

⁷ <http://water.org/water-crisis/water-sanitation-facts/>

⁸ Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *The Particulars of Rapture: Reflections on Exodus* (New York: Schocken Books, 2001), 234-235.

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I learned at our Session meeting last week that our church has just sent funds to the United Orphanage and Academy in Moi's Bridge, to complete a water project that have been working on a long time, so that now the 150 people there daily have fresher water. It is only one village in one country in one vast continent. A dent in the problem of water safety, but a worthy dent.

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Closer to home, it may be the case that for some of us, the only time we are truly silent – the only time we seek to “be still and know that I am God” – is the *minute* or so following the Prayer of Confession. But even then, despite our most disciplined efforts, we can be distracted – by a bulletin dropping, the Fitbit on our wrist, the lacrosse game awaiting us and the players we will transport in our already loaded SUV, the kitchen faucet we still have to replace.

Despite these distractions, I would like to suggest that this minute each week can be a start to us opening ourselves to being touched by God. It is for me.

During that sixty seconds of silence, I pray for the things I have done and the things I have left undone. I pray for people close to me, for people in the church, for our nation, for my capacity to focus on the service I am leading. Mine is a long list but I go to both services so I have 120 seconds. It's a start.

I know it can be counterproductive for the ministry to try to say “You should have a closer experience of God.” None of us can control such experiences nor can we control God. But I can quote a psalm to you, a psalm in which God speaks:

“Be still,” God says. “Be still, and know that I am God.”⁹

Oh, the water
Oh, the water
Oh, the water..
And it stoned me to my soul...
And it stoned me to my soul
Stoned me just like goin' home...

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⁹ Psalm 46:10.