

What's The Big Deal About Water?

Genesis 12:1-9

Archibald Wallace

Two farmers lived near each other. One raised tomatoes, the other hay. Before sleep at night, each prayed, and one night the prayers went like this: The Hay Farmer prayed that God would not send rain for three days until he cut his hay and let it dry. The tomato farmer was worried he was going to lose his crop because there had been so little rain. "Lord," he prayed, "send rain, lot's of rain, tonight, please." Water, we can't live without it, and we can't live with too much. Hurricanes bring too much rain. Global warming has changed rain patterns, where once there was rain, there isn't anymore, and where there was no rain, there is rain in abundance.

Tomorrow, we celebrate the changing of the people of this land from a colony to a country. In our early days, the rivers were our highways—the James, the Appomattox, the Chowan, the Ohio, the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries. There was abundant water, fresh and salt. New water came usually every three to five days. While America and Canada are blessed with a recurring weather pattern that brings abundant rain to about 80% of the land, that occurrence is not so on around the world. Israel is a good example. It is dry in Israel for 80% of the year. The eastward flow of clouds and moisture from the Atlantic is stripped and blocked from Israel by the Alps. It was and is not unusual for Israel to experience droughts – long droughts. The Jordan is not a mighty flowing river. It is less than the Appomattox and closer to Swift Creek. Water is important there . Water means life there. Water is the focus of conversation there.

In today's text from 1 Kings 18:20-40, we will hear a story of water. The Bible is full of stories and discussions and metaphors involving water –some 700 plus cites, but today, we will look at water as divine revelation, as God's act, as God giving life, where nothing else could. Let's listen for God's word from 1st Kings 18

1st Kings 18

20 So Ahab sent word throughout all Israel and assembled the prophets on Mt. Carmel.

21 Elijah went before the people and said, "How long will you waver between two choices? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal is god, follow him? The people said nothing.

22 Then Elijah said to them, "I am the only one of the Lord's prophets left, but Baal has 450 prophets.

23 Get two bulls for us.. Let Baal's prophets choose one of them and let them cut it into pieces and put it on the wood but not set fire to it. I will pre[pare the other bull and put it on the wood but not set fire to it.

24 Then you call on the name of your god, and I will call onn the name of the Lord. The God who answers by fire—he is God! Then all the people said, "What you say is good!"

25 Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, "Choose one of the bulls and prepare it first, since there are so many of you., Call on the name of your god, but do not light the fire."

26 So they took the bull given them and they prepared it. Then they called on the name of Baal from morning until noon. "Baal answefrf us, they shouted!" But there was no response. No one answered. And they danced around the altar they had made.

27 At noon Elijah began to taunt them. "Shout louder," he said. "Surely he is a god. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened."

28 So they shouted louder and slashed themselves with swords and spears, as was their custom, until their blood flowed.

29 Midday passed. And they continued their frantic prophesying until the time for evening sacrifice. But there was no response. No one answered. No one paid attention.

30 Then Elijah said to all the people, "Come here to me." They came to him and he repaired the altar of the Lord, which had been torn down.

31 Elijah took twelve stones, one for each of the twelve tribes descended from Jacob, to whom the word of the Lord had come, saying, "Your name shall be Israel."

32 With the stones he built an altar in the name of the Lord. And he dug a trench around it large enough to hold two seahs of seed. (about 24 pounds)

33 He arranged the wood, cut the bull into pieces, and laid it on the wood. Then he said to them, "Fill four large jars with water and pour it on the offering and on the wood.

34 "Do it again," he said, and they did it again. "Do it a third time," he ordered and they did it the third time.

35 The water ran down around the altar and even filled the trench.

36 At the time of sacrifice, the prophet Elijah stepped forward and prayed, "Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command.

37 Answer me, Lord, answer me. So these people will know that you, Lord, are God. And that you are turning their hearts back again."

38 Then, the fire of the Lord fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones and the soil, and also licked up the water in the trench.

39 When all the people saw this, they fell prostrate and cried, "The Lord—he is God! The Lord—he is God!"

40 Then Elijah commanded them, "Seize the prophets of Baal. Don't let anyone get away." They seized them and Elijah had them brought down to the Kishon Valley and slaughtered them there.

One more verse

Elijah then told Ahab that rain was coming, that God was ending the drought, and after prayer from Elijah, a little cloud was seen in the distance and it kept coming and getting bigger.

45 Meanwhile, the sky grew black with clouds, the wind rose, a heavy rain started falling and Ahab rode off to Jezebel.

The Word Of The Lord!

The drought they were experiencing had lasted over 3 and ½ years. Think of it—No rain anywhere for 3 to 4 years is a disaster. Then God it was time to show them once more, who is God. God decided to bring rain but on God's terms. There was to be a contest of beliefs—God versus Baal. King

Ahab and his ultra pagan wife Jezebel banked on the foreign gods of Baal she had brought into Israel. She thought her priests could pray and do a rain dance, and the rains would come, and God, the God of Israel, would be vanquished once and for all. Little did she know who she was messing with. 450 priests of Baal danced and prayed to their god carved from stone, made by their own hands, and nothing happened. Truth is, they could have prayed until eternity to the gods they had carved with their own hands and nothing would happen.. Then Elijah prayed to the God of all, the God of life, the one and only God, and fire came, and Baal was vanquished, and the priests of Baal were destroyed, and God sent water, lots of water, It was God's act! His seal of water was upon it.

God and Water! The Bible is full of God and water stories.

But, this story tells us God gives the water, God gives life. This isn't the only place in Scripture where water is metaphor for God's gift of life, of God's deliverance, of God's judgment.

The Garden of Eden had 4 rivers flowing from it. It was paradise—Adam and Eve lived and walked and talked with God, and just so you would know it was for real, rivers of living water flowed from Eden.

Noah was deluged with water, cleansing water, judgmental water. Noah and his family were saved, but the world was judged, It's what happens when you turn your back on God. God used water to remind them, to judge them, to condemn them, that He was life and nothing else.

Abraham left the Euphrates—water, and went to Israel, where the first thing he did was to dig a well—water. Abraham later crossed the Nile and returned from Egypt, navigating the waters of Egypt to come back to the promised land.

Moses held back the Nile for Israel to cross and later struck a rock as God commanded to provide water from nothing.

Gideon used the way his men drank from a river to see who the three hundred fighters would be.

On and on, story after story, water is involved or used or is present.

The symbolism of water is repeated and repeated. In the New Testament Jesus meets a woman at a well in John 4, a Samaritan woman, and asks her for water, and before he is through, he is offering her living water, himself, to her. Jesus called himself the living water, the water of life, the metaphor for salvation. Living water equals salvation. One of the last scenes in the Bible repaints a scene from the beginning. In Revelation 22 God is coming to earth to live with us, bringing a new heaven and a new earth, and there, in the midst of it all, there is the expected throne of God and from it flow 4 rivers of living water. From Genesis, with the Holy Spirit hovering over the waters and calming them and using them for creation to the last act, the end of time, when God comes to us, water is at the center of the Biblical Story.

Water—the synonym for life, for salvation, the synonym for the Word.

When Jesus stepped forward to begin his ministry, his first act was to be Baptized by John. He came up from the water symbolizing a new creation, showing us that we too needed baptism, to outwardly show whose we were and what we now were while inwardly sealing our lives in Christ is through the act. In Baptism we too become new creatures, a new creation, alive with Christ in us, empowered by the Holy Spirit, walking humbly with our God.

I remember a poem we studied in High School, Coleridge's, 1797, *Rime Of The Ancient Mariner*, the story of being at sea and becalmed and out of drinking water, yet surrounded by water, but not a drop to drink. Coleridge may not have meant it, but he described us, surrounded by water that cannot give life, water of our own making, desperately, in need of God's living water, yet still reciting the mariner's woe: "Water, Water, everywhere, and not a drop to drink."

That line is our line. God has put water everywhere, spiritual water, overwhelmed us with it, yet we still chase the water that brings only death—salt water—contaminated water, water of our own distilling, and never God's living water. We stand with the Samaritan woman at the well and hear of the living water. She asked for it. Why don't we? Instead, we want the tainted water, the impure water, the polluted water, the contaminated water, the water of death, the water of Baal.

Yesterday, I saw a stream of water with an oily looking slick on top. It carried runoff from a septic tank and overflow from additives to fields of grass, put there to help it grow. The water was shot, unusable, poison, yet yards away it was being collected and treated and drunk. Why must we drink of these polluted cups of our own making, when the river of life flowing by, so near, so pure, in the word of Christ, the in the good-news of the Gospels? Why?

I don't want to end without two more observations. Do you remember Jesus' first miracle? It seems so trivial, water to wine at a wedding feast. Why did Jesus do it? What does it mean? God's acts are identified through water. You can always tell it's God at work, acting, fixing, correcting, renewing, rescuing, because there is water involved in the act. The water authenticates it. Jesus followed this by walking on the water, by healing at the pool, by chasing the devil into the water through the pigs, by taking up with fishermen and always being around the water, by crossing the water to pray. Each act with water is God's stamp of approval and God's certification that what we are reading is truly God at work, The water authenticates the story or the event.

But then there is Cana—water to wine. Then there is a last supper, where Jesus took the wine as a sign of his new Covenant. Then there is the cross, where his side was pierced to see if he was still alive, and water and blood came mingled down. Water to wine! Wine for blood! A new standard! When it is God's act, there is water. But for Christ, it was water and blood. So we Baptize to let God seal us. and we drink the cup of the new covenant to let Jesus fill us. And we let the breath of the Holy Spirit warm us. God for us, God in us. God sending us.

Someone once asked for a good way to explain our belief in one God, when it looks like three—a Trinity. The argument was it sounds like three God's, not one as we proclaim. I remembered my Chemistry classes, where water had a formula, H₂O—two parts Hydrogen and 1 part Oxygen. That formula never changes, whether the formula is a liquid—water, a solid—ice, or a gas—humidity, a cloud. Water, it's all around us, if only we could see.

Know this: there is no life without water, God's living water, the very essence of Christ himself. Now you can keep buying water from other places in fancy bottles and colors, but the living water is the

gift of Christ. So ask yourself, what will you be drinking today? It's not too late to shop in God's pantry for the real water, but it could be tomorrow.