



Creation Season

Fifth Sunday of Easter, Year A, April 20, 2008

*Water: Water as integral to life
Social injustice of water inequity*

Information and Reflections for Homilists, Liturgists, and Clergy of the Episcopal Diocese of Minnesota

There are several Themes for this Sunday:

Lectionary themes

Deliverance from our enemies
Gospel theme: Jesus is the way, truth, life

Revised Common Lectionary Readings:

Acts 7: 55-60
Psalm 31: 1-5, 15-16
1 Peter 2: 2-10
John 14: 1-14

Creation themes

Water as integral to life
Social injustice of water inequity
Ecosystems/interdependency of habitat zones
“Living stones”
“Wars, poverty, subsistence all threatened by human action”

“The Eco-Social Costs of Privatizing Water”

Section I. Is there any connection between Christian faith’s gospel and dirt, land, earth, water, air? Regrettably there is little or no connection for many people. The tenets of the faith, they insist, focus on individuals, inner states of mind, personal ethics, families, and the church as a building and institution.

If we claim otherwise, on what basis do we say so? Many depend on proof-texting. Proof-texting is not limited to fundamentalism, for others also use biblical texts to support a position that was already formed before it was informed by those texts. I notice, for instance, that my unabridged NRSV concordance uses 2 and a half pages to list all occurrences of “water,” “waters,” and a few other words that start with “water.” It would be quite a labor to work through all that, however, especially if I allow those texts to inform and correct any initial hypothesis with which I began to read them. I won’t go there to start sermon preparation in this instance.

A second possibility would be to investigate early Palestinian geography, and sociologies of ancient Judaism and earliest Palestinian Christianity. There one could gather evidence about how God’s People *actually* related to the waters around them, and in what ways they attempted to protect their animals and their land (flowing with milk and honey, the story went). Leviticus 25 and both Sabbath and Jubilee laws leave no doubt that the *ideal* goal for God’s People is care for the land and all flora and fauna that are dependent on it and its waters and air.

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Third, a sermon for earth day needs to express theological understandings of varied biblical insights that relate faith to earth. For instance, the Church is a community of “living stones” (I Peter 2:5) that was created by God to model community in human affairs, including human interactions with the world in which they live. We “live and move and have our being” in God, to be sure. But that reality does not remove us from the world within which we also live and move and have our being, all the while praying that God’s will be done “on earth.”

How, then, could the Church model community between people and planet earth? How may the Church’s physical existence model for other communities how to live in ways that land, water, and air can sustain over time and around the globe? How can the Church think practically with “the mind of Christ Jesus” on Earth Day (Phil. 2:5-13)? How can we work out the ecological consequences of Jesus being “the way, and the truth, and the life”? If there is a “way” to “the Father” in ecological matters, what is it? We have to spell that out. There must be such a Way, for humanity was created in the image of the Creator in order that we would *keep* the earth “good” (Gen. 1). The Creator does not “leave behind” the earth, its water, its air, and most of its people. Neither can we downgrade and abandon the creation.

Fourth, it has been said that the Church is “the extension of the Incarnation,” which “will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these” (John 14:12). If that is the case, then we move not only from ancient biblical texts toward today. We move also from our own time toward the biblical texts. Karl Barth famously maintained that we need the Bible in our right hand and the newspaper in our left hand, and we need to be in the midst of dialogue between them.

Section II. We have moved in these reflections from scripture to present situation. Now we look at the unprecedented situation of present ecological crisis (including a crisis of water), and view it in dialogue with today’s texts.

When I was growing up back in western North Carolina’s 1930s and 1940s, springs brought forth fresh water from mountainsides, and we swam without fear of disease in many streams of very cold pure water. The water was not only fresh and clean, it was free. Nobody could imagine ever having to pay for that water. It came free from rain and snow. It came, as we saw it, from the Creator.

In this Age of Privatization, however, corporations around the world have come between water and people, either buying rights to springs and groundwater, or receiving grants from governments to “develop” water resources. They do so, of course, for profit to themselves. The freedom with water that humanity used to know exists no longer in that arrangement.

The Minnesota Episcopal Environmental Stewardship Commission (MEESC) has prepared Creation Season materials for the Season of Easter, 2008, with a focus on water. If you find the information on this reflection to be of interest, you may wish to visit the MEESC website for more information (www.env-steward.com). Members of MEESC are available to visit your congregation to assist you and them in an environmental stewardship walk.

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We have seen televised reports of this privatizing process, and the profound social costs it exacts. I recall seeing such a report about a stream of water passing by a community that was forbidden by legal penalty from accessing that water as it flowed on to its corporate destination. The local government, moreover, had been prevented from protecting its people and lands, due to a “globalized” contract. The IMF (International Monetary Fund), the World Bank, the World Trade Organization, and such businesses as Vivendi and Suez Lyonnaise des Eaux, continue to “privatize” water, raking in billions of dollars in profits, no matter the social and ecological costs.

One book that documents all this is Vandana Shiva’s *Water Wars: Privatization, Pollution, and Profit* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2002). (Further evidence is available from Google.) Shiva concludes that “water sustainability can emerge only from democratic control of water resources. Community control avoids ecological breakdown and prevents social conflict.” In order to make deserts bloom we need, she says, indigenous water management, decentralized water democracies, and “recognition of water as a common resource.”

There is stark contrast between the *interdependent* “living stones” of God’s People and, on the other hand, enforced (“bought”) uses of water for the profit of a few. The Church cannot model community by supporting the privatization of water that all humanity depends upon for life itself. Neither can we model community by supporting unregulated “laissez-fair” economic policies that deny climate change and pollute land, water and air, thereby melting glaciers that “deep-freeze” water for future generations and the lands and crops on which they will depend. The “household of God” (Eph. 2:19) must “keep house” if she will extend with “greater works” the works of Jesus of Nazareth (John 14:12).

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