

Sermon: December 15, 2019 – Advent 3 – Luke 1: 46-55
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley

The third Sunday of Advent is typically the Sunday of Mary, mother of Jesus. It is also, in this year's Advent exploration of the classical elements of Earth, Air, Fire and Water, chosen to be the Sunday of Water. These two, Mary and Water, do not come together by accident.

Water plays such a key role in scripture: the first words of the Bible, the beginning of the first chapter of Genesis, are "When God began to create the heavens and the earth— the earth was without shape or form, it was dark over the deep sea, and God's wind swept over the waters." There is the story of the great flood, starting in the 6th chapter of Genesis, God's supposed do-over after humanity had made an irreparable mess of things, a story repeated in the mythologies of many cultures. The incident of bringing water from the rock (Exodus 17 and Numbers 20) symbolized the troubled relationship between Moses and God, indicating God's provision and Moses' unwillingness to truly trust. Jesus, in the magnificently drawn encounter with a Samaritan woman at a well (John 4), refers to himself as "Living Water." And then there is a sort of "Holy Trinity of Water" in the gospels: the amniotic waters in Mary's womb, the water that reportedly sprung with blood from Jesus' side (John 19:34) when he was pierced by a spear at the crucifixion, and baptism – a pivotal moment in Jesus' ministry, and our sacrament of integration into the body of Christ.

Water also plays a key role in the sustenance of life. Water, in the form of ice, is one of the factors that astronomers look for in determining whether a planet might be habitable. And somewhere around 55 to 60% of an adult human body is water – it's an invisible, but essential and dominant part of my being. Populations who *do not* have access to a safe, accessible water supply can tell you how urgently important water is to life; others seem unaware of the gift, letting litre upon litre just run down the drain. Yet my awareness or non-awareness of its importance, doesn't change the reality: without water, I do not have life.

That statement: without -blank- I do not have life is true for something else as well. Recently, a group of twenty of us from Ralph Connor and St. Michael's Anglican concluded an eight-week study of Richard Rohr's book, *The Universal Christ*, a book which speaks to the Divine interconnection of all things, and Fr. Rohr makes this assertion: "I have never been separate from God, nor can I be, except in my mind." (Rohr, p.44) That may sound like a very spiritually arrogant thing to say, but if we understand God, not as some distant, removed, angry old man, attached to only one set of sacred texts and one religious tradition, but as the loving entity that infuses and connects all of life, the truth in this statement bubbles to the surface more easily. Our connection to God is in many ways like our body's connection to water: crucial yet largely invisible, making up more of our being than we might imagine, and perhaps more apparent to us in times of drought than at times when things are flowing easily.

Mary, a young woman from Nazareth, was placed right at the middle of that spiritual flow – or perhaps torrent – when she entered the big story of God and humanity and God's long journey toward justice. In many ways an unlikely heroine of this story, Mary was young, betrothed but not yet married, from a little-known village up north in the hills, but these qualities kind of work in her favour when we look back. Richard Rohr calls her a representative of "everywoman and everyman" (p.127) and she was *at least that*, if not a *full-on representative of the marginalized underclass*. But one way or another, she was – eventually, at least – willing to go with the flow and see where God would lead her life.

Canadian novelist Margaret Atwood, in her book *The Penelopiad*, revisits Greek mythology from a feminist perspective, and I find that her words about water (p.43) apply brilliantly to Mary: "Water does not resist. Water flows. When you plunge your hand into it, all you feel is a caress. Water is not a solid wall, it will not stop you. But water always goes where it wants to go, and

nothing in the end can stand against it. Water is patient. Dripping water wears away a stone. Remember that, my child. Remember you are half water. If you can't go through an obstacle, go around it. Water does."

Mary is crucial to our spiritual story, not just because a womb was needed for Jesus to be born, but because of her ability to exhibit all of these qualities of water described by Margaret Atwood: water does not resist, it flows, it caresses, it is patient and powerful, it will not stop you but has the ability to go around any obstacle it chooses. Water exhibits these qualities and so does Mary, uniquely connecting the depth of feminine presence with the expression of Divine love.

Each year when we come to Mary's Sunday, we are re-acquainted with her sequence: once she agreed to what was proposed to her and confirmed it with a visit to her cousin Elisabeth, she sang a song, that expressed the power and shape of God's love – the love that she embraced fully, the love that her child, Jesus, would proclaim in his words and actions, and through his ongoing life in those who take up his cause. Mary's Magnificat was powerful, defiant, rooted in an earlier song by Hannah the mother of Samuel. It's not some wishy-washy statement of a God who hardly cares; it analyzes the inequality of old, top-down power structures and contrasts this with a God who is present to the downtrodden. I'm not going to repeat the whole thing, but bring us back into the spirit of Mary's song with these verses: (46-47, and 51-53)

**"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior...
God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty."**

In these words, Mary speaks of a God who is right here, right now. Mary refuses to soft-sell or be a moderating voice, choosing instead to counter-balance the historic imbalances of human life. Judith Jones, an Episcopal vicar in Oregon, describes Mary's song like so:

"Mary sings about the God who saves not just souls, but embodied people. The God she celebrates is not content merely to point people toward heaven; God's redemptive work begins here on earth. God fills the hungry not only with hope, but with food. Rather than being satisfied with comforting the lowly, Mary's Lord lifts them up, granting them dignity and honor, a seat at the table and a voice in the conversation. At the same time, God shows strength by disrupting the world's power structures, dethroning rulers, and humbling the mighty."

Indeed, these words of Mary, expressing the passionate heart of God that will now beat within her, speak of the God of the here and now, the energy of Christ that lives in our hearts and our bellies and motivates our lives. Like an unstoppable current pulsing down a river, like a relentless drip of water eroding hard-set stone, God's powerful love keeps working, flowing, pushing in favour of those whose rights are dumped out and disregarded like filthy wastewater. Mary simultaneously gives voice to those on the margins, and to the mission agenda of the ever-present God. Many of us, over the years, have also said some degree of 'yes' to these principles, and as an Affirming Ministry we have firmed up those commitments, to embrace and advocate for ALL people who get pushed to the margins by oppression and exclusion. Mary's song of a God motivated by loving justice, calls us to action.

Before closing, there is one more connection that needs making this morning, as we engage the metaphor of water and the person and proclamation of mother Mary. In this year when eyes have been opened and ears unplugged to the realities of climate crisis, and on this weekend when climate talks in Madrid found limited common ground, we would do well to understand God's deep connection to the health of the environment as well. God's connection to humanity is not deferred until the afterlife; as stated by Mary's Magnificat, God is involved right here, right now. If someone is under attack, God is present to them, and if the entity under attack is flora or

fauna or the ozone layer or the glaciers, God is engaged there, too. God's passionate love infuses ALL that we see – not just human existence, but all existence. Richard Rohr's book is about this pretty much from cover to cover, and our Indigenous friends have told us for years of a Divine presence that is all around us, in the mountains and the rivers and in all living beings. On this Sunday when we hear of a God who "scatters the proud" and "lifts up the lowly" may we hear that also, as a call to involvement along with God, in big ways and small, in the future health of our home, the earth.

On this Sunday, we give thanks for the holy, tangible, foundational gift of water. Water that gives a home to fish and geese and otters. Water that makes up more than half of our bodies. Water that protects little ones still growing in the womb. Water that blesses those being baptized. And we give thanks for those whose commitment to God's loving justice, has the qualities of water: patient, powerful, able to go where it needs to go. As we give thanks for the water of life and the water of spirit, may our souls, with Mary's, honour and proclaim God's commitment to this planet and all who dwell therein. In Christ we pray, Amen.

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