

Sermon: The Gift Text: Isaiah 55:1-13 Lent 3 March 24. 2019
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The mysterious rash on the arm of six-year-old Theron wouldn't heal. For almost a year, his mother, Ioka Thomas, who lives in the Six Nations of the Grand River indigenous reserve in Ontario, went to the local Doctor for treatment. But the itchy red rash always returned. Thomas came to suspect the culprit behind the rash was water – or, rather, the lack of it. The Six Nations reserve has no running water.

Thomas, a mother of five, has lived without running tap water since the age of 16. Her children lack access to things commonplace elsewhere, like toilets, showers and baths. For washing and toilet usage, they use a bucket.

It is a challenging existence, full of frustration, exhaustion and health problems, and reminiscent of life in some developing countries. But this is not the “third world”. It is Canada. Her community is located in prosperous southern Ontario, 90 minutes from Toronto. Across Canada, in 2018 there were 174 water advisories in more than 100 indigenous communities in Canada.

For more than a decade, members of the interfaith humanitarian group No More Deaths have been placing basic survival goods and especially jugs of water in the Sonoran Desert that runs between Arizona and Mexico. Their goal is simple: to prevent migrants from dying in the desert. Between 1999 and 2018, more than 3,000 migrants perished while trying to make the dangerous desert crossing

During the summer of 2017, as temperatures reached more than 40 degrees, these Christian humanitarians drove into the Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge, part of the vast desert wilderness along the border, and left behind jugs of water and canned food for migrants. The four women, all volunteers with No More Deaths, were followed by a U.S. Border Patrol officer and arrested.” According to court records, the women said their actions were motivated by their religious convictions and their belief that everyone should have access to the basic means of survival. And the jugs of water that they left in the desert were dumped out by border agents when they found them.

In the Bible, giving water to all those who thirst is a sign of God's compassion. “Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters,” declares the prophet Isaiah, describing the invitation of God. In the Gospel of Matthew (25:34, 35), giving water to the thirsty is one of Jesus' commands to his disciples, and it is an explicit way of serving Jesus himself. The volunteers for No More Deaths were only following Jesus' directive.

We can recount the times in Scripture's story when water is part of the holy narrative. The story begins with water, the waters at the beginning over which God's Spirit moved. There is water at the end of the story, the waters which, in the world to come, will flow out from the throne of God, the River of Life in John's Revelation.

Water may be seen as Holy because it is so elemental, so powerful. Water can carve through stone, making valleys and canyons. Water forms into mighty rivers, fills vast oceans, gathers in powerful waves, and falls as life giving rain... St Columba wrote a prayer: "Stay with me God. The sea is so great and my boat is so small." Water may be holy because it reminds us of our place in the grandeur of God's Creation.

Water is perhaps considered holy because it is so essential to life. You can survive about a month without food, but only 5 to 7 days without water.

In a country like ours, which is blessed with more fresh water than any other nation on earth, maybe we don't value water in the way that many people in our world do. It might be less special, less precious to us. We turn on the tap and there it is. We use about 100 gallons each day, easily 20 times more than most of the world's people would hope to use.... For many people on our planet, including more than 100 indigenous communities here in Canada, getting clean water takes considerable effort. Water is a scarce commodity. Valued. Most of the world's people must walk at least 3 hours to fetch water. 1 billion people lack access to an improved water supply - approximately one in six people on earth. Every day, 6000 people, mostly children under the age of five, die from diseases due to poor water quality.

The people of Israel in Biblical times knew water to be a very precious commodity. The people of Israel were thirsty. They longed for God. When Isaiah wrote the words we read today from Isaiah 55, the Jews were living in the desert of exile. They had been forced to leave their land, the land God had given to them. They had witnessed the destruction of Jerusalem's Temple where they believed God would dwell, close to them, forever. They were taken thousands of miles across desert and wilderness to a foreign land, where they lived in an alien culture, by an unfamiliar river under alien gods.

The people felt far from God, far from the source of their life. They felt God had left them. They longed to be close to God again. Perhaps they had tried to satisfy their longing with the gods of Babylon or with the wealth of this foreign land. But still, they thirsted for God. In answer to their longing, God comes. Isaiah pictures God as a water seller, calling through the streets of Babylon, inviting people to come and have what they long for ... water that satisfies like no other can ... water that quenches Israel's deep thirst.

"Come" cries God. Come and I will give you a precious commodity. It's yours for free. I will bring you home. I will be close to you again. Come and receive the water that you long for. Come drink. Come to the living holy sacred waters that only God can provide. Come to me and

thirst no more says the Lord.

The people of Israel were thirsty. Are we thirsty? Compared to most of the world's people we have abundant water and may not realize how precious water really is. So too, in our world do we know how thirsty we really are?

We live very full lives. Full schedules. Plugged in all the time. Little silence. Little stillness. We are full. Affluent. Preoccupied. There is no room in us. Who knows what we feel? What we long for? What we need? We are too distracted to notice.

So here is Lent. Lent is an opportunity to create empty space in ourselves, in our schedules, in our hearts in order to feel that thirst within us that only can be satisfied by God. St. Augustine spoke of a restlessness, a hunger, a space within that only God can fill. We often think of spirituality as something we need. But maybe spirituality is rooted in what we lack. Urban Holmes, a prolific writer on the history of Christian spirituality suggests that spirituality is most about longing. To be spiritual is to hunger and thirst for something more.

In modern life if we have a space or hollowness within, a sense of emptiness, we rush to fill it up. But can we be encouraged to sit, to feel that emptiness, to create space in our lives rather than to cram up the quiet moments with activity, the emptiness with filler? Can we get in touch with that longing, that thirst that only God can fill ... so that God can come and fill us up?

"Come" cries God. Come and I will give what you really need. It's yours for free. Come and receive the water that you long for. Come drink. Come to the living holy sacred waters that only God can provide. Come to me and thirst no more says the Lord.