

COME TO THE WATERS

Isaiah 55:1-9

Third Sunday of Lent

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For the people who lived in the dry, semi-arid Middle East, the words of Isaiah must have captured the attention of a community that needed to listen. Have you ever noted how prominent a part that water plays throughout the Bible? The act of Creation includes taming the waters. The garden of Eden is nourished by a river. Forty days of rain flood the earth. Hagar and Ishmael find a spring of water and are saved from death in the desert. Moses leads the people across the Red Sea and God provides a miraculous stream of water in the desert. Elijah is taken up from the River Jordan. Jesus is baptized in that same river, turns water into wine, asks a Samaritan woman for a drink of water, calms the storm on the Sea of Galilee and among his last words is "I thirst."

What are we to think of this mixed message that the various authors of the Bible hand down to us? On one hand a loving and caring God creates a world and provides rivers to ensure that all life will thrive. On the other hand, an enraged God causes a world wide flood that destroys all life except for the chosen in the Ark. Jesus calms a storm, saving the lives of his disciples but dies thirsty and alone.

Those various authors sought ways to express the power and breadth of God. They wrote of the creator, the life giver, the Deity overflowing with love for all creation. But those authors also struggled with the less than stellar qualities of the human family; the need to gather power and the thirst for control that gave birth to war. The authors noted how far from the original blessing humankind wandered and they could only describe that condition in terms of the great flood.

Perhaps as did those ancient authors, I have been reflecting on the massive inundation of emotionally charged information that is pouring out from all aspects of human society. Perhaps they felt what I sometimes feel. It is as though we humans are flooded with rage and pain. They listened to the reports of messengers arriving from battlefields. We hear our reports every night on the news as a correspondent from some war torn part of the world reports on blood, death and atrocity. Closer to home, the morning paper almost weekly describes the latest fraud investigation on a public figure who has embezzled money meant for the common good.

Do you feel as I do, that there are times when choosing to watch a re-run of some old TV series is emotionally more healthy than viewing the news; or that reading only sports and the comics make a better beginning to the day than the front page. If so, those choices are probably psychologically better than reading the day's reality.

In our Wednesday morning Bible Study, we have been giving ourselves a tutorial on the Quran. We have discovered three things. The first is that the earliest written words of Mohammed are found toward the end of the Quran, not at the beginning. The second is that those early words are a challenge to Muslims to live faithful, compassionate and just lives that they may be welcomed into the kingdom of God. Those who are not faithful will be sent to the place of eternal fire. The third point is that there is great similarity between

the teachings of Jesus and those of Mohammed. The following is taken from Sura or chapter 90:

Does he think there is no power over him. He says, "look at the goods I devoured." Does he think no one sees him? Did we not endow him with eyes, lips and tongue and guide him to the two high plains. And yet he did not climb the steep pass. What can tell you of the steep pass? To free a slave, to feed the destitute on a day of hunger, a kinsman orphan or a stranger out of luck in need.

Be of those who keep the faith, who counsel one another to patience, who counsel to compassion. They are of the right. As for those who cast our signs away, they are of the left. Over them a vault of fire.

At the heart of the early teaching of Islam is the same lesson as the Great Commandment. "Love your God with all your heart and mind and soul and strength and love your neighbor as yourself." In fact, this same teaching is present in all religions. So, what is wrong? What don't we understand? What is it within us that ignores those teachings? Is it tribalism? Is compassion reserved only for those of the same family, race, religious belief or political persuasion?

This passage from Isaiah that we heard today is a universal invitation to everyone who thirsts; everyone who hungers. Yes, it begins with David the king but this universal invitation extends beyond Judah to all peoples. Isaiah says: "You shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you." "Seek the Lord while he may be found," Isaiah continues, "call upon him while he is still near."

What these words mean to me is different from Isaiah's teaching. Isaiah spoke to a people still in exile but shortly to return to Jerusalem. The people in exile felt abandoned by God. Many, indeed believed that God stayed with the land of Israel and left the people to find their own way in exile. I hear these words as a challenge to all believers; Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu. No matter how the Deity is defined, it is time to take God seriously; to welcome God's presence into the center of human existence. While I would love to suggest that the United Nations declare that all races and tribes immediately cease warfare and begin to find common humanity with neighbors and strangers, it will not happen... yet. But celebrating God's presence in our circle, we proclaim the reality of the Divine.

So, as we participate today in both the Sacrament of Baptism and that of Holy Communion, let us open our hearts to the reality of God's presence in each life here; in Harrison's and his connection through his family to all of us. Let us pass the bread and the juice with profound recognition that in the bread and the cup, we share with one another not only our friendship but also our hopes and disappointments, our joys and our sorrows. With our participation in this holy meal let us open ourselves to the miracle of love. May this community be strengthened by the love of each of us and may we each go forth to proclaim the presence of God through our words and actions. May we be simply and joyfully bearers of love. Amen.