What's with the Water? World Communion Sunday on Creation 4
Reflection for 4 October 2020 on Exodus 17:1-7
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I am embarrassed to admit that "retail therapy" cheers me up. You know what I mean? With the availability of online shopping, this time of COVID19 has been no exception. During the Festival of Homiletics (preaching), which was "virtual" (online) last spring, we still had the opportunity to shop at the usual vendors, just without getting to see the products in person. I likely would not have, if I had tried them on in person, but I bought three (count them: 2 black and 1 teal; 2 short-sleeve and 1 long sleeve) new clergy shirts and a new white alb. Some might agree that the condition of my clergy shirts warranted investing in new ones, but I didn't need a new alb. But it was on sale and sure looked good on the model!

It's amazing what one can think one *HAS TO HAVE* when those seasonal sale flyers start arriving. But it's not a matter of life or death! Nor was my impulse shopping for clergy-wear. We won't die if we miss out on the "door crasher" specials.

In contrast, the people of Israel in today's story were in a life and death situation. They were braving the elements in the desert, in danger of dying of thirst and hunger. Two weeks ago we heard that they were provided with "manna," a strange flaky substance that appeared on the ground each morning. So-named, because "manna" means "What is it?" This, along with an occasional flock of quail, supposedly sustained them for 40 years!

In today's story, it's water they need. Water IS a need. We will die without it. **Water** makes up a significant fraction of the human **body**, both by weight and by volume. An average adult body is **45 to 65 percent** water—that's roughly 45 quarts. Men are more watery than women. A man's body is **50 to 65 percent** water, compared to **45 to 60 percent** for a woman. In infants, the figure is a whopping **70-75 percent**.[i] Some of us have a lower amount of water, because body fat contains approximately **10 percent water**, while muscle is approximately **75 percent water**.

So, yes, those Israelites were going to die without water.

Since Canada is a water-rich country, we Canadians often take it for granted. We come in at first place for the percentage of our area—almost 9%—that is water, as the second largest country in the world. Russia is larger, but only 4% of it is water, so it comes in second for amount of water.

The people of Israel were trying to live in a desert; the wilderness of Sin or Sinai desert, named after the "moon goddess" worshipped by indigenous peoples there.

People die of dehydration in deserts; the need is real. As the story in Exodus tells us, God provided. Moses struck a rock and water came from the rock and the people's thirst was quenched.

Was it a miracle? Apparently there are rock-like formations that are known to store water. Hitting such rocks to release the water is a skill developed by some desert dwellers. Does that make it any less of a sign that they could depend on God? Nope.

The slow, 40 year wilderness journey of the people of Israel is about them undergoing a slow change from being a people who were enslaved by harsh taskmasters in Egypt to a people who could rely on and follow the God who provided for them and called them to freedom to live responsibly in a new way, in a new place. They could have gotten there a LOT faster, but evidently they needed that transition time. Sound familiar? Think about how interim ministry is like that: a transition time to change us from people enslaved by old ways (believing we need more people, more giving of time, talent, and treasure) into people who can trust that God has a mission for us NOW, the way we are NOW, though it is quite a different identity from who we were in the past. We will be having discussions about that in which you can participate on Zoom in upcoming weeks.

One of the tragic things we have come to realize in our own country, is that many First Nations communities in Canada do not have safe water. One factor in contamination of the water table is a consequence of some mining operations. As you know, one of my avocations is advocacy for local peoples around the world who are effected by mining. We don't have to go to another country to witness the effects. We know water can be contaminated by such things as fracking or by transporting oil or gas great distances. Our Wider Work committee and Climate Study group have studied these topics and we have the opportunity to send a letter to Premier Ford about a proposed pipeline through the Beverly Swamp and other environmentally significant areas of rural Hamilton. Let's do our part!

Meanwhile, it is absolutely unacceptable that many of our neighbours in Six Nations of the Grand River, located within about a thirty minute drive from Hamilton, do not have potable water. As recently as 2018, only about nine per cent of residents of the reserve had household access to clean water. Many don't even have functioning water pipes at all, forcing them to buy jugs of water and haul them to their homes.[ii] Can you imagine having to do that with the added cleaning and handwashing that helps protect us during this Covid19 pandemic?

In spite of that the Six Nations of the Grand River have had an excellent response to the pandemic, engaging in COVID19 precautions in advance of Provincial government guidelines, including closing reserve borders, with checkpoints. Their website says:

Our entire response has been guided by Ogwehoweh values like trust, sharing, and collective community responsibility.[iii]

They have collectively protected each other in this time, even as their community, like many Indigenous communities, lives with disease and death due to long-neglected water quality. What is so ironic is that, because *they* consider water sacred and because of *their* water stewardship, we non-indigenous communities have safe water. And why don't *they*, the people who protected the water for eons?

"Some studies, including a recent one based in Nova Scotia, have found that over the years, toxic dump sites were placed in closer proximity to black, Indigenous and other non-white communities. Their dangerous runoffs may have seriously impacted these communities' health over the years."[iv] This is a form of **Environmental racism** resulting from White Privilege and White Supremacy.

(Several EPUC folks know what I am referring to, as we just finished a month of discussing racism and how we are both a part of a system of racism and that we can be part of dismantling it. If you missed it and want to participate if we offer it another time, please be in touch with me.)

It is incumbent on us to preserve and safeguard the water supply that has been so generously supplied in the country in which we live, the water respected and stewarded by indigenous peoples for thousands of years before settlers arrived and began ruining it with our supposed development. Without clean water, we and other life forms simply won't survive.

This first Sunday in October is often called "World Communion" Sunday. It was started in the United States in 1933 as a way of giving hope and unity in a time of great poverty, divisiveness, hopelessness and unrest. It was never more needed than now, in this global pandemic and the political pandemonium in the country to the south of us.

While it is observed more in North America than elsewhere, World Communion Sunday is an opportunity for us to realize that we are part of a world-wide community of people who gather and are nourished at the table of Jesus. In Christian churches all around the world, people are celebrating this observance today.

Some use regular white bread cut into little cubes, like we often do. Some use a common loaf and break off a piece for themselves or are given one. Some use wafers. When I received communion with my mother in her Lutheran retirement home shortly before she died, the pastor dipped a fair-sized wafer in wine and placed it directly on our tongues. As some churches re-open during this second pandemic wave, many are using pre-packaged communion elements not touched by human hands. Ministers are

joking that their words at communion will be, rather than “take and eat,”… “tear open and eat…”

Some churches use wine, while others use grape juice as we do, since our roots are in the old Methodist tradition. The use of unfermented grape juice by Methodists since the late nineteenth century, expresses pastoral concern for recovering alcoholics, enables the participation of children and youth, and supports the church's witness of abstinence.

In some churches, people come forward for communion, either kneeling at a railing or standing at communion stations as we do at Christmas time. Others receive the bread and grape juice in individual servings at their seats, as we usually do, and wait for everyone to partake together. The first time I communed in a United Church, I didn’t know we were supposed to wait and commune at the same time. That was very embarrassing! There were no instructions and the assumption was that everyone was an insider and knew how to do it. (That is a huge lesson for us “long-timers”!! Explanations go a long way to enable newcomers to feel welcome and comfortable.)

Sometimes, in intimate services with small numbers, such as on Maundy Thursday, we gather in a circle and share together. There are many other variations.

Despite differences in style, there is more than enough that is similar in a communion service to remind us of our unity in Christ when we are worshipping away from home.

Holy communion reminds us, again and again, that we can rely on God for our needs. And it challenges us to the kind of ministry where we can be God’s agents in a hurting, hungry and thirsty world. Someone may have to go out and give that rock a good whack occasionally!

The food served at communion is not enough to keep us from dying of physical starvation or thirst, but our faith tradition reminds us that we need more than physical food and water to survive.

Both Matthew and Luke tell a story of Satan tempting Jesus—after a forty day fast in the desert—to turn the stones around him into bread. Verse 4 in chapter 4 in both gospels tell of Jesus answering: It is written that **humans** shall **not live by bread alone**, but by every word of God. (That coincidence of being in the same chapter and verse is pretty remarkable, but they DID both use a common source for writing their gospels!)

When we gather at the communion table, we are reminded that we are joined in faith by people around the world. We hold these people in prayer, as they hold us. When our faith grows dim through discouragement or disaster, they hold the light for us, as we do for them.

It happens both virtually and in person, locally! It happens when we gather for meals at the church. It happens when folks on the Wider Work committee gather at someone's home over the holidays. It happens when the guys gather for coffee or when some of us go to lunch after yoga or after worship services. It happens when the community shares a meal at EPUC on Christmas Day, essentially like having dinner with family.

And our sharing communion is also like having dinner with family. Today is very different from how we have ever shared communion before, but it won't likely be the last time we do it this way. If you participate in our worship service on Zoom or via phone at 10:30 on Sunday morning, it really is a communion experience, as the bread and juice is dedicated by the minister and we eat and drink together. (If you do it yourself at some other time, it is called an AGAPE (Love) meal. That's okay, too.)

Today, as we sit, each in our own living space, we will be joined together at God's table figuratively, to receive strength and light and hope and love to nourish and strengthen us to proclaim God's love and kin-dom with our lives. May it be so.

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[i] according to statistics compiled by the International Bottled Water Association.

[ii] https://www.cbc.ca/radio/outintheopen/neighbours-1.4618733/why-so-few-people-on-six-nations-reserve-have-clean-running-water-unlike-their-neighbours-1.4618968, accessed on 1 Oct 2020.

[iii] https://ppforum.ca/policy-speaking/protecting-a-people-the-six-nations-success-in-covid-19-prevention/

[iv] IBID, CBC article in second note.