



## Water, Water Everywhere: Seeing It Anew

JENNIFER ANDERSON KOENIG

**T**he wall of water that blows past your house in a storm. A small pool of water on hot cement drying up before your eyes. The gleeful sounds of children at the local swimming pool. Pictures of water sitting calmly, even resolutely around homes and trees and playground equipment in North Dakota or around office buildings and factories in Japan. Open fire hydrants spewing water and bringing relief to city inhabitants in the scorching sun. Water bottles clipped to students' backpacks. Water that is merciful to bodies plagued by illness or fatigue. It is amazing how attentive you become after you have been asked to write about water.

You read an article about Africa and health and learn that standing water is a resort town for mosquitoes carrying malaria, a parasitic disease that contributes to the death of a person every 45 seconds. You learn that standing water occurs most often in areas traumatized by armed conflict or stressed by severe weather—refugee camps and disaster relief outposts that do not possess adequate facilities for large, transient populations. It turns out that peacemaking (or lack thereof) affects water, affects the ordinary details of daily existence.

You listen to a radio interview (on a cooking show!) about hypoxia, the problem of diminishing oxygen in huge and growing areas of the world's oceans, which is changing water habitat, forcing sea creatures closer to the surface, and making many species more vulnerable.

You go to a lecture and find out that the average United States citizen uses 90–100 gallons of water per day while billions of people elsewhere use 1.5 gallons.

You stand on the shore of Lake Superior, water as far as the eye can see, and you think about the woman at the well in John's Gospel (John 4:3–30) who could see only dry land for her life, who initially wanted just enough water to carry home.

You remember the cold, cold spring water in the Cannon River rushing over student and pastor, the naming of the Trinity in the midst of this natural wonder, with a snake swimming by, a fish jumping, and the congregation singing joyfully as the shivering—now baptized—student climbs back up the river's banks into waiting towels and warm embraces.

*(continued on page 74)*

## Water, Water Everywhere: Sharing Its Life

JIM LINDUS

I am a parish pastor. I live on an island in the Pacific Northwest. Water is a part of the rhythm of island living. Though I cannot see it, I wake up every morning surrounded by water (waterfront and water-view property is very expensive). If I want to leave the island and go to “America,” I have to take a ferry and sail across the waters of the Puget Sound. Last night I sat on the beach with friends, eating crab that was harvested that very day from the water. Water comes from above as well. The rainy season in the Pacific Northwest is nine months long.

I am a parish pastor. My work in the church revolves around water. Water is used to baptize the young and the old. I have waded into the Jordan River with more than 300 of my parishioners as they affirmed their baptisms. I have officiated at funerals for those who have lost their lives tragically in the water. I use water as I brew some 400 cups of coffee a week. And each Sunday during the closing hymn I indiscriminately fling water from the baptismal font upon the faithful. Once I even used a high-powered squirt gun from the pulpit to remind people of God’s love.

I am a parish pastor. However, long before I carried that title I was my mother’s son. My life began like yours. A moment of passion followed by a lifetime of dependence upon water. God knit us together while we floated in the hidden aquifer of our mother’s womb. Water broke, announcing the labor of our arrival. As air filled our lungs for the first time, our bodies were 80% water. From our bawling cry to our final breath, among the highest priorities of our subconscious is the daily replenishing of that life-giving water.

Human creatures can survive weeks without food, but a few days without water and our existence is in peril. From the beginning of the human story it was quite simple: those who did not drink water would dry up and die. Consequently, our ancestors built their lives and communities around wells, rivers, lakes, and oceans. They planned their trade routes and their living patterns based largely upon the availability of fresh water. It had nothing to do with the view. It was a matter of survival.

Scientists tell us that the overall amount of water on our planet has remained

*(continued on page 75)*

It is amazing what comes to mind after you have been asked to write about water. Water is everywhere to be seen, experienced, and considered. Everywhere this sign of baptism with its potential for destruction and restoration. Everywhere this sacramental symbol of life in Christ—a life that is honest, haunted, provocative, powerful, and hopeful. If only every person, every child of God, would be asked to write an article about water so that we would see it everywhere and be reminded at every turn who we are. If only we would remember at every turn that our strivings, separation, and stubborn sin are washed away in God’s holy waters and that we rise up again and again—made new.

“Water is the new oil,” we are told. The “water wars” have already begun and will intensify because, even more than oil, water brings power. And as it becomes a thoroughgoing commodity, a political tool, a symbol of wealth and injustice, what will we Christians and other devout religious people say? Will we enter the conversation soon or wait until all associations with water have become muddied by corruption or inequity? And will that then change how we in the church talk about water and sacraments? Will the role of water in world dominance change how we think about it as symbol of our holy and eternal life? Or will it aid a deeper understanding that God’s waters are a gift beyond the reach of our merit or greed, like the woman at the well who went home with “living water” but without her water jar.

Over years we come to comprehend that our strengths and weaknesses comprise the same fiber—good use and ill use and idolatry all woven together. Always the tension of saint and sinner. Our relationship with water feels similar. So available to some of us as to be unremarkable, making us careless about it. Yet, so essential as the source of life inside our bodies and for our land that we fight for the right to be careless about it. We humans are strange creatures: nuanced, truly reverent, dangerously covetous, able to love God and God’s gifts while neglecting them too. But God’s heart remains true.

From the beginning the creation was good. Gen 1:1–2 reads: “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.” Tertullian reminds us that water is the “primal dwelling place” of the Holy Spirit.\*

Water—running through your hands, rolling down your face, raining from the clouds—water is a modern-day Isaiah or John the Baptist or Paul, a prophet and preacher, calling us to reside with our whole, embodied lives inside God’s whole, mysterious, terrifying, and beautiful everlasting life. ☩

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\**Tertullian’s Homily on Baptism*, ed. and trans. Ernest Evans (London: SPCK, 1964) 19.

the same for two billion years. That means that the same water that now makes up your body was once in the body of your ancestors. The same water that greets you in the shower once bathed dinosaurs. The same water that quenches your thirst was once mixed with dirt to bring sight to a blind man. The water that sits frozen in the glaciers was present in Gen 1:2 when “a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.”

I am a parish pastor. On a few occasions I have been present as little ones have emerged from the birth canal. On many occasions I have been with dear saints as they have breathed their last. The similarities at the beginning and end of life are striking. The labor of birth and the labor of death. The holding of hands. The wiping of the brow. The calming voice of a loved one. The promise of rest and an end of pain. A family circle anticipating a first embrace, or a family circle grieving the embraces that never were or will be no more. And there is water, too. Salty tears running down the face. Perspiration on the forehead. Our final pleasure is a simple pleasure: ice chips on a spoon, fed to us by the hands that care for us.

Whether you live on an island or in the big city or in the farm fields of the Midwest, the value of this most common and precious element cannot be underestimated. There is not a single day in our lives when we do not interact with water.

I am a parish pastor. I have the best job in the world. Each day I am called upon to proclaim God’s love. It is not an easy calling, for day-to-day living is hard and dangerous. People are unfaithful and unforgiving. Our sin and the sin of others leave us broken. It would be pretty easy to forget God’s promises. It would be pretty easy to forget that we are loved. But in God’s wisdom we have been provided with the perfect sermon illustrations: the common elements of bread, wine, and water.

So when you brush your teeth, remember that God loves you. When you dodge the raindrops, remember that God forgives you. When you are singing in the shower surrounded by H<sub>2</sub>O, remember the promise of life everlasting. In the beginning and in the end there is water: a most common, necessary, and unavoidable reminder of God’s love. ☩

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