

The Spiritual Healing of Water

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June 23, 2024

Matthew 3:13-17

Hear how we can create a connection with God through nature and water this Sunday. Especially in moments of despair, we can find God's presence and be reminded of God's grace through the sight and sound of water, demonstrating its spiritual healing powers.

Both our everyday life and our spiritual journey can be filled with trials and tribulations. I know for me it can be: Where am I going to find time this week to meet my deadlines at work? Not only what I am going to make for dinner, but do I even have all of the necessary ingredients in my kitchen to make dinner? Am I responsible for picking up the kids after school and how am I going to get them to their after school activities? And on the spiritual side it can be that feel of loneliness or a lack of support. It is during these times that I have recently had the awareness of both when these feelings occur inside me and what the appropriate remedy is: water.

I was feeling tired and exhausted the other day and I just needed something soothing to get me out of my funk. I know it may seem that I have aged out of it, but one of my go-tos when I feel this way is to watch Mr. Rogers Neighborhood. However, on this specific occasion, I actually turned on Bob Ross' Joy of Painting. I enjoy listening to these two (2) PBS media legends, because they have an incredibly smooth, soft, inviting, and quite frankly uplifting way of connecting with the viewer that always puts me at ease and makes me feel better about myself. As I was watching Bob Ross paint his nature scene, he began describing to his viewers, whom he always engages as art students, about how to approach drawing a creek. Rather than focusing on the physical technique, he encourages his audience to "think how water would think." I literally paused the episode so I could take a moment to ponder his question. How does water think? On that day, I landed on "serene, peaceful, yet powerful and unobstructed". Bob Ross continued that his creek would be "splashing and crashing" and then "find little rocks and the water just falls right over to make these happy little waterfalls. All kinds of little things going on – so many happy little things." As I continue through my sermon, its these "happy little things" I ask you to focus on as it is these items where I find – and hope you can to – God's presence and grace.

In the Gospel text we heard today Matthew describes the baptism of Jesus. This is a story I have read, heard, and even seen recreated many times. However, as I prepared this sermon I gathered new perspective. As an engineer by study, I tend to have a very right or wrong point of view to a fault and as such I always interpreted this story very literally in the sense that God created the sacrament of baptism for us all and shared this opportunity with Jesus to rid Him of any original sin. I still hold this interpretation, but I

have now expanded my perception to include that God has shared with us many bountiful gifts in nature and was very purposeful in selecting water as the delivery for His grace with us. Perhaps as one of these “happy little things”. In fact, “Presbyterians describe baptism as a sign and seal of the covenant of grace made by God through Jesus and extended to us. In baptism, God claims us as beloved children and members of Christ’s body, the church, washing us clean from sin as we renounce the power of evil and seek the will and way of God.”¹ None of this is probably new for much of you, but the point I am trying to make is that we are only baptized once but stress, frustration, despair, doubt, anxiety, loneliness – all the challenges I described initially – can all creep into our mind or life at any moment. It’s in those times that we may be in need and are seeking to improve our spiritual health. And I am here to tell you – that at least for me personally – being in the presence of water in nature is God’s sign of that covenant. His ability to show Himself to us and remind us of His grace.

The Bible references water 722 times² and God has several uses for water throughout that run the entire spectrum – some not so nice (for example the great flood of Noah and the Ark or the Egyptians being washed away in the Red Sea) to those that are life giving (Moses striking the rock and God providing water for the Israelites), but I want to focus on those that demonstrate God’s grace. I am focusing on these references as I have a very personal and spiritual connection with water. I grew up in a town called Lake Elmo, I graduated from Stillwater high school, I spent countless hours frolicking in the St. Croix River, I absolutely adore the Patapsco River and Patapsco Valley State Park, and most recently I have spent 17 years and counting focusing on solving community water challenges around the globe. For these reasons I have always come to find spiritual healing in the presence of water and nature. It is common for me to go on a hike or a walk along a water body to help clear my head whenever I feel stressed or troubled. Even the sound of a babbling brook or waterfall can put me at ease. Just like the “splashing and crashing” that Bob Ross was describing; the sound of a water current is one of those “happy little things” for me.

It's a shame that it took me so long in life to realize that my entire life I have felt this connection because as mentioned before through water is one of the ways God demonstrates His grace to us. In hindsight it makes sense that this wasn't abundantly clear to me initially. Going back two (2) weeks to Dorothy's Message from June 9th, our spirituality has been growing in us all our lives. As I have aged and have more clarity on my spirituality, I now recognize that being in the presence of water provides me spiritual healing.

In Psalm 84 we hear “Happy are those who live in your house, ever singing your praise. Happy are those whose strength is in you, in whose heart are the highways to Zion. As they go through the valley of Baca they make it a place of springs; the early rain also covers it with pools.” Here the Psalmist (the sons of Korah) demonstrates that worshipping and/or sharing the word of God is equivalent to providing fresh water.

Along this line of thinking, I also believe the reverse to be true. When we are in the presence of water and nature, we are in the presence of God sharing His grace with us.

Personally, as a bibliophobe, or someone who doesn't care for reading, I find joy in the fact that God has diversified His methods in sharing His presence and grace with us. And let's not forget the important role that the Holy Spirit plays. As we return to the original Gospel text, "as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to Him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on Him." I hope you all have experienced something similar in your lives where the Holy Spirit descends upon you and heals your soul.

The dove's symbolism is well documented in the church. PCUSA's logo includes the shape of a descending dove. According to PCUSA, the dove "affirms the role of the Spirit in both inspiring and interpreting Scripture in the life of the church." I can only hope that my inspiration and interpretation of the Scripture today is both well-founded and hopefully connecting with you all. Doves are seen to communicate God's long-reaching presence, security, and the promise of guaranteed hope. An interpretation is that doves were selected to demonstrate God's presence because of their abundance around the world. In this way God can manifest His presence to everyone with the sighting of this wonderful bird. This omnipresence and the abundance of water in this world lead to the dove's intersection with water frequently. Here from the Song of Solomon 5:12, we hear the poet describing another's beauty: "His eyes are like doves beside springs of water, bathed in milk, fitly set." Just as we heard in Jesus' baptism; the dove is nearby the water. The poet here is describing an individual's beauty, but I read this passage and recognize nature's beauty as well. God is sharing the dove and water with us to show His presence and share His grace. What a great way to uplift our spiritual health.

Now I encourage you all to find that place or memory in your mind where you have felt the Holy Spirit's presence. I have had the good fortune of visiting some of God's most awe inspiring places the last few years. The ice cold waters of Grinnell Lake facing the Angel Wing Mountain beneath the Grinnell Glacier and the incredible sweeping mountains that form a valley and bowl near the Bird Woman Falls in Glacier National Park. The sight of snowcapped mountains along Vancouver Harbour whilst walking through the beautifully scented cedar, fir, and spruce trees in Stanley Park in Vancouver. These are just a few examples of God's most amazing work. These places are so jaw-droppingly beautiful that there is no denying the presence, power, and grace of God.

I use these examples as hyperbole of God's awesomeness. However, as we hear in Deuteronomy 32:1-3 it can sometimes be the simple presence and sound of water that can deliver God's greatness: "Give ear, O heavens, and I will speak; let the earth hear the words of my mouth. May my teaching drop like the rain, my speech condense like the dew; like gentle rain on grass, like showers on new growth. For I will proclaim the name of the Lord; ascribe greatness to our God." We see another example this time from Moses where delivering the word of God is equivalent to sharing water with the soil and foliage.

Again, I am compelled to believe the reverse is true as well. As we sit on our porch and listen to the pitter-patter of the rain, as we witness the rejuvenating powers water provides for the grass, plants, and trees; we are just blessed to have that as one of our many connections to our Lord – or one of our “happy little things”.

This Scripture was shared to us by Moses and as I read it, I was reminded of Dorothy and Ken’s covenant themed Children’s Messages from earlier this year. As you may recall Moses also documents the Lord as saying: “I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth” from Genesis 9:13. God’s covenant – God’s promise – to look after the Earth, all its people, and all creatures. What incredible reassurance! And for the sign of this covenant to be something as amazing as a rainbow. I mean have you ever seen a rainbow, approached someone and said, hey look at that rainbow over there, and there response to be “I’m not interested.” No! – Because every single rainbow delivers joy and happiness. And let me remind you there is no rainbow without the rain – without the healing power of water.

Again, drawing from personal experience, I would like to share one more example of what/where I think of these simpler moments in the presence of water. Whenever I am seeking the spiritual healing of water, whenever I have those feelings of doubt, one of my favorite places to visit is a creek here in Catonsville. Some of you, maybe all of you know about it, but tucked between Dunmore and Somerset Ave there is a nice sized creek filled with many stones. I sit in awe of the water trying to find all the little nooks and crannies between these large rocks. I rest and listen to the rush of the water or the fall of the water as the elevation changes. I sit and look to the heavens and hear the birds make their calls or the squirrels collecting their food. While I may not be physically performing the sacrament of baptism, while I may not be resurfacing to the water as Jesus did in our story today, while I may not be visited by a dove; it is in those moments that I do feel the presence of the Holy Spirit and all those trials and tribulations I mentioned earlier are washed away. This is how I know that I have gained the spiritual healing I was seeking and I pray that you are able to find the Holy Spirit’s presence and God’s grace in the same way I do – through water. Amen.

Sources

¹ <https://www.pcusa.org/news/2016/1/21/what-presbyterians-believe-baptism/>

² <https://www.christianpost.com/news/one-important-word-that-appears-in-the-bible-722-times.html>

Bob Ross, *The Joy of Painting*, Season 10, Episode 4, “Secluded Bridge”

Bible References

1. Gospel Scripture – Matthew 3:13-17, The Baptism of Jesus
2. Psalm 84:4-6 – The Sons of Korah Describing the Joy of Worship
3. Deuteronomy 32:1-3 – The Song of Moses
4. Song of Solomon 5:12 – Colloquy of Friends and Bride
5. Genesis 9:13 – God's Covenant with Noah