

WATER BRAIDING WATER: THE MYTHIC RIVER FLOWS ON

Water Communion at

**Williamsburg Unitarian Universalists
Williamsburg, VA
September 9, 2007**

CHALICE LIGHTING AND CALL TO WORSHIP

Inversnaid
by Gerard Manley Hopkins

This darksome burn, horseback brown,
His rollrock highroad roaring down,
In coop and in comb the fleece of his foam
Flutes and low to the lake falls home.

A windpuff-bonnet of fáwn-fróth
Turns and twindles over the broth
Of a pool so pitchblack, féll-frówning,
It rounds and rounds Despair to drowning.

Degged with dew, dappled with dew
Are the groins of the braes that the brook treads through,
Wiry heathpacks, fitches of fern,
And the beadbonny ash that sits over the burn.

What would the world be, once bereft
Of wet and of wildness? Let them be left,
O let them be left, wildness and wet;
Long live the weeds and the wilderness yet.

* * *

Called by picture, piano, and poem;

Called by Water, Well, and Wellness;

Called to Wholeness, called to worship;

Welcome, Welcome, come to the well and drink.

SERMON

by Rev. Preston Moore

The Samaritan Woman at the Well is one of the most symbolic stories in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Its central symbol – water – is also an essential element in many other religious traditions: in the African religion called Yoruba, in Paganism, in Hinduism with its seven sacred rivers, and many others.

Water, and particularly the water called “living water,” runs through the Hebrew Bible and Christian Scripture like that vigorous mountain stream in Gerard Manley Hopkins’ poem this morning. It appears in Genesis, in the story of Hagar; in Exodus, in the Israelites’ quarrel with Moses over water; in Isaiah, Jeremiah, and the Psalms. In Song of Solomon, the erotic biblical love poem, a lady refers to her lover as “a well of living water.” In Christian Scripture, baptism with water replaces tribalism and heredity as a dramatic liberalization -- a universalizing way into spirit.

The well appears over and over again in the Bible as a place of significant encounters. It is a symbol of revelation, an opening into depth and sustenance. It also represents an incision into Mother Earth, a wound if you will, albeit not one that aggrieves her.

The Samaritan woman herself is an unmistakable sign that something important is about to happen. The Samaritans committed an unpardonable sin against the primacy of Jerusalem -- establishing a competing temple at Shechem. When the Disciples find Jesus conversing with the Samaritan woman, they are taken aback. Religious teachers, always male in that era, did not speak with women in public. As a Samaritan and a woman, in ancient Judaic history she is a symbol of what was considered low, suspicious, despised. She herself reflects this, wondering aloud why a Jew would be asking a Samaritan for a drink.

But Jesus makes of her a symbol of his universalizing ministry. He invites her to become a spiritual well for others, “a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.” The message is clear: if a Samaritan woman can be called to this ministry, then anyone can.

It is a tale of separation transforming into wholeness, one thing braiding with another: Jerusalem and Shechem, the Jews and Samaritans, the peoples of the world; the physical and the spiritual; the finite and the infinite, reuniting humanity with what calls to us from beyond time and space; and the literal and the metaphorical – when the Samaritan woman hears Jesus speak of an ever-replenishing spring of water, she says “great! I won’t have to fetch water from this well any more.”

I picture Jesus responding, very kindly, “my dear, what kind of water do you think we’re talking about here?”

And there, right there, is the one troublesome symbol in the story: Jesus. He speaks of making living water available to people, about being a well of spirituality from which others can drink. Later in the Book of John (7:38), he says, “out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of

living water.” The Samaritan Woman feels called by his words. She believes. But if we, the children of the Age of Reason, were there at the well, we surely would cross-examine a little. “How can we possibly do this?” we would ask. “We are not divine. We don’t have that kind of magic. We are not Jesus. In what must we believe? What do we have in our hearts that could possibly bring forth such spiritual rivers? What is the practice?”

I believe Jesus would answer us this way. “Forget about divinity attributed to me by others. It is their symbol, not mine. Did you not hear me ask for a drink of literal water at this well? I thirst, as you do. To be a spiritual well, you need believe in nothing more than the possibility of transformation. You already have in your hearts the only things needed to bring forth such spiritual rivers – the sharable experience of your own human joy and suffering, and the capacity to listen with compassion as others do the same.”

“Your greatest gift to the world is the sharable experience of your wounds, from which every one of you has bled your own living water. These are the incisions life has made into your soul, just as the well is an incision into the earth. The place of wound is also the place of growth, transformation, and nobility.”

. . . So I believe he would say, or words to that effect.

It is a marvelous paradox. We would never wish wound and loss for anyone, and yet such experiences are where great spiritual value is found. Religion is full of paradox, which is simply truth standing on its head to get our attention. It is a paradox that, in turn, stands upon its head the ancient belief – repudiated over and over again by Jesus -- that wound and disability were signs of moral defect. It is just the other way around.

The story and its symbols, of course, are ancient ones, set in an ancient culture, long time gone. Yet it still has power for us today. Many people in the modern world still struggle for literal water. And all of us have a bodily knowing of its life-giving quality and symbolic power. When we swim in it, sail upon it, stand next to it, even see pictures of it and hear its sounds, it stirs something primal in us. This is what it means to have a symbolic experience. The symbol speaks directly to the deeper part of ourselves, down below cognition, in the language already embedded there.

Ritual is symbolic behavior, consciously performed. When we each pour our water into a bowl every time the first day of a new church year comes around, it is not just a pleasant minuet on a Sunday morning. It is not the empty formality dismissed as primitive by the secular world. It is a covenant to merge our spiritual selves in the vessel of our religious community, to continue to write ourselves into the mythic narrative. It is the re-inscribing of an ancient metaphor in deep memory and in consciousness, at the same time.

We invoke this ancient metaphor

because it reveals the vexations of daily life
to be only the surface of an immense river of meaning and healing
that flows inexorably toward wholeness.

We convene and covenant again today to continue our shared journey toward wholeness, carried by the mythic river that flowed before we appeared and will flow on after we disappear. We changed by it, and it changed forever by the merging of our waters, our wounds.

World without end. AMEN.