

Isaiah 55:10-13 ~ John 4:7-15

*Living Water*

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter ~ Sacrament of Baptism ~ Earth Care Sunday ~ April 21, 2024

The Rev. Dr. Laurie Brubaker Davis

*Introduction to Second Lesson*

You may not have realized that freshly baptized Atlas John Hillis, just three months old, is *already* exerting a disproportionate amount of power here in our little corner of the earth. Definitely already punching way above his weight. And I'm not talking about the absolute disruption within the ecosystem of his mom and dad, or of all new parents all over the earth (i.e. the lack of sleep, the constant wondering "are we doing this right?"). The power, the weight, I'm talking about is how Atlas' baptism today, on Earth Care Sunday 2024, has inspired our Green Team to center our whole worship service this year on God's gift of water. Thank you, Atlas!

Since his middle name is John, I chose our gospel lesson I am about to read, from John chapter 4, beginning at verse 7. Well, that's *one* reason. The other reason will become evident. I will be reading only a very small snippet of Jesus' longest conversation in any of our four canonical gospels with another human being. And where do you suppose this longest conversation took place? At a well, at Jacob's well, to be precise. Jesus was passing through Samaria, and a Samaritan woman had come to draw water from this well near her home, a daily task. Like all of us, she needed it for drinking, cooking, washing. And Jesus went to that same well because he and his disciple buddies were on a long trek by foot. By noon, Jesus was thirsty.

It you think about it, their common need for water was actually the catalyst that brought these two very different people (a Jewish man and a Samaritan woman) together to have this extraordinary, extended, transformative conversation. Needs we all share—not only with other human beings, but with all creation—have the potential to either draw us together across our differences. Or to divide and destroy us. The choice is ours. This whole 42 verse long story testifies to God's way of drawing us across our differences together, and not apart.

For now, let's settle into this well spring of God's Holy Word, opening our ears and hearts, trusting God's word will not return empty, but shall accomplish that which God has purposed for each of us.

*Sermon*

Think for a moment about what you have done since you first woke up today and realized it was Sunday. And that you were going to church. I'm not asking you what your first thought was. I am asking you to remember what you have done since that moment. I am willing to bet that at least once, probably more than once, you used water: to wash your face, make coffee, cook some breakfast, brush your teeth, take some pills. Or maybe you watered a plant or gave your dog or cat a dish of water. Raise your hand if you have used water at least once since you woke up... That's right, I was pretty sure that would be all of us.

Now, this one is more fun: recall a time or a moment when water gave you great joy. It could be something from yesterday or years ago. It may have involved a body of water, the sight or sound of it. Or it could have been a time when you needed a drink of water. Remember the joy that water has given you. And you guessed it: I'm going to invite you to share that joyful water moment for 30 seconds with a person sitting next to or near you. Find your person. I will call time, for the second person to share back.... Ready set, go!

I wish I could have heard all of your stories! If you leave our worship today having simply deepened your gratitude for the everyday gift of water, that would be enough. Through the gift of water, this primary element of life, God rebirths us, revives us, connects us, and is also calling to us. Scientifically, liquid water is the most important factor that makes a planet habitable. As we look beyond the earth for another planet that could support life, astrobiologists look for it on the surface and atmosphere of exoplanets. Water is critical to cellular function, chemical reactions, and thermal regulation. It's also a universal solvent and environment for biochemical processes, both inside and outside cells. Even more basically: We are water. We have almost the same water content in our bodies as the earth itself—60-70%! A "fun fact" that Darlene taught the children during Discovery Time.

Before you start wondering if we dropped into a science class here in the middle of what you thought was supposed to be a sermon, consider our Sacraments: The absolute center of our Christian faith and practice. Take a look at these familiar objects in our sanctuary. The baptismal font, the plate, the cup. Water, bread, wine. You may have wondered why they are always up here where you can see them—even when we are *not* having a baptism or celebrating Holy Communion. Sometimes on special Sundays, when the chancel gets crowded with people, instruments, decorations, or a Christmas play, we may wonder why we can't just tuck these pieces of furniture and unused stoneware away? These objects, these vessels are more than that. They are reminders of God's invisible love and grace made visible through three primary elements in life, taken from the earth: water, bread, and wine. Gifts of the earth from God.

For today, we are focusing on the first one, water. Which not only births us and revives us, but it also connects us. We all need it to live. Without it we die. No matter who we are, where we are from, what religion we are, or any of the other ways we divide ourselves. We share *cosmic mutuality* through water. And here are 2 *not so* "fun facts" about our precious water here on earth: First, 11 million metric tons of plastic enter the ocean every year. That is the equivalent to 1 garbage truck of plastic entering the ocean every minutes. And second, most of the plastic we use cannot be recycled. The startling truth, the "inconvenient truth" is that 95% of the plastic used in the US is not recycled. Recycling is important and it helps, but it will not solve the problem.

What does plastic in the ocean have to do with our Christian faith into which we just baptized Atlas? Perhaps we can learn an important lesson from our ecumenical friends in the Anglican Church of Canada who have recently added this vow to the questions asked at baptism: "*Will you strive to safeguard the integrity of God's creation, and respect, sustain and renew the life of the Earth?*" The answer, "I will, with God's help." I like this vow and share it with

you because it provides a clear articulation how following Christ is a commitment to care for God's creation. It makes clear that following Jesus includes respecting and caring for the earth. And it challenges us to make choices in our daily lives as Christians that work for the healing of creation." <sup>i</sup>

As Sarah Augustine has taught me: "We live in a closed system of mutual dependence. There is nothing we can do as humans to change this." Sarah Augustine, a member of the Ojibwe Anishinaabe nation and a Christian, has learned from her elders that this shared mutual dependence is also a call. This shared mutual dependence calls us to grow in relations—to consider each other relatives. We are all relations. Isn't that what our Bible teaches us, the words I shared at the end of our welcome walk with Atlas, "See what love the Father has given us that we should be called the children of God, for that is who we are." (1 John 3:1). Whether we happen to live in Gaza, Ukraine, Sudan, Haiti, or Marshfield. We are all God's children. We are relations. Our baptism words and ritual seal this truth with water.

And yet, this mutual dependence swims upstream against the message of the dominant culture is that we are self-reliant individuals, at the center of our world view. A 2014 study from the Harvard Graduate School for Education surveyed ten thousand middle and high schoolers around the United States about their values. Nearly 80% of them named high achievement or happiness as their top choice over caring for others. What's more, they accurately predicted that this was what their parents most value for them as well: the youth were three times more likely to agree than disagree with the statement: "My parents are prouder if I get good grades in my classes than if I'm a caring community member in class and school." Troubling too in this study: two thirds of the youth prioritized hard work as more important than fairness, and over 60 % ranked hard work above kindness. Other studies of American values bear similar results: Adults have a weak commitment to larger collectives and the common good.<sup>ii</sup>

We have the choice to work together in our Christian vow to safeguard the gift of God's creation. One way to do this, as noted in "Breaking the Plastic Wave," humanity can reduce the flow of plastics into the ocean by up to 80% by 2040 through a set of actions led by governments and industry—the two entities with the most power to effect large-scale change. There are no quick or simple fixes to this mass problem—but humanity can solve the ocean plastic puzzle in one generation with a concerted, broad-based, and long-term effort. Yes: Systemic change.<sup>iii</sup> We accomplish that scale of saving the earth, together. Beginning with conversations at the well; talking and listening. Or as some have put it: Jesus is coming: Plant a Tree!

Last Sunday, in the context of our shared amazement at the solar eclipse, I said that "we all speak sun." Today, I am saying that we all speak water. Wherever we were born, whatever language we speak, however we identify, or choose to brand ourselves, no matter how we vote: we all speak water. And today through the sacrament of baptism by water, we *all* vowed to "guide baby Atlas by word and deed, with love and prayer, to know and follow Christ." In 2040, he will be only 16 years old. Just imagine if we really did work together to reduce the flow of plastic by 80% before he graduates from high school.

Yes, with our words and with our actions. Large and small, we can fulfill our vow to Atlas, to God, and to this *world* that God so loved and still loves. One immediate action you can choose is to attend the forum in the Parlor following worship titled "Being the Calm in the Eye of the Storm." This will be a great chance to continue exploring and discussing what God is calling us to do about our one and only precious planet that God has placed us on and charged us with caring for.

We all speak water. Like Jesus and the Samaritan woman that one day at Jacob's well, over 2,000 years ago. Like at the dawn of creation of life on Earth. We are a part of the same closed system of mutual dependence. Beloved Community, to say "yes" to Christ is to say "yes" to the call "*to safeguard the integrity of God's creation, and respect, sustain and renew the life of the Earth.*" For all God's children, especially those who happened to be born into a life where clean drinking water is scarce.

I will give Jesus, who offers us Living Water, the final word in my sermon today. Words for his disciples then and now. First from the beginning of his instructions to his twelve disciples and finally from his last parable before he was arrested. Both instructions had to do with water. Before sending his disciples out for the first time, to teach and proclaim his message, he said to them: "*This is a large work I've called you into, but don't be overwhelmed by it. It's best to start small. Give a cool cup of water to someone who is thirsty, for instance. The smallest act of giving or receiving makes you a true apprentice.*" (Matthew 10:42 MB). And from his last teaching in Matthew 25:35, *Blessed are you "For I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink."*

---

<sup>i</sup> "Starting with the Earth: The Sacraments and Creation Care," by Paul Galbreath, *Call to Worship*, Greening the Liturgy, Volume 52.4, 2019.

<sup>ii</sup> Sarah Augustine & Sheri Hostetler, *So We & Our Children May Live: Following Jesus in Confronting the Climate Crisis*, (Herald Press: Harrington, VA, 2023), pp. 53-59.

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/trend/archive/winter-2022/our-ocean-is-choking-on-plastic-but-its-a-problem-we-can-solve>].