

# Of water and the Spirit

Sermon delivered at West Hamilton Community Church on 16 Nov 2014

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## Readings

Exodus 30:17–21

Psalms 23:1–6

John 4:1–26

## Introduction

How many of you find it difficult to connect with God during the week? Life can be busy, with no time to draw apart and be with God; humdrum – the familiarity of the same routine and same environment can leave us feeling uninspired spiritually; hard, stressful or painful, making it hard to see God's grace and goodness present with us. And sometimes life is just fine but we find ourselves dry in prayer. Our prayer times seem lacklustre, and God seems distant.

We know that God is present with us at all times and in all the places we go. So how can we more effectively connect with him in the midst of our daily life? As we seek to grow in God and live the Christian life, this becomes a very central question. Many people have devoted their lives to finding answers and many books have been written. There are of course many different ways to do it, and different ways will work best for different people. You will no doubt have your own experiences of things that work for you. Here I want to focus specifically on water as a way that God works and communicates in our lives. Why do I think that water can draw us close to God? For a start, the Bible contains (by one estimation) over 770 references to water. That is more than the number of references to worship or prayer. Clearly water is a strong Biblical theme. That is enough to get us started....

## Water is:

### **A metaphor of our need for God and God's work in us.**

The metaphor helps us understand, so we can more fully open ourselves to God. In John 4, Jesus uses the metaphor of water to open the Samaritan woman's heart to receiving him as her saviour. For her it is a powerful metaphor because thirst and water are a regular part of her daily experience. How many of you here can remember an experience of being thirsty – I mean really really thirsty? And the wonderful feeling of water wetting your parched lips and throat? It is important to remember those experiences. We need them, because in them we grasp the power and depth of the metaphor. There are many other examples around us of water bringing life. Seek out places like these, and meditate on them. In doing so you will deepen your appreciation of the biblical metaphors of water and enrich your appreciation of God's work in your life.

The passage from Exodus can be considered a metaphor too. Physical cleansing of course can do nothing to make us acceptable to God, but the act of cleansing with pure water was the way God chose to show people their need for God's inner cleansing. Our need for inner cleansing is so fundamental to our relationship with God that God made the metaphor of ceremonial washing an obligatory part of the temple worship.

### **A means of God's work in our inner life.**

Let's turn to Psalm 23. 'The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul.' There is clearly the metaphor of God's inner work here as well. David has experienced God's inner healing and peace and likens it to a sheep's experience of resting beside a lake.

But I suspect there is a literal meaning here too. David was a shepherd and many times would have prayed to God while sitting beside a still water. Was God able to use that water to bring David the stillness he needed to pray? Humans are drawn to water. A friend of mine, a counsellor at Wintec, often asks students where they go to find calm and renewal. She says they regularly describe water – a beach, a lake, a stream or river. Each type of water can have a different effect on us. Still water calms us and quietens our souls. It is a place to reflect (pun intended!). A gently flowing stream can renew and refresh us. A thundering waterfall or a wild surf beach may overwhelm us with its power, reminding us how small we are and making our struggles seem less significant.

Do you have a favourite watery place that you go to for your soul to be restored? Perhaps it is too far away to visit there regularly, but you can visit that place in prayer and God can minister to you through it.

### **A gift of God that constantly serves us and meets our physical needs**

Recently I decided to carry a clicker counter in my pocket and count all the times I interacted with water during the day. By the end of a very ordinary day I had 18 clicks on my counter. Here are some of the ways that water featured in my day:

- Flushing toilet
- Washing hands
- Boiling porridge
- Washing dishes
- Brushing teeth
- Praying beside a stream
- Making cup of coffee
- Biking through the rain
- Admiring the cloudscape
- Giving my children a bath
- Having a shower
- Listening to rain on the roof

I have come to realize that water is constantly and humbly serving us. If water is a gift of God, then it is a fact of God's continual presence and blessing in our lives. Paul points this out when he preaches to the people of Lystra 'God has not left himself without testimony. He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons.' (Acts 14:17). St. Francis turned this into a prayer of thanksgiving. In his Canticle of the Creatures, he says 'Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Water who is so useful, humble, precious, and pure.' If we, too, learn to give thanks for water each time we use it or meet it, we become more aware of God's constant presence and blessing.

### **A beautiful presence**

Water is all around us in a myriad of forms. There seems no end to the ways God can use water to create patterns, alter light, and bring out colour, showing the Creator's beauty, majesty and mystery. One of the things I love about water is that with all of modern science, we actually still don't fully understand it – water has a number of mysterious properties that still elude scientists.

Finally, without going into detail, I want to acknowledge two more aspects of water....

## An agent of God

Water is an agent of God, a means for him to work out his purposes in our world, from the smallest to the largest scale (the great flood in Genesis 8; Psalm 29). Sometimes water is not welcome in our lives, e.g. being soaked by a cold rain, finding a water leak in the house. Perhaps one of the purposes of these things is to remind us that we are not the centre of the universe.

## A chaotic force that God overcomes

Episodes in the Bible (e.g. Jesus and the storm on the Sea of Galilee) and recent events (e.g. the 2004 tsunami) remind us that water is sometimes chaotic force that God overcomes in working out His purposes in our world.

## How precious is water?

Demonstration of amount of water in the world, using a 10 L bucket of water.

Water source	% of total water	mL in a 10 L bucket
Oceans, Seas, & Bays	96.5	9650
Ice caps, Glaciers, & Permanent Snow	1.74	174
Ground water	1.7	170
Lakes: Fresh	0.007	0.7
Atmosphere	0.001	0.1
Rivers	0.0002	0.02
Biological Water	0.0001	0.01

The world's six billion people are using 54 percent of all the accessible freshwater contained in rivers, lakes and underground aquifers.

How do we treat the water that comes and goes from our lives? There are hopeful signs that we are learning to appreciate water more. For example, big changes are taking place in the way we treat water in cities. In the past, stormwater was regarded as a nuisance and a threat and was to be removed as quickly and efficiently as possible. As a result, streams in cities were regarded as drains and came to look like drains. Now people are beginning to value urban streams as habitats and amenities where people can enjoy nature in the city. As a result, urban streams are beginning to be transformed into beautiful places, maybe even places one could encounter God.

## Conclusion

In the busyness or the ordinariness or the struggle of daily life, it can be hard to see God and relate to him in meaningful ways. But God *is* present and is constantly relating to us through the created world. Water provides one of the richest metaphors for God's work and one of the deepest means of receiving his grace. It is one of his most humble servants, but it can also be one of the most devastating agents of his power. If we can become more mindful of

the ways we interact with His world, especially water, we will discover His presence much more deeply in our lives. But we need to learn to value and protect his gifts in creation.

## Home group questions

1. Do you find it difficult connecting with God during the week? What ways have you discovered that help you stay conscious of God's presence and work in your life from day to day?
2. Do you think that becoming more conscious of God's gifts in creation might help you relate to him more closely in daily life?
3. Are there particular natural places you have been, or experiences you have had of the natural world that God has used to speak or work in your life?
4. Water features in many ways throughout the Bible. Which Bible passages on water (if any) have been particularly meaningful for you?
5. Water is one of our most basic needs and yet is one of the easiest things to take for granted. Consider the following
  - In the last century, the world's use of water has been growing at more than twice the rate of population growth.
  - The average New Zealander uses 250 L water per day, whereas the average *family* in Congo uses 25L per day.
  - About 60% of New Zealand's monitored lakes have too much nutrient (which cause algae blooms), and in Waikato streams, nitrogen-based nutrients rose by 40% since 1992.

How can we honour God through the way that we use and interact with water?