

**May 24, 2020**

*The 7th Sunday in Eastertide*

Isaiah 55: 1–9

Acts 8: 26–39

### ***Water-marked***

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Let's start at the very beginning – almost; let's pick up the Genesis story on the second day – just after the creation of light, and the separation of the night from the day:

*And God said, "Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters." So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so.*

*God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day. And God said, "Let the waters under the sky be gathered into one place, and let the dry land appear." And it was so. God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together God called Seas. And God saw that it was good.*

- *Genesis 1:6-10*

It's interesting to notice that *land* is the afterthought: not that water was invented to fill the hollows and chasms, but that *water* came first, and then was moved aside to make room for other things. In fact, when God begins water is *everywhere* – and then God divides it with a vault, so that, in the ancient Hebrew world-view, there are waters above and waters below. Separating waters from waters was evidently work enough for the second day – and it *was* good. Then only on the third day, when the work of creation was already almost half-done, comes the making of a place in the midst of the waters, balanced somehow between the waters, for the likes of us and our kindred creatures to dwell. The world-view in which we are steeped (or, we might even say, drenched) starts with water on all sides; so it probably wasn't even surprising when the human creatures eventually discovered that they themselves were 60% water. God moved water around to make room for land – and moved water around to make room for cell walls and nuclei and mitochondria and blood and tissues. Water isn't really our environment so much as it's our other parent, along with the humus that, perhaps, we more closely resemble. And if we don't renew our family tie by taking in a few ounces a day – well, it's back to dust for us.

Here's another ancient bit of wisdom – written down, perhaps, within only a few hundred years of the Genesis story – from the ancient Chinese book of wisdom known as the *I Ching*:

*The wind blows over the lake  
and stirs the surface of the water.  
Thus visible effects of the invisible  
manifest themselves.*

Another true thing about water is that it shows us things that we'd otherwise have a hard time seeing. Therein lies some of its particular holiness. To see the surface of the lake, with the wind blowing across it, is perhaps to begin to imagine seeing the way God works in this world: with power that is entirely invisible, but unmistakably real – as though you can't see the hand, but you can see the grace and healing and justice that the hand stirs as it passes.

Or we can look at the surface another way: we can wait until it calms and then stare at what it reflects. When we do that, we see part of the truth: we see what we look like, though it exactly reverses the image of what other people see when they look at us. But we don't see what lies within: we don't see into the depths of the self whose face is reflected or, for that matter, into the depths of the water below. But we know that the truth of water is in those depths – just as we know that the truth of the self is in that face. Water helps us to see the surface and the depths for what they are.

Which brings us to the story that is our New Testament lesson this morning, from the 8th chapter of the book of the Acts of the Apostles – the story of what happened when Philip, who was one of the first to join the community as it Easter-ed its way out from the resurrection, met an Ethiopian on the wilderness road that leads west from the heights of Jerusalem down to Gaza:

*Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a wilderness road.) So Philip got up and went.*

*Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury, who had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home; the Ethiopian was seated in a chariot, reading the prophet Isaiah.*

*Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it." So Philip ran up to it and heard the Ethiopian reading the prophet Isaiah. Philip asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" The Ethiopian replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" and invited Philip to get in and ride along.*

*Now the passage of the scripture that the Ethiopian was reading was this:*

*"Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,  
and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth.  
In his humiliation justice was denied him.  
Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth."*

*The Ethiopian asked Philip, "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, proclaimed the good news about Jesus.*

*As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the Ethiopian said, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?" and commanded the chariot to stop. Both of them went down into the water, and Philip baptized the Ethiopian. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the Ethiopian saw him no more, and went on the way, rejoicing.*

Both of them seem to need a little nudge in order to get to the meaning of their encounter. Philip, like the other members of Jesus' inner circle, was surely transformed by the fresh joy of resurrection; but apparently he still needed some help in recognizing actual opportunities to put it to work: there on the road he seems to need the Holy Spirit to whisper "Here! This one!"

As for the Ethiopian – for the author of this story, he is certainly a symbol: this is meant to be a story of the first expansion of the gospel beyond Jesus’s original circle. The gospel story – the moving of the power of love across the surface of history, visibly stirring the human race – has the power to glide across the obvious social and cultural boundaries. But the Ethiopian is more than just a cultural symbol. He is also a person – and one who may actually have just come from an experience of being seen only as a symbol. He’s on the way from Jerusalem, having gone up to the city to worship: clearly he is of that tribe of Ethiopians who trace their heritage to the God of Israel. But because he is a eunuch – and the storyteller refers to him that way five times – he would have been barred by law and custom from the inner circle of worship in the Temple. As he begins the long journey home he’s reading Isaiah, perhaps as a way of thinking more about what he saw and heard and felt in Jerusalem, wondering what his relationship to it can be. Now there are any number of passages he could have found his way to in the book of the prophet Isaiah that might have warmed his heart: “Comfort ye, my people” or “He shall feed his flock like a shepherd” or “They who wait upon the Lord will renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles...” or “you shall go out in joy and be led forth in peace...” But no: he is reading the servant-song in Isaiah’s 53rd chapter, a bit of the book that we save for Good Friday: “As a sheep that is led to the slaughter, so he opened not his mouth. In humiliation, justice was denied him.” Not necessarily a passage to make you want to sign right up... unless...

Unless you know something about humiliation. Unless your life has given you ways of knowing things about the deafening silence of powerlessness. Unless you’ve been treated as a symbol, or been forgotten, been denied justice or pushed aside or told that what you represent is not welcome, not appropriate, not clean. Unless, for whatever reason, you didn’t feel like you belonged.

We can’t be sure what the Ethiopian experienced in Jerusalem. But we know what culture and custom had to say about him – which, maybe, are not so different from what culture and custom would have to say about him now in some places, some districts where he might try to register to vote for example, or some neighborhoods he might go jogging through. And we know that he would not have been the first or the last to find himself pushed aside by those who put cleanliness above Godliness, those who want to keep their religion or their neighborhood or their worldview tidy by circumscribing people and ideas that look different.

If Philip’s experience seems more familiar maybe it’s because we see habits of our own reflected in it: sometimes we need a nudge to recognize the family resemblance in a stranger. Sometimes the Spirit needs to whisper *Here! This one!* to get us to see a sibling in the depths behind a face that looks only like something different on the surface.

So maybe it’s not so strange after all that, of all passages, this song of the servant suffering in silence would be the one that compelled the Ethiopian heading home from Jerusalem. Luke, the storyteller of the book of Acts, is right that it often takes the movement of the Spirit Herself to haul us out into the road and hoist us up into someone else’s chariot to share their journey. It takes a nudge to get us to recognize when someone is trying to read the ripples on the surface of the water – wondering about the power that moves them, wondering what there might be to see in the depths if they could figure out how to look beyond the surfaces.

As they're riding along together, reading the words and feeling the power that moves across the page – of all things, suddenly the Ethiopian eunuch says, “Look, here is water!” and stops the chariot. Look, here is water helping us to see things that otherwise we have a hard time seeing. “What is to prevent me from being baptized?” he asks – and the Spirit moving across the surface of that lake or pond or pool or whatever it was beside the wilderness road has already got us cornered, because by the time the Ethiopian eunuch asks, we know what the answer is: of course there is nothing, *nothing at all* to prevent you from being baptized. Look, here is water – and here is the Spirit stirring the surface of our relationships, showing us who we are in our depths, showing us who God is in God's depths, willing to pour out life in order that we might have life, and have it abundantly. Look, here is water – and though it marks the eunuch forever as one for whom Jesus was willing to suffer, this baptism changes both of them: how they see each other, how they read the ripples. Just as the arrival in our midst of a beautiful group of new members a bit later in this service will change all of us, widen our way of seeing each other as siblings, deepen our way of understanding the poured-out love of God in Jesus Christ.

We can't quite leave it there though, can we? One of the properties of water is to show us things that we otherwise have a hard time seeing; and we remember how, in the creation story, God balanced life carefully between the water above and the water below – how God made room for life in the midst of water put carefully in its place, and how it took God almost a whole day in the process of world-making just to do that. Thou chunk of creation-time just to put the waters in their places: a whole biblical “day” of millennia, maybe – to solidify some of the waters into the ethereal blue of the glaciers ... and to freeze and sprinkle some of it into the snow and ice at the poles ... and, eventually, to etch the valleys where it could flow and the lakes where it could gather, the lakes with their surfaces to show us how visible effects of the invisible manifest themselves. It took a lot of divine energy to put the waters where they needed to be for there to be room for life – including, one supposes, to stash a little bit of it beside the wilderness road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza so that it would be there at just the right moment.

And if all this carefully-placed water shows us things we otherwise have a hard time seeing: well, maybe one part that's hard to see, but so urgently necessary to see, is that rearranging the structure of that placement is a way of undoing the work of God. Now, with the ice melting, the dams breaking, the rivers flooding, the hurricanes raging, the lead leaching into the pipes, the fires burning out of control... well, what is the water trying to tell us that we have a hard time seeing without its help? Something invisible is moving across the surface of time – of *this* time, I mean, the paper this morning, the news tonight.

It's so beautiful, isn't it? And so complicated. It marks us as God's own: it invites us to look deeply into ourselves and see how God's love transforms us. And it marks us as part of the intricate web of life, if we are unwilling to look into its depths – the web of air and soil and creatures and glaciers and forests full of trees that are praying, the luminous web of everything for which God moved the waters out of the way in order to make room. And if we are unwilling to see what water helps us to see that we have a hard time seeing ourselves - well, then what?

It's in the book of the prophet Isaiah, of all places, that it says, “Ho, everyone – come to the waters!” Come and choose life. And when you come to the waters, remember to watch for what it's hard for us to see –

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and stirs the surface of the water.  
Thus visible effects of the invisible  
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