

The Rev. Meghan Murphy-Gill, Curate
Church of the Ascension
Sermon on Good Friday 2022

“Where’s my water?” my son, Albie, cries out several times every day.

He has two water bottles he carries around: one for school, a dinged up metal bottle painted in a hue of blue that evokes tropical seas or Lake Michigan on a perfect summer day. The other one is red. It was not cheap, even before inflation, and so he doesn’t take this one to school, where he’d certainly lose it like so many hats, gloves, even snow boots before.

When he cries out “Where’s my water?” in the morning, it’s usually the blue water bottle that he’s hoping to retrieve and place in the side pocket of his backpack to take to school. At night, when he’s getting ready for bed, and I’m about to read him a chapter of Harry Potter, he will suddenly realize he doesn’t have the red water bottle.

“Where’s my water?” he’ll say to me, a whisper of panic at the edge of his voice. I look at him with my most “mom” look and say, “It’s right where you left it.” “But! But!,” he responds. And then, “Oh yeah!” and he runs to fetch it from his bedroom, the bathroom, the living room, the kitchen. Whenever it was that he last left it.

I’m aware that “my water” is a bit of a security blanket for Albie. When we recently restarted swim lessons, he asked me if he could bring his water bottle to the side of the pool. I reassured him that I’d hold onto his water for him.

“But what if I get thirsty?” he asked. Again, the panic at the edges of his voice.

Water has always featured prominently in my religious imagination. When I reflect on my life as a Christian or the presence of God in my own life, it is images of water that always come to mind. My spiritual practices are like swimming in a vast, warm lake. A sudden discovery about my relationship with God presents a great, joyful fountain. My prayer, a stream rolling purposefully over smooth, gray rocks.

Water also features prominently throughout the Bible. In the beginning, says one of the creation stories of Genesis, the earth was water, and God separated the land from the water on the first day. God divides the waters of the Red Sea for safe passage for the Israelites. And it is a torrent of rain, water falling relentlessly from the sky, covering the whole earth in the Great Flood, a punishment for sin that even God recognizes as too harsh.

“You shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail,” prophesies Isaiah. The Psalms frequently turn to the symbol of water to speak of God’s love. Even book 1, Psalm 1: They are like trees planted by streams of water, bearing fruit in due season, with leaves that do not wither ...” writes the Psalmist. And from the prophet Amos: “Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”

Where there is water, there is the Almighty God.

John, too, the Gospel from which we get our Passion story, uses water repeatedly as a motif. There is John the Baptist's early appearance in this narrative. He clamors for repentance, and he baptizes with water to wash away sins. In his conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well, Jesus asks for a drink but tells her that only can the Living Water truly quench thirst, the very water only he, the revelation of God, offers.

Jesus turns water into wine so that the wedding festivities at Cana may continue on well into the night. And upon leaving the festival of Booths, he tells the crowd that has begun to form, Jesus offers an answer to anyone who might ask, "What if I get thirsty?": Let them come to me, Jesus says, "and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, 'Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water.'"

And yet, from the cross, in his final moments, Jesus speaks those words, "I thirst."

How can that be? How can the incarnate God, who separated the land from the waters, who parted the Red Sea, who has rained down with waters that cleanse and restore the earth, how can he suffer on a cross with thirst?

So much ink has been spilled throughout the ages, about how this could happen, what actually happened, who Jesus really was. For my part, I don't think there is a sufficient answer. There is nothing reasonable about this moment. Jesus the Christ, the Living Water, thirsty. It is a profound scandal.

But isn't that exactly right? Is it not a scandal that the Living Water would walk among us who have been created from dust. Isn't the entire life and ministry of Jesus a scandal? Born of an unmarried woman in a barn. Healer of the sick and preacher of the God's kingdom? Not Pilate's, not the Emperor's, not even the reign imagined by the Pharisees. But God's kingdom, inherited by the poor in spirit and the meek and the merciful.

When I see the body of Jesus the Christ on the cross, thirsting, I think of the scandal of bodies of those who thirst for justice that rolls down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Bodies who have been abused by people they loved and trusted. Bodies killed in gun violence. Bodies of whose whole lives have been pushed so far into the margins that they can no longer imagine themselves on the page. Black bodies. Brown bodies. Ukrainian bodies. Bodies of even Russian soldiers. Queer bodies. Trans bodies.

When I see the body of Jesus the Christ on the cross, I cannot help but hear the panic-edged words of my son echo in my mind.

"Where is my water?"