

ALL WET

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs
Preached on Transfiguration Sunday, February 11, 2018

Lectionary Readings: Revelation 22: 1-5 and John 4: 7-15.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Flying over an Archetypal

Symbol, I Am Disconcerted by the Absence of Terra Firma

I had a marvelous experience a number of years ago when a friend of mine who is a pilot had a three-day meeting in San Juan. He asked me if I could take three days and go with him. He lived in Kansas City, so he flew his four-seat airplane to the Binghamton regional airport, picked me up, and then we flew down to Miami, crossing over Washington, D.C., airspace, where I learned they're rather picky about that.

We landed in Miami and were told we needed to pick up a little box that went at my feet, which was an inflatable life raft in case things go bad. That was at my feet as we left Miami heading for San Juan, Puerto Rico. Shortly after taking off, we flew at 7,000 feet, and the big planes were at 40,000 feet, zooming past us as we pattered along.

We were not far out, just 15 minutes out of Miami, when I fully realized there was no land in sight. Wherever I looked, there was nothing but ocean, and it stayed that way for quite a while. It was a little disconcerting being in a tiny airplane, and a little statistic came to mind — three-quarters of the earth is covered with ocean. Suddenly, it seemed like a lot of water.

Today marks the final one of a series I've spent a lot of time working on, looking at archetypes that thread their way through the Bible, through the world scriptures, through our lives. We covered trees, mountains, light, music, and this morning, the subject is water as an archetypal symbol.

Researching these has been a delight, but today my problem is that I've got about 15 hours' worth of material to reduce into 15 minutes. What I'm going to do is to give you two brief

overviews, and then to look in detail at two passages from the Bible, which happen to say the same thing.

Two overviews first: The symbolism of water is huge. It's everywhere, and so what I'd like to look at is the concept of dream symbolism. You see a waterfall, for instance, or a geyser or a river in your dreams. What does that mean? There are symbols, meanings that go with images of water. Here are a few of them:

Overview Number One —

Symbols of Dreams About Various Kinds of Water

- Ice — For example, if you dream about ice, there's a situation in your life that's frozen or static and needs to be thawed out.
- Muddy or murky water — The situation is unclear and needs to be clarified.
- Splashing water — There's a need for arousal, for awakening.
- Steam, vapor, mist, fog — Not all has been revealed; not all is known.
- Ocean — A classic symbol of infinity. Either standing on a beach and looking out as far as the eye can see or flying in an airplane gazing in any direction.
- Tides — Are symbolic of the natural rhythm of things. Beyond that, there's a powerful rhythm. In other words, it's foolish to fight against it.
- Snow — Represents quiet and peace.
- Flood — This is a complex image because it's both bad and good. It means too much, to the point of danger. It means damage and loss, but it also means judgment. In addition, it means destroying in order to purify.
- Spring rains — Mean warmth, growth, softening, renewal.
- Lake — This is also complex. It means unrealized potential because you see only what's on the surface, and there's so much underneath that has yet to emerge.
- Puddle — Symbolizes play, childhood, fun, carefree; go ahead and get dirty.
- Stream, river — Another symbol for infinity; ever flowing, never stopping.
- Oasis — Water in the desert; a place of safety or refuge, away from danger.

- Well — One of the most extraordinary symbols of all. Like the ocean or the stream, it's one of the most pregnant symbols of all time. Its meaning is to go deeper to find life-giving water. Go deeper in sports, meaning to try harder. In our intellect, in our spirituality, going deeper to find nourishment, to find reward.

These are only a few examples of water symbols — 14 of them if you were counting, out of dozens and dozens.

Overview Number Two —

Classic Bible Texts Concerning Water

The second overview on water is to look at these classic texts in the Bible about water, that reference water — the same profound and important things, using water as imagery. Let me give you a handful of these:

- Genesis 1:1 — “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.” This is a philosophical passage. That primal, chaotic, formless potential that God’s spirit swept over in order to begin creation. It’s a poetic way of wording it. Some of the other texts are a bit tough.
- Amos 5:21 and 23-24 — Fantastic imagery but extremely judgmental. God is speaking, “I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. // Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. // But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream.”
- Jeremiah 2:12-13 — An equally judgmental passage. “Be appalled, O heavens, at this, be shocked, be utterly desolate, says the Lord, // for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, // the fountain of living water and dug out cisterns for themselves, // cracked cisterns that can hold no water.”
- John 7:37 — “On the last day of the festival, the great day, while Jesus was standing there, he cried out, ‘Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, 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.”’ Now he said this about the Spirit, which they were to receive”

- Revelation 22:1 — My favorite overview of all. It comes at the very end of the Bible. I use this one for funeral services. “Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of nations.” (That passage is affectionately known as the “Fruit-of-the-Month Club.”)

Note that the imagery goes from the very beginning to the very end and all the way through the scriptures. So those are the two overviews: The dream symbolism kind of overview, and then just looking at some of these extraordinary passages.

Let’s Look at Two Passages

in Detail; They Are Radically Different but Say the Same Thing

My agenda is not just to point out what they say but to make you think about them differently. Here is the first of the two passages, the story that Jacob Neville read for the New Testament scripture lesson, John 4: 7-15, the story of the woman at the well, a famous passage:

“A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, ‘Give me a drink.’ (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, ‘How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?’ (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, ‘If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, “Give me a drink,” you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.’ The woman said to him, ‘Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?’ Jesus said to her, ‘Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.’ The woman said to him, ‘Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.’”

Here are some Bible-study kinds of details that are actually pretty important. The woman is a Samaritan, and Jews don’t like Samaritans for a number of reasons. They are former Jews who have syncretized into the surrounding culture and have forsaken the purity of their Judaism. That’s one of the reasons they’re not liked.

There are other reasons as well. They're considered dirty, uncouth, unclean people. Now you've got a Samaritan woman, and you'll note that the two of them are alone. Jesus' disciples had gone into the city to buy food, according to John. Why would the author throw in that detail except they're alone, which is extraordinarily improper?

It is noon also, which is not when people, women in particular, would come to the well. No, that is done early in the morning or at dusk, in the cool of the day. It is not done at high noon. Why is the Samaritan woman doing it then? The surmise about it is that she is an outcast within her own society. She is not welcomed by the other women. And why is that? Because if Jacob had continued to read on to the next few paragraphs, this is a person who has had multiple marriages, and the guy she is living with isn't her husband, so she is despised by her group. She is not a loved person.

Jesus says to this person:

“Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.”

I don't want to appear stupid, but I do want to ask, “What does he mean by this? What is it about the water he gives that is different and better than the water in the well?” Clearly, Jesus thinks symbolically or metaphorically, but if it's not a better quality of real water, then what is it? What does he mean?

Why is he telling this to an uneducated, unmarried, unloved Samaritan woman, rather than to his disciples or a crowd of Jews or the rabbis or the Pharisees? He's talking to the lowest person imaginable. Why?

I Want to Expand Your Thinking;

**We Venerate One Word of God,
but We Must Consider Other Logos**

Now let's go to the other passage, and see if we can discern an answer. The other passage is from Isaiah, Chapter 55, Verses 10-11:

“For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, // making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, // so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, // but it shall accomplish that which I propose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.”

Water is symbolic of the word of God. But more than that — it is symbolic of the presence, the spirit, the wisdom, the life of God. Divine life, wisdom, presence, spirit, word and guidance is like the spring rains, like the ocean, like an ever-flowing stream.

Here is where I want to expand your thinking. Perhaps even to reverse it a bit. If water is symbolic of the word of God — and you know that’s pretty cool, that’s good — what happens if we want more of it? What we tend to do is to say, “We need to understand the Bible better. We need to dig deeper, we need to study the Bible diligently. We need to treasure the words of Jesus and memorize them and put them on posters. We need to make the Bible the best-selling book of all time, and like the Gideons, we need to place one in every hotel room.”

We venerate one form of the word of God, this one message of the presence and spirit and wisdom and life. Yet with our concentration upon this one message, we miss countless others. Therefore, we need to entertain the thought that the Word, that logos found in the Greek New Testament (the presence, the spirit, the wisdom, the life, the communication of God), we must consider that:

- * It is ubiquitous, that it infuses, and that it surrounds us.
- * It can be found in the conversation with a confidant.
- * It can be found in the encouragement from a friend.
- * There are various forms found in the world’s religions.
- * It might be found in a lesson from nature, those countless lessons that we can perceive in nature.
- * It might be in the form of inner guidance when our souls are quiet enough to listen to spirit.
- * There are a dozen other examples of God’s word to us from a still-speaking God.

This word, this logos, is poured out upon us and is welling up within us, therefore:

- † Taking on the form of splashing water, may all the forms of presence, spirit, wisdom, and life awaken us and enliven us.
- † Like entering into a mist or fog on an early morning walk, may the profound mystery of divinity incarnate within our souls and illuminate us.
- † Standing on a beach with sand in our toes and waves upon our feet, may the limitlessness of the presence and spirit and wisdom and life wash over us.
- † When the snow begins to fall, and before the snow blowers and the plows kick in, may the quiet and the peace of God’s presence envelop you, and hold you.

- † May the spring rains, which are not yet too far off, remind you not just of the renewal of grass and flowers but of every form of divine restoration, redemption, reconciliation, and renewal of the heart.
- † This summer, if you have time to sit by a lake or a river or a stream, may those primal energies of infinite unrealized potential calm you, strengthen you, encourage you, and heal you.

“For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven . . . so shall my word [presence, spirit, wisdom, life] be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty”

— Isaiah 55: 10-11

“ . . . The earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.”

— Habakkuk 2: 14

Amen.