

Lenten Fast from Violence 2006:

Week 3

WATER: A SOURCE OF LIFE

*When the poor and needy seek water,
I will open rivers on the bare heights,
And fountains in the midst of the valleys;
I will make the wilderness a pool of water,
And the dry land springs of water.*

Isaiah 41:17-18

Fast: A period of abstention or self-denial

Abstention: The act or habit of deliberate self-denial

Self-denial: Sacrifice of one's own desires or interests. The trait of practicing self discipline 2: the act of denying yourself; controlling your impulses 3: renunciation of your own interests in favor of the interests of others

During this period of Lent, fasting from a form of violence – in this case, violence to our environment, to God's creation – and in particular, the focus on water - means renouncing our own interests in favor of our brothers and sisters – our brothers and sisters around the world, and in future generations.

All life springs from water. Too much or too little can bring catastrophe. Water is a fundamental need of all people, yet one of every six people lacks access to safe drinking water. Two million people – most of them children – die each year from waterborne disease. In the 1990s, the number of children killed by diarrhea – the result of unsafe water and sanitation – exceeded the number of people killed in armed conflicts since the Second World War. Water policies and water-related projects are fundamental to the establishment and maintenance of healthy, sustainable communities. (Church World Service)

Water is a profound symbol within our scriptural and liturgical traditions. In fact, the Bible includes over 500 references to the word "water" and countless more on water-related subjects, like rivers, rain, seas, floods and storms.

Freshwater is one of God's most precious gifts and is vital as the life support of the planet, its ecosystems, and its inhabitants. While so important in sustaining life, less than one percent of the world's freshwater is available for human use – whether for agriculture, drinking and household use, transportation or energy production. Freshwater is in high demand and the competition is ever increasing as overuse and water quality issues continually threaten existing supplies.

While over two-thirds of the Earth's surface is covered by water, freshwater is actually quite rare. The Earth's waters are unevenly distributed through oceans, lakes, rivers and groundwater, with oceans accounting for 97% of the water in the biosphere. Two more percent is trapped in polar caps and glaciers, leaving only about 1 percent of all the Earth's water as freshwater, upon which thousands of species within God's creation (including humans) are directly dependent.

Freshwater ecosystems come in many forms and include all inland bodies of water, including – among others – lakes, rivers, and wetlands. These ecosystems, also known as watersheds or catchments, are globally threatened by unsustainable land use and water management.

Good water management plays a vital role in realizing the abundance of the Earth's freshwater supply. Communities must take seriously the need to use and protect this life giving and sustaining resource for today's inhabitants and future generations.

When all we need do is turn on a faucet and abundant clean water comes flowing out, it is difficult to remember that water is the precious gift that sustains us and the rest of Creation. Without water, however, we would not have life, and neither would the rest of God's beloved earth's creatures.

The availability of fresh water can mean the difference between life and death. Approximately one billion people worldwide lack access to clean drinking water. Clean water for our fellow creatures is increasingly scarce too. For example, 20% of all freshwater fish species are threatened or endangered because of too little water.

WHAT TO DO?

As Christians we are called to witness God's presence in every living organism on Earth. The everyday choices we make – whether in our homes, at our places of work, or within our churches – have a profound influence on the health of the natural communities in which we live. Simple actions can make meaningful changes for God's creation.

Did you know...? One toilet flush in the U.S. uses as much water as the average person in a developing country uses for a whole day's drinking, cooking, washing, and cleaning.

Caring for creation begins at home – our personal homes and our church homes. Recognizing that we are part of the complex web of creation, not separate from it, not above it, but embedded in it, causes us to treat it lovingly. Loving God and loving our neighbor includes caring for the Earth that God has created. Key elements of a personal and a congregational “green” life include:

- Reducing waste

- Reducing and eliminating toxics
- Creating incentives for transportation alternatives
- Controlling stormwater and greening the landscape
- Conserving water
- Conserving energy and using green power
- Purchasing and investing responsibly.

An example of what we can do in our institutional church life is shown by the following resolution adopted by the Episcopal Church;

Resolved, That the 74th General Convention urge dioceses, congregations, and communicants to regard water resources as precious, and to recognize that the right use of water is an explicit means to show love for one's neighbor, since water connects people and all creatures throughout the global community; and be it further

Resolved, That the 74th General Convention encourage dioceses, congregations, and communicants to become active stewards of their water resources through conservation efforts including reduction of consumption; through examination of water discharge such that contaminated water does not improperly leave church grounds; and through the creation of environmental programs for stewardship of water and the whole of creation and for the education of congregants in regard to good and faithful stewardship of the earth's resources; and be it further

Resolved, That the General Convention encourage dioceses, congregations, and communicants to undertake one or more of the following four stewardship steps:

- When and where possible, install water-saving devices, such as low-flow commodes and aspirators on sink faucets.
- Replant church grounds and home gardens with plants and trees that are drought-tolerant and have low needs for water, and that are native to the region and therefore able to survive local climatic conditions.
- Devise drainage systems that allow rainwater to flow from gutters and drain pipes to spread onto the lawn and landscaped areas of church grounds and home gardens, thereby reducing water lost to sewer systems.
- Pave new or repave existing parking lots with materials that are pervious, so that water penetrates into soil beneath parking areas, thereby reducing the flow of oil and other auto fluids into streams.

And it is important that we be conscious of legislation and policies regarding water and do what we can to advocate for just and fair policies.

A Responsive Prayer

(by the Rev. John Paarlberg)

Creator God,
Whose Spirit moved over the face of the waters,
Who gathers the seas into their places
And directs the courses of the rivers,
Who sends rain upon the earth
That it should bring forth life:
We praise you for the gift of water.

Redeemer God,
Who spared Noah and creatures of every kind
From the waters of the flood.
Who led your people over dry land through the seas
And across the Jordan to the land of promise,
Who marks our adoption as children
With the sign of water:
We thank you for the gift of water.

Sustaining God,
Create in us such a sense of wonder and delight
In this and all your gifts
That we might receive them with gratitude,
Care for them with love,
And generously share them with all your creatures,
To the honor and glory of your name.

Resources

United Nations International Decade of Action (2005-2015): Water for Life.

<http://www.un.org/waterforlifedecade/>

Church World Service: http://www.churchworldservice.org/educ_materials.html

- Worship with the World: WATER
- Thirsty Souls & Parched Lands
- Twice as Thirsty: Women, Children & Water

National Council of Churches Eco-Justice Programs:

- Water Action Toolkit <http://nccecojustice.org/database/>

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