

Water for Prophet

April 24, 2016

“Dearly Beloved, we’re gathered here today to get through this thing called Life. Electric word, life, it means forever, and that’s a mighty long time...”

Alright, fine, I’ll confess: my sister Katie dared me to start today’s sermon with that quote. Those of you who don’t know it, it’s a quote from Prince’s *“Let’s Go Crazy.”* I’d been resisting her, but now that you heard me, if any of you ever meet her, tell her she owes me twenty bucks!

I’d been resisting her. I didn’t want to use the pulpit to highlight pop culture, didn’t want to use it for something silly, but it occurred to me as I edited and edited what I felt I was being called to talk about today, that Prince’s reminder that life is an electric word makes sense with what we’re doing here today. Life is an electric word and it means forever. That dovetails with what we’re celebrating.

As we celebrate Earth Day, officially the largest secular holiday celebrated all over the world – over a billion people celebrate Earth Day – as we celebrate Earth Day, I remind you that life is indeed an electric word. Every time I visit someone in the hospital, and many other times for that matter, my prayer begins, “Holy God, we thank you for life.” The magnificence of life is something that we all too often take for granted, whether we are in good health or not, whether we’re robust or frail, the sheer experience of having life is positively mind-blowing, and it’s something that most of us don’t take enough time often enough to praise God about.

That’s one of the reasons that the Psalm that Heather read for us today is so powerful. It’s a hymn of praise, calling on all living things to praise God. In fact, it calls on non-living things to praise God, too.

Existence is magnificent. Life is an electric word.

The dovetail, then, between the introduction to *“Let’s Go Crazy,”* and Earth Day comes together in the next line, where Prince reminds us that this electric word life means forever. For too long, we’ve not been treating the earth as if it is forever, have not been treating it as if it equals life.

Think about it this way: have you ever purchased something that was inexpensive, something that you really didn’t expect to last? The first thing that comes to mind for me are dog toys in our house. We know that Rufus is going to destroy anything that squeaks in about 20 minutes, so we make a point not to spend much on his toys. If he destroys them, there is little lost.

On the flip side, think of something that you purchased with the intention that it would last. Whether you thought of furniture, or shoes, or a car, or any number of other things, my guess is that you probably take better care of that object when you intend for it to last than you do if you buy something that is intended for the short term, something disposable.

Unfortunately, for too long, we have not been treating the earth as if it’s something we intend to last, we haven’t been treating it as our forever home. This is why it makes so much sense that churches are slowly coming to celebrate Earth Day along with the rest of secular society. We

need to both praise God for all of creation as we celebrate Earth Day and we need to commit ourselves to the long-term view of its care.

But friends, my title today is “*Water for Prophet.*” Water is a major theme throughout the Bible, from the very beginning of Genesis where the Ruah, the breath of God, moves over the waters of chaos and forms order, to the passage from the end of Revelation that we read today, the Bible conveys the mystery, and wonder, and power of God in water.

When we baptized Elijah today, we recalled some of the ways that God used water and the way that people have experienced God in water and then we asked God to use water to bless Elijah as well.

When the woman at the well seemed estranged, Jesus’ response was to give her living water. Water is life, it’s joy, it’s cleansing, and it can be destructive, it can be death dealing. On Maundy Thursday, after we read about Jesus washing his disciples’ feet, we invited all gathered to come forward, to wash their hands, and then to dry the hands of the next person in line. It was a wonderful chance to symbolically serve one another, but something that other people rarely get to see because they aren’t standing where I am is the joy on people’s faces as they washed and experienced the water. This happens every single time that I’ve done this ritual. Water invariably compels people to play a little bit: to splash and flick it on one another.

Then, I also think of Mahalia Jackson’s wonderful, amazing rendition of “*It Don’t Cost Very Much.*” The great gospel singer belts out:

***“It don’t cost very much
to give a glass of water to a pilgrim in need of such
Well you may not be an angel and you may not go to church
But the good that you do will come back to you
It don’t cost very much”***

Water, from time immemorial, has been understood as both precious and absolutely basic. For decades, a significant portion of our One Great Hour of Sharing offering has gone toward providing clean drinking water all over the world. And last year, some of those funds were actually spent on water filters for the people of Flint. Yes, along with helping people in South Sudan and Honduras get clean drinking water, our donations helped the people in a state that is surrounded by the bulk of the fresh water in the world.

This, friends, this is why we need to be prophets. Do you remember what a prophet is? (Silence.) Okay, I need to do my job better! A prophet is someone who is called by God to call society back into right relationship. It’s someone who recognizes something that is terribly wrong and who God uses to right that wrong.

One of the things that I find most striking about the Flint water crisis is that it was perpetuated knowingly under the guise of saving money. It was allowed to continue even when it was discovered, and worst of all, it disproportionately affected the vulnerable. ALL of those things are grave social injustices around which God calls us to be prophetic.

Now, lest you imagine that this water crisis is across the lake and therefore not our concern, I've read recently that the water at two Wisconsin state prisons, Fox Lake Correctional Institute and Waupun, both have had dozens of instances of failing water quality tests for lead and other contaminants that are dangerous for human beings just in the last two years. Dozens of failed water quality tests affecting people who are completely unable to do anything about it, and our state is doing nothing. Not only is this inhumane, if the effects of lead are half as bad as what we're told, think of what this does to the minds and the behaviors of these inmates. We are poisoning people and then releasing them and blaming them for having been poisoned.

Friends, we all should be outraged by this. And all of this brings home the statement from Interfaith Power and Light, a grassroots, faith-based, eco-justice organization. Gus Speth, the co-founder of the Natural Resources Defense Council, was speaking to Interfaith Power and Light one day and he said: *"I used to think that the top environmental problems were biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse and climate change. I was wrong. The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed and apathy, and to deal with these we need a cultural and spiritual transformation. And we scientists don't know how to do that."*

That's what Speth says. But we people of faith DO know how to transform culture. We know how to change the world.

There are any number of things we can do. We need to write to our state legislators, telling them that the state of the water in our prisons is unconscionable. We can join the new Eco-Justice Task Force that's being formed by JOSHUA, the advocacy network that we are part of with other Brown County congregations, or we could join any other number of eco-focused organizations. We can take care of the chemicals that we buy, what we put on our lawn, how much we drive. We can vote for legislators who actually acknowledge climate change and respect the earth. All of these are ways that we will be a part of transforming society and helping our world to be the place that God created it to be.

The possibilities of what we can do to celebrate and protect the earth are endless, but we are called to do something, each and every one of us. We're called to celebrate the gift of life, the gift of existence, and to give praise to our maker for all the world's magnificence. We're called to work for the health of the earth, for the responsible use of its resources, and for justice so those on the margins, those who are disproportionately affected by misuse, are no longer the victims of our greed, selfishness, and apathy.

In doing these things, maybe Prince's dream will come true and forever will be how we treat the earth. Alleluia and Amen.

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April 24, 2016
Psalm 148, Revelation 21