
HOLY WATERS

a sermon given by the Rev. Rosemary Lloyd
Sunday, September 14, 2008
at The First Church in Boston

“There is no clean water in Abilnyang, Sudan. Dust hangs in the air. It is 120 degrees....Today, as you did yesterday and the day before, for as many days as you can remember, you will balance a jerry can on your head...walk a dusty path through barren, predatory landscape...four miles out, four miles back...to get the water that your family needs to live one more day. And while you probably never thought about it, parasites live in the water you carry home, making sickness as much a part of your village as the dust and the heat.”¹

This tale of life in southern Sudan, a war ravaged country with an almost unimaginably harsh environment...is from Salva Dut—a tall, thin Black African, who was forced to flee the civil war in his country when he was just 11 years old. He was separated from his father who, for 19 years Salva believed was dead...

Oh, but tides turn....and lives are renewed...

Salva wandered for more than a decade, moving from one refugee camp to the next in Africa and then in Europe. His long journey eventually brought him to the U.S. at 18, where, for the first time, he was able to go to school. In 2002, Salva learned that his father was still alive, but deathly ill in a UN clinic far from his village. Salva traveled four days to reach his father’s bedside.

“Who are you?” asked the weak man.

“I am Salva Dut, your son,” he replied.

And his father anointed him with water—because he believed his son was dead and now was returned from the tomb.

The spilling of a precious, scarce and sacred resource in Sudan marked this unlikely, and moving reunion. That water was used for a blessing is not so very surprising. It fits with our almost universal appreciation of water as a symbol of revitalization, renewal, promise and hope. It is being used this morning for the baptism of my granddaughter, Zoe Rose, in upstate New York. What makes it just a little unnerving is to realize that Salva’s father was sickened by water—the murky water he drank in his village that harbored the parasites that were now ravaging his body.

Salva decided he must do something. He returned to the US, determined to use his education to find a way to make the water safe for his father and the people of his village...

This story from south central Sudan, told in a new documentary directed by Jeff Mead of POV-Rose Films in Rochester, NY. It gives us just a glimpse of the monumental dimension of the challenge of water around the globe. Salva Dut’s father is just one of the more than 1 **billion** people who do not have access to clean, safe water to drink.

¹ From *Just Add Water*, directed by Jeff Mead of POV-Rose Films, Rochester, NY, 2008.

It is almost unimaginable to us, isn't it? Here in our 21st century, urban society, we can turn on any faucet with confidence that water will flow from the tap. We can let it run until it gets cool enough to drink or warm enough to wash with. We can let it run long and hot enough in the shower to steam up the whole bathroom...with never a concern that the water might run dry.

But there are harbingers of troubled waters. Some of you have received them first hand. You may live in town or city that has sent out an advisory to boil your water before using it because of a high E.Coli count in the local supply. It is no secret that, nationally, our public water filtration systems get overwhelmed by high bacterial counts.

The aging arteries of water distribution pipes, part of an amazing infrastructure laid years ago, are clogging with sediment and rugged microscopic life forms that break free to swim with the tide of water into your kitchen tap. Though it may look clear and smell of no more than chlorine or local minerals, a glass of water tainted with cryptosporidium or other microbe could be devastating to babies, elders, or people with compromised immune systems.

Wide rivers in Texas that once irrigated area ranches and farms are drying up to a trickle of mud because the water is being diverted to arid Southwest boom towns and golf courses. And townspeople in Maine are worried that their famous underground springs may not be available for local use soon because they are being drained by a multinational corporation for bottled distribution.

According to government sources, our country may be "ill prepared" for the coming water crisis.² Just last year, much of the Southeast suffered the most severe long-term drought since the Dust Bowl, creating an emergency so serious that some cities were just months away from running out of water.

The cost to revitalize purification systems, to rebuild infrastructure, to protect it from terrorism, to keep supplies in American cities running in a time of climate change---the cost is rising. Right here in Boston, the number of households that have had their water shut off because people can't afford to pay the rising rates has **TRIPLED** in the last five years.³ World wide, the burden of limited water access is falling heaviest on the world's poor. The U.N. has labeled this phenomenon "water apartheid."⁴ And there is general concern in the international diplomatic community that in the future, there will be wars over access to fresh water.⁵

When the UN established its charter of human rights more than 50 years ago, no one included access to fresh water as one of those rights. Like free access to air, it seemed, well, redundant to have to name such an obvious principle. Who could have imagined that the movement to globalize everything would create an atmosphere in which it would become acceptable to commodify this divine resource, or to allow corporate interests to determine public access to safe water?

² According to a 2004 U.S. Geological Survey.

³ According to unpublished records from the MWRA released by The Color of Water, a Boston-based justice partner of the UUSC.

⁴ http://www.uusc.org/content/world_water_day_2008

⁵ Including former UN Sec. Gen. Kofi Annan, in comments made at the start of the 2004 Sustainable Development Commission's work
<http://www.veoliawater.com/press/resource/files/engagements/1901,kofi-annan.htm>

Let's ask ourselves: Does the issue of clean water affect us sitting in this Sanctuary? It does if we take seriously our Unitarian Universalist principle that we are part of an interdependent web of existence. It does if we are to derive deep, sustaining meaning from the water communion ritual we shared this morning....

But there is a tension in the matter of *how* to preserve and protect clean water on the planet. The tension is between the ideas of good and thoughtful people who care about this precious resource. On the one hand, some assert that to prevent waste and protect the supply, water must have a monetary value and that value should be regulated by the market. On the other hand, are those who maintain that the market is unable and unmotivated to insure that the poor will have equal access to safe water.

While I am not equipped to discuss the merits and failings of globalization and multinational corporations, it seems fitting to invite our thoughtful reflection on the nature of water and its place in the creation. Is water a right or is it merely a commodity to be allocated on the basis of ability to pay for it?

In the history of the world, across cultures and religion, life-giving water has been considered a common good—part of the commons that belongs to all. “Water is the source of life and it is “a potent bearer of cultural and religious meaning.”⁶ Our reflection is grounded in these two theologically grounded observations.

“Life, in all its forms is impossible without water. It was only the development of planetary conditions that allowed for the presence of large quantities of water in liquid state that made the emergence of life on earth possible.”⁷ The Biblical story of creation begins with the spirit of God “brooding over the face of the waters” (Genesis 1:2).

In other ancient Hebrew texts, drought is a symbol and image of divine judgment (Isaiah 33:9), and the prophets expressed hope for an arid land through the promise that rivers will spring up in the desert (Isaiah 43:19).

Water is a precondition for life. A given—a gift. To assert that it is a right “implies that clean, fresh water should be available to meet the basic needs of all, rather than be treated as a private commodity to be bought and sold.”

Our human dependency on water is not just physical; it is social and spiritual. Water is a source of comfort and beauty; a source of livelihood and a living spring for our imaginations.

Protecting this sacred, public, universal good for *all* people now and in the future is our sacred and public obligation. Can that obligation be relegated to or regulated by the potentially narrow interests of privatization? Or should it be but met in an open, democratic and just practice.

Today, we celebrate the gift of water. We have it stand as a rich symbol for the life and work of this religious community—*its* renewal, *its* hope and *its* promise. We can also celebrate the good work that is being done to sanctify and codify this gift as a right for all beings.

For all the bad news in the global story of water, there is good news! We can all draw hope from the fact that thousands of people around the world are working to preserve this sacred resource, building powerful partnerships across business, science,

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⁷ This, and following quotes, are taken from a document prepared by an ecumenical panel of the World Council of Churches.

government, religion, and the arts. As eco-entrepreneur Paul Hawken says when talking about his newest book *Blessed Unrest*, “Real change occurs from the bottom up, it occurs person to person, and it almost always occurs in small groups and locales and then bubbles up and aggregates to larger vectors of change.”⁸

Salva Dut, in telling his story, said, “You never know who will be the next person to change the world, or where they will come from...This is what keeps me going,” he says.

Friends, I say, Salva Dut—once one of the Lost Boys of Sudan-- keeps me going. He kept faith with his father and the people of his village. He founded Water for Sudan (WFS) to raise money to bring the simple equipment needed to drill wells deep enough to reach the clean water that lies beneath the dusty surface of Sudan villages. As they dig down into the earth, the people say, “We are planting the seed of water.”

There is a beautiful prayer from the Rig Veda of the Hindu tradition that begins: “God makes the rivers to flow. They tire not, nor do they cease from flowing...” In Sudan, Salva Dut helps make the waters to flow. He doesn’t tire and his organization is growing. His father recovered and is staying well because he can now drink safe, clean water in his own village. Today, just two years after drilling a well there, a market economy is developing in the village. Girls who no longer have to walk 8 miles for water are able to attend the school that the village could afford to build. And soon a medical clinic will open on the foundation that has been dug.

Water for Sudan has already drilled 25 wells, bringing clean drinking water to more than 80,000 people. With rising support for their practical life-saving work, they now have a second drilling team and a goal to drill 50 wells a year

Once upon a time, in an unimaginably harsh, hot and dusty landscape, a place of poverty, disease, horrific civil war, and diaspora, there was no water...

But today, there is renewal, promise and hope.

There is hope, friends, because you never know where the next person to change the world will come from to turn the tide and the world around...

AMEN.

⁸ Please take a look at the vast grassroots conversation happening at <http://www.wiserearth.org/>