

Who Holds the water?¹
Sermon May 10, 2015
Psalm 98
Acts 10

As I begin this sermon my mind swirls like the waters of a whirlpool.
Stories, memories, images of my own encounters with the first peoples
of this land swirl together in this whirlpool

The image of water features prominently in our scripture texts too

Psalm 98

In the inclusive version:

Let the sea and all within it thunder:

the world and all its peoples.

let the rivers clap their hands

and the hills ring out their joy

before YHWH, who comes to judge the earth,

who will rule the world with justice

and its peoples with equity.

In Acts 10:47

10:47 "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have
received the Holy Spirit just as we have?"

roaring seas that thunder

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rivers that clap their hands

the waters of baptism in Peter's hands for some of the first Gentiles who were baptized in Jesus' name

Who holds this water? Can anyone hold water?

Have water and bowl and let it run through my fingers – swirling with memory, image and story.

I was four years old. I see everything from the height of the table-top looking up at the angry adults around me.

18-year-old Carolyn who lives with us as a sister and not as a sister an aboriginal foster child of the government's 60's scoop placed with white middle class and many Mennonite families – ours among them.

She's angry with my mother. She's going to get married and my mother can't stop her. She throws a pillow, my mother's glasses break there is a small amount of blood and a glass of water on the table spills.

Next memory. We visit Carolyn and her husband and her toddler child in a small apartment. I sense the pain and strained relationship, but have no idea then how to name what is palpable in the air. I just know it is hard for everyone, me included, but I play with the baby. This is the easy part.

Next memory. My parents take my older siblings to visit my aunt and uncle who help to run the Poplar Hill residential school. They leave me with

grandparents, but I see the pictures when they return. My older siblings with aboriginal children, rustic cabins, paneled walls, children laughing and playing. My aunt and uncle are faithful Christians and strict. I wonder what it was like living with their rules at Poplar Hill. They believe they are doing God's will.

Next memory. My foster sister Carolyn has re-connected with my mother. She comes to my parent's 50th wedding anniversary. So much time. So much not said. Carolyn shows me pictures of her twin granddaughters. She and her husband Paul, now grandparents, have had a good long marriage like my parents.

Next memory. I sit with Carolyn in my mother's kitchen at another family gathering. She has come to a small handful of significant family gatherings in recent years. I feel like we never really knew each other. Can it happen now? Where are you from? What's it been like for you? It's a good conversation. We are open and wonder about each other's lives. It is a beginning – for the first time?

Next memory. My aunt who helped at Poplar Hill residential school has passed away. Did she ever really know what she was part of? What do I do with this connection and these questions?

And the sea roars and the rivers clap their hands at the presence of YHWH, who comes to judge the earth,

who will rule the world with justice
and its peoples with equity.

We exegete, or interpret texts with our own stories as they swirl in our minds, hearts and memories. It's actually impossible to do otherwise. We may not always acknowledge the stories, the encounters, the images that guide us, not even to ourselves but they are there nonetheless and it is in the intersection between story and text that the Spirit of Truth chooses to speak.

Who holds the water of these texts and these stories? What do I hear? I do not want to stay in the whirlpool. I need something to grab on to. What if I can't save myself? What if I need to be saved? What do these texts offer?

This first one:

And the sea roars and the rivers clap their hands at the presence of YHWH,
who comes to judge the earth,
who will rule the world with justice
and its peoples with equity.

The sea and the rivers are glad that YHWH comes to judge the earth
with justice and its peoples with equity.

I understand their gladness and I am scared. I'm scared because I have benefited too much from the current order of things. When things are set right, what will it mean?

I pray that God's justice and equity includes compassion for all so that like the sea and the rivers I will be glad for what is coming.

I remember what I have learned all my life that God saves through compassion

com passion

with suffering

God saves the whole creation with suffering love through Jesus.

Our second text from Acts:

And the Holy Spirit descended upon the Gentiles and they praised God. and the circumcised believers were amazed that the Spirit was available to these people too and Peter did not withhold baptism, but baptized them in the name of Jesus Christ.

Whose conversion is this story about?

Why was it written the way it was?

I'll start with a response to the second question, why was it written the way it was?

The entire Luke/Acts saga reveals God's purpose for the salvation of humankind through narrative form. Divine direction is shown in angel visitations, visions, answers to prayer, Spirit guidance, as well as by scriptural citations and allusions. Today's small story within the larger story is no exception.

The part that comes before the few verses that were read for us can be summarized as follows.

Cornelius, a centurion of the Italians, is a God fearing man. While he is praying an angel appears to him and tells him to send to Joppa for a man named Simon Peter. Meanwhile Peter, at the tanner's house in Joppa has a vision of ritually unclean animals lowered from heaven in a sheet. Three times the sheet is lowered and three times God says to him that what God has made clean, you must not call profane. At this very moment, Cornelius' men arrive and ask Peter to come with them to Cornelius' house in Caesarea. Peter and his companions go with them. When he arrives he enters their home even though this is not religiously permitted and says.

I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to God. Then he tells them about Jesus of Nazareth. Peter tells them that Jesus, a God appointed, Holy Spirit infused healer of the oppressed was put to death in Jerusalem and was raised by God on the third day. And that he, Peter and the others ate and drank with him after he was raised and were now appointed by the Holy Spirit to tell others that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead and that forgiveness of sins is available in his name.

After these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard them and the circumcised believers who had come with Peter were amazed that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles.

Now in answer to my first question, who is being converted in this story:

It sounds like the Holy Spirit is in the business of saving everyone, Peter and his companions as well as those who received baptism that day.

Peter names it when he says, can anyone withhold baptism from those upon whom the Holy Spirit descends. The baptism of water follows the baptism of the Spirit.

Everything in this story happens through God's agency. Cornelius and Peter both respond to the agency of the Spirit of God through vision and angel encounter for Peter and his companions they must first release their assumptions about the religious rituals necessary for inclusion in God's saving work. In this story where forgiveness of sins is available in Jesus' name, Peter's sins are being forgiven as well as those of Cornelius and his family.

God was present in both their lives before this encounter. God is present with them in their encounter and God is and will be present beyond this encounter. The Cornelius family invites Peter to stay with them. Will prolonged encounter enable a prolonged experience of saving grace for all?

O Sing to YHWH a new song
who has done wonders.

Showing salvation and divine justice to the nations

God has remembered the house of Israel in truth and love

All the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God.

This Psalm expresses unbridled joy.

Shout to the Most High, all the earth, break into joyous songs of praise
with harp and melodious singing.
with trumpets and the blast of the shofar

All creation, the sea and the rivers join in the celebration when YHWH
comes to judge the earth with justice and its peoples with equity.

What will God's remembrance of truth and love look like between
settler Mennonites and aboriginal peoples?

Is it there in a conversation between my foster sister Carolyn and I in
my mother's kitchen?

Is it there when I ask questions about my aunt and uncle's participation
in the school at Poplar Hill?

I pray God's truth and love will be present at the conclusion of the Truth
and Reconciliation commission's work at the end of this month. There
will be many ways to participate including planting a heart garden with
the children of our congregation in solidarity with others across the
country. We will tell you more about that in the coming weeks.

We know now that God never uniquely blessed colonial cultures. I
hope that we can say with Peter that we truly understand that God
shows no partiality. When the church and good church people aligned
themselves with colonial superiority we entered a time of profound
darkness. When in the eyes of part of the church God became white and

sin became anything not European, God wept. What God has made clean do not call profane. How will any of us know what God has made clean if we do not listen deeply to the Spirit of God who judges the nations with justice and equity?

Maybe just maybe as in the story of Peter and his companions and the household of Cornelius our salvation exists precisely in our encounter with each other.

One more memory:

I am on the water in a kayak, in the Broughton straight between the Northern part of Vancouver island and mainland BC. There are six of us. We have paddled for a few hours and we hope to come ashore to rest, have lunch and visit an Orca whale observation centre. We see a man on the shore, no docks and no buildings, just a man. Our guide instructs us to raise our paddles – a sign that we wish to come ashore in this wilderness place.

The man has a drum and this is what we hear as we hold our paddles in the air.

audio of drum and song

“You have traveled a great distance, come ashore, let’s have some lunch,” he says.

For the first time in my life, something deep within me shifts.

He is host and I am guest and as such I recognize myself in a whole new way. He is a man of the Kwak-wak-ya-wak people of the Wakashan

language. We are both people of this earth who find ourselves in a tremendously humbling part of the world:

deep cold sea,

great tides,

giant trees,

rocks,

eagles and great sea mammals.

In this place he recognizes himself as host to me a traveler who is tired and hungry, yes, but it soon becomes clear that he also sees himself as a child of mother earth and a brother to her creatures. After lunch he guides us through the dense rainforest to the Orca whale observation station. I expect high tech. Instead it is only a small plywood and plastic shelter where students and local aboriginals observe and systematically record the Orca whales near Robson bite where they come to rub their bellies on the smooth rocks, for pleasure they say, and eat the abundant wild salmon who gather at the mouth of the Robson river where it meets the sea. These observers know each of over 200 Orca's by name and age and familial relationship. They understand these amazing creatures as their own relations. They love them and I am changed.

The place

the people

the creatures

all remarkably hospitable.

In this encounter I am changed.

And the sea roars and the rivers clap their hands at the presence of YHWH,
who comes to judge the earth,
who will rule the world with justice
and its peoples with equity.

Finally, when we try to hold water – it runs through our fingers.

The creator of the deep who divided waters from waters
The deep cold sea from the heavens above and
placed all creatures within its biosphere;
this creator holds the water and all that it contains.

This creator also holds the water of our salvation if we dare to receive it.