

## **Sermon: Water from the Rock**

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, Oct 1, 2023)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts  
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

“For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is God’s saving power for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek.” Words of the Apostle Paul, penned down first to the congregation gathered in Rome, but really addressing the entirety of the Christian Church, the body of Christ for the past two thousand years, passed down through traditions and generations, now placed in our collective hands—I am not ashamed of the gospel for it is God’s saving power for everyone who believes.

It is with that, I like to invite you to a painful journey today, as we mark the third anniversary of the National Day of Truth and Reconciliation, a day dedicated to hearing the truth of Canada’s treatment of the Indigenous population, through its colonial policy of assimilation, through the painful chapter of the residential schools, through the churches’ participation, its complacency, and now facing painful trauma for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities collectively and inter-generationally.

Before I show you the video of a residential school survivor, I want to say that it is painful, and triggering for some, but it is important that we hear her story, and receive it as what it is, a first-hand account of crying out for true healing and reconciliation.

[video]

It is with her story in mind, I would like to invite you to reflect on our Scripture passage of Exodus 17. Water is a physical necessity for all biological life-form. We cannot live without it. The human body is consisted of 90% water. Think about it—90% water. Sure we have bones, muscles, nerves, hairs, skins, organs and all that, but 90% of us is actually...water.

Now we may go without food for a good while, not pleasant, and certainly not for the faint of heart, but fasting is a spiritual discipline that many do practice, and certainly we read of the fasting of Jesus in the wilderness for 40 days. But to go without water? Going without water, one’s body would not last three days. That was the problem facing the Israelites,

in today's Scripture reading, as we follow along their stories in the Book of Exodus.

Thirst is a physical problem, but at the same time it is also a spiritual problem. It is a spiritual problem because thirst is the result of our sin, our original fallenness. When God created the first human couple—Adam and Eve, God placed them in the garden of Eden. Eden was full of water! In fact, in Genesis 2, we learn the garden was the source of 4 major rivers of the Ancient Near East. “*The name of the first is Pishon; it is the one that flows around the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold, and the gold of that land is good; bdellium and onyx stone are there. The name of the second river is Gihon; it is the one that flows around the whole land of Cush. The name of the third river is Tigris, which flows east of Assyria. And the fourth river is the Euphrates.*” (Genesis 2:11-14) Think about it, all that water at our disposal, for our pleasure—to nourish, to restore and to heal.

So when the Israelites complained to Moses, Aaron, to God really, that they were thirsty—the problem was both physical and spiritual. Physical thirst is easy to diagnose—the tongue is parched, the lips crack, one becomes dizzy, your mind starts to play tricks on you, and you begin to faint. However, spiritual thirst, in so far as their spiritual diagnosis, much harder to do.

T.S. Eliot has this to say about thirst, in the final section of his work “*The Waste Land*”.

Here is no water but only rock  
Rock and no water and the sandy road  
The road winding above among the mountains  
Which are mountains of rock without water  
If there were water we should stop and drink  
Amongst the rock one cannot stop or think  
Sweat is dry and feet are in the sand  
If there were only water amongst the rock

Glancing at these words superficially, one would think Eliot is speaking only of the physical thirst. But reading them in the context of his whole body of work, one comes to an appreciation of the poet's interior journey. A journey in search of fertility and growth, and the many hard and dry places along the way.

The Israelites, in their 40 years of wandering in the wilderness, certainly had their share of many hard and dry places. But when they turn to God, when they come to trust and rely solely in God's provision, not only did they find mana and quail, they find water from the rock. This renewal in unexpected, hidden places, will eventually lead the community of faith into salvation and redemption.

For the Christian community, we understand this spiritual thirst can only be quenched by the living water that Christ provides, as Jesus said to the Samaritan woman by the well, "*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.*" (John 4:13-14)

The challenge for us as the community of faith who have understood and received this grace, is to share it, even as we repent from the sins of our past with regard to the Indigenous communities struggling to overcome their pain, struggling to find living water for their healing. The challenge for us, is to have the conviction to proclaim, as Isaiah the prophet proclaimed to the exiles, to a dejected and rejected population,

*"When the poor and needy seek water,  
and there is none,  
and their tongue is parched with thirst,  
I the Lord will answer them,  
I the God of Israel will not forsake them.  
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)

I will conclude my reflection today, with words of Willy Littlechild, an Indigenous elder and survivor of the residential school system, who concluded his heartfelt remark yesterday, before thousands of attendees in front of the Parliament Hill, with this prayer of Saint Francis of Assisi,

"Make me an instrument of your peace:  
where there is hatred, let me sow love;  
where there is injury, pardon;  
where there is doubt, faith;

where there is despair, hope;  
where there is darkness, light;  
where there is sadness, joy.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**