

SERMON

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Life Quenching Water

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Once upon a time, in the land called South Africa, there was a great drought. The land was dry. There was no water anywhere. Spring came and went but no rain fell. The animals all said, "We will have a very wet summer." But summer was dry and very, very hot. By the beginning of winter, the Mutale River had dried up, and if you looked down the village well in the middle of the day, you could not even glimpse water. All the animals were suffering; the snakes, tortoises, elephants, and lions. In the bush the impala, kudu, porcupines and hares were panting for water. In the jackal-berry tree the guinea fowl, crows and baboons sat quiet, their throats too dry to screech or chatter.

King Lion called everybody to attend a meeting. All the animals arrived and they all agreed that during such a time they should forget all grievances and stand together. "We will dig for water in the dry riverbed. Mr. Elephant, you will start, you are the strongest of all the animals. You must dig and save our lives."

Mr. Elephant dug and dug and dug. "No, Mr. Elephant, this will not do. Look, the hole you are making is far too wide, you'll never find water this way," King Lion said.

Mr. Kudu started digging. He dug and dug and dug but his hooves were so sharp, the soft river sand just rolled back into the hole.

"No, Mr. Kudu, this won't work, you are not getting anywhere. Let Mr. Baboon try."

Baboon dug and dug but his mind was clearly somewhere else. Every now and then he would stop and throw the mud around as if in a game.

"No, Mr. Baboon, you are not being serious, let someone else try before we all die of thirst."

Then Impala tried, Hare tried, Guinea Fowl and Crow. They all tried. It was useless. They grumbled and complained, then in exhaustion, they sat around the dry river bed.

At last Tortoise slowly stepped forward and slowly started digging. And as he dug, he sang

*Spring up O well, with-in my soul, Spring up O well, and make me whole
Spring up O well and give to me, that life, abundantly.*

The animals all laughed at him because he was so small. They told him he was crazy because they had already tried digging. But slowly he dug and dug and dug, quietly singing

*Spring up O well, with-in my soul, Spring up O well, and make me whole
Spring up O well and give to me, that life, abundantly.*

By then it was late afternoon and the animals were tired and miserable. They grumbled and complained. They sat around watching. Some had fallen asleep. The yellow moon soon rose in the east. Some animals were snoring. Others were sighing.

Suddenly there was a splash, splash!

King Lion jumped up, Baboon woke up and so did Kudu and Impala, Elephant and all the animals. They rushed to the water and pushed Tortoise aside. "Get out the way, little one!" They gathered around the hole and drank and drank. They drank until they had their fill, and with full bellies, they wandered off.

The next morning before daybreak, Tortoise was already clearing the hole that had been trampled by all the animals in their rush to drink. He cleared the edges and sang

*Spring up O well, with-in my soul, Spring up O well, and make me whole
Spring up O well and give to me, that life, abundantly.*

Slowly the hole filled up with clear water. Tortoise stepped into the pool of water and drank and drank.

But just then all the animals arrived back for their early morning drink. "Get out of the way, Mr. Tortoise. You're stepping in our drinking water and making it muddy." And they pushed Tortoise aside again.

As Tortoise walked away, he warned them, "This water is for us all to share. If you do not share it, then I tell you, today this water will dry up, all of it!"

The animals laughed and mocked Tortoise. But then, to their utter shock, the water slowly seeped back into the ground, and the hole dried up.

"Now we are in big trouble," King Lion said. "We've insulted Mr. Tortoise and now he took the water away. What are we going to do?"

"We must apologise," Porcupine said. "Let's beg him to come back. Guinea Fowl, you can talk fast and non-stop, you go."

"Ki-ki-ki-ki-ki," said Guinea Fowl, "I'll try, I'll try, I'll try." And off he went.

The animals waited and waited and waited and by midday, when the sun was burning hot, finally Guinea Fowl arrived back with Tortoise.

King Lion stepped forward. "On behalf of all the animals, I apologise for the way we treated you. It is true that we were greedy and did not share the water for us. Please bring it back."

Softly Tortoise began to sing:

*Spring up O well, with-in my soul, Spring up O well, and make me whole
Spring up O well and give to me, that life, abundantly.*

In front of their eyes, even as they held their breath, the water slowly began to seep up into the hollow. King Lion held back the animals and said, "Mr. Tortoise, please have the first drink." And, after Tortoise had had his fill all the animals, in neat order, had their drink.

Like many African folktales, the story of the Tortoise and the water can teach us a lot. It's a lesson on humility, and sharing. It's also a lesson on trust in the Divine. The tortoise is wise. Even though he is oppressed, criticized, ignored and laughed at, he has wisdom, and because of his wisdom, he realizes the need to trust that the Divine Creator will take care of his needs.

In many ways, it isn't difficult to see the similarities between Moses and the tortoise. Both were wise. Both were laughed at and scoffed by others. And it appears that both placed their trust in Divine intervention. Just as the tortoise slowly sang to the Creator, so too did Moses call out to God in our scripture today.

And the animals are in many ways like the Israelites in our scripture. Both were thirsty. Both complained and grumbled. Both had little faith that Creator God would provide. And if you read on in Exodus, you will see that just like the animals were not grateful, so too the Israelites did not remember how blessed they were.

The story also teaches us about the need to share the commodity of water. The animals were really thirsty for water. In Canada, it's hard for us to understand thirst. You might feel like you need a drink on a hot day, (or on a Friday evening) but have you ever been REALLY thirsty? So thirsty, that you begin to feel dizzy, your stomach aches, you feel weak and nauseous? Just a single drop of water would help! We get the impression that it was like that for the Israelites as they journeyed through the dessert. They were so thirsty, that they cried out "Give us water to drink!"

It's hard for us to imagine, since we live in a place where we can just turn the tap on for clean, safe drinking water. The idea of waking up before sunrise every morning and spending hours walking just to find a water source. Standing in line to access a muddy hole in the ground that you share with both your neighbors, and with the cows and goats. Then, carrying 40 pounds of dirty water all the way home on your back and serving it to the people you love most, knowing that the dirty water might cause stomach pain and diarrhea and even loss of life from water-related diseases.

It's a world most of us don't know. And yet, it's the reality for 748 million people around the world—748 million! That's nearly 10 percent of everyone living on this planet. And it's not just in developing countries, it is here in Canada too. There are currently 114 First Nation communities living under a "Do Not Consume" water advisory. Some lack any running drinking water, relying only on delivery from trucks and cisterns to collect rainwater, and many households rely on well water that is often contaminated. Exposure to the contaminants found in this water can cause illnesses ranging from gastrointestinal disorders to increased risk of cancer. The basic human right to water is seriously at risk in First Nations communities across Canada.

You and I got lucky. We're the other 90 percent. We happened to be born in places where we've never had to worry about finding water or deal with the fear that our water might affect the health of our families. But that doesn't mean their stories can't impact us. Or that we can't make a difference. If you read my message in last weeks Friday File, our Knox United Newsletter, you will see that I gave some suggestions of how we could help fair and equal access to clean water in Ontario.

And finally, I think that in both the story of the tortoise, and in our scripture, the symbol of the water can also be a metaphor for the Living Water that Christ provides for us. In John 4:14, Jesus says that water alone will not quench your thirst, but faith in Christ brings God's promise. It is Living water that quenches our thirst. Jesus said :

whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst.

The animals knew that they needed water to survive. The Israelites knew that their survival depended on water. We know that we all need safe clean water to live on earth, and that is why, with God's grace, we work towards equitable sharing of that water. But our spiritual lives are quenched by far more than water. It is our faith in God, the Creator, and the way of Christ that gives us abundant life.

*Spring up O well, with-in my soul, Spring up O well, and make me whole
Spring up O well and give to me, that life, abundantly.*