

Pastor Letter: The Blessings of Water (12/11/22)

For the first 10 years of my life, I lived in the rural areas of Clarion County. Much of the area had been strip mined for the top two veins of coal years before and had left the land scarred by these operations. In my early childhood, large draglines were moving across the landscape harvesting the next two deeper veins of coal. Farms, roads, and entire communities were disappearing due to these massive coal mining machines that moved tons of earth in order to reach the underground coal reserves.

Not only were the farms and roads disappearing but also the cherished amounts of clean underground water sources. My grandfather's potable water source was precious rainwater that came off the barn roof and was collected into a concrete cistern. I have also helped him haul water in 55-gallon drums on the back of the tractor to fill the cistern in the summer. A shallow water well that was contaminated by acid mine drainage was used to provide water for the farm animals and irrigating the garden and fruit trees.

Our trip to the Holy Lands in 1997, helped to reinforce my appreciation for clean water as we traveled through the arid regions that I had read about in the Bible. Many of the nomadic peoples were congregated around the wadis and other sources of water for their flocks of sheep and goats. I quickly realized that management of these valuable water resources was controlled by political powers.

The city of Jericho was developed because of several underground springs that created a desert oasis. The political government had collected taxes from the people of the town but had not upgraded the leaky water distribution system. We learned that the generous Norwegian people supplied the finances to install a new water distribution system to the people of Jericho.

As we traveled northward from Jericho to the Sea of Galilee, we observed an open trench that had been built to supply water from the Jordan River, the headwaters of the Sea of Galilee, along the western shore of the Sea. This open trench was used to supply running water to selected arid areas, selective communities, and certain private businesses. This open trench was lowering the level of the Sea of Galilee.

On the hillsides above the Jezreel Valley, we observed a creative irrigation system that supplied water to an arid region of land. Small plastic tubing was systematically buried underground in order to supply water to fruit trees, grapevines, and other crops. Small holes were drilled into this tubing at strategical places in order to provide water to specific plants. The water was pumped underground and at night in order to prevent evaporation into the air. Plants were literally blooming in the desert.

When a local missional church in Pittsburgh learned I was going to spend the summer in Kenya, they asked me to hand carry some money for a teachers' college near Mount Kenya. One of the workers at the Seminary where I was spending the summer offered to take me to this educational facility. When we finally arrived at the school, we discovered that the electrical power was out and the generator for the main water pump was broken. The school staff volunteered to live without electrical power and water so that the students could have sufficient water, that was supplied by a small generator that operated a small water pump. On a happier note, the funds I hand carried to the school allowed the staff to purchase 4 bicycles that the students used to travel to surrounding churches in order to provide Christian education to their children.

I was invited to dinner at the home of the worker who brought me to this area. The family lived on a small farm of 1 milk cow, several goats, and a few chickens. The

house was erected of wooded slats and a metal roof. The worker's mother was cooking on a wood fire in 3 stones in a small out building made of sticks and a metal roof. The main room of the house had a sofa, two wooden chairs, and a dirt floor. The main water supply was a rain barrel at the edge of the house much like my grandfather's cistern. I saw the mother dip a pitcher into the rain barrel in order to provide water for us to wash our hands before the evening meal, catching the water in a basin. Once we ate, the woman again allowed us to wash our hands from the same pitcher and basin as before.

The women used the water from the basin to wash the dinner dishes. She used the wash water to provide a drink for the cow, goats and chickens. The residual liquid was used in the garden. Every drop of water is a very precious lifeline, in an arid land.

As I traveled in the Holy Lands, Kenya, Ethiopia, and Mexico, I have often seen women carrying a 5-gallon plastic jug on their backs and often another 5-gallon plastic jug on their heads filled with water for their households. Often this water source is a great distance from their homes. Very seldom is this water clean, potable, or safe.

I share these experiences not to impress you with my travels but to shine a spotlight upon this week's Biblical passages and the Advent liturgical season. We light the pink Advent candle this week, that highlights the Joy of God's promises. The prophet Isaiah provides a poetic oracle that describes Almighty God's promise of the joy of salvation and the coming Day of the Lord. We read that even nature will rejoice, "The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the LORD, the majesty of our God," (Isa. 35:1-2).

God will gather his children, heal their woes, and bring them back home, "Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes," (vv. 5-7).

Isaiah gives us picture of the end times when God's people will be set free of bondage and find their way to the Lord's presence, "A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God's people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray. No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there. And the ransomed of the LORD shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away," (vv. 8-10).

These images may not be your own visions of the second coming of our Lord, but each of us should be fully prepared for our Lord's return to set up the Kingdom of God. Our NT passage encourages each of us to be fully prepared but patiently wait with anticipation as we read, "Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near," (James 5:7-8).

When our Lord returns, may He find each of us ready for that joyous and glorious day. Rejoice always! Pastor Larry