

A Wind from God Swept Over the Face of the Waters
Ingathering Water Ritual Homily
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It is good to be back together again. It is good to be gathered here in this hour, in this morning, in this sanctuary. It is good to share together today this water communion that hundreds of other Unitarian Universalist churches across the country are also conducting. It is good to connect and reconnect, to meet and share stories of our summer journeys and adventures, or if we did not travel this summer, to share once again stories of our homes and jobs and neighbors and children and families.

My story of this past summer is a story full of motion and change. In June, I attended our Unitarian Universalist Association General Assembly as an ordained minister for the first time; in July the church Board and I spent two days together on a leadership retreat preparing for this next year; in August, you and I also made it through our first year together, including a process of mutual evaluation.

In my home life, we experienced the range of life passages. In August, a favorite aunt of mine died. My mother has Alzheimer's disease, and in May my brother and I learned that the retirement home where she was living could no longer care for her. So the two of us made an emergency trip to Milwaukee in June to pack up her apartment and move her to an Alzheimer's care facility in Tucson, Arizona, near where my brother now lives. On the other end of the spectrum, in July, Heidi and I found out we are pregnant, and that the due date for the baby is March 10.

It has been a very full summer for us, as I am sure it has been for all of you. Over the past few months, as I looked forward to this Ingathering water ceremony service, I wondered where I might get water to bring today. We did travel to a friend's cabin in northern Minnesota, but other than that, we've just been settling into our new house. But as I was sorting through my mom's things a few months ago, I discovered inside one of her dresser drawers a small, carved, wooden box. Inside the wooden box I found a glass vial, and the vial was full of water. I don't know where the water came from. But as a minister, my mom also led Ingathering Water Communion services, and years ago she also was a chaplain for various summer camps, so I suspect the water may come from one of those sources.

I want to be able to talk to my mother about the water. I want to be able hear more of her stories about how she engaged her ministerial calling, and I want to know how she handled things that I am now encountering for the first time. And now that I have a child, with another one on the way, I also want to talk to her about my childhood, and hear advice or perspectives she has on parenting.

But I can't talk with her about any of this. She still knows who I am when I call, but after about a minute or so our conversation begins to go in circles. When I began preparing for this Ingathering service, this is not what I expected to share with you this morning. And yet, I felt a connection between the water we bring together today and the water I found in my mother's wooden box.

We gather together today using water to celebrate a return and a beginning. An ancient story I know also uses water to tell and celebrate a commencement: "In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth; the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of

the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.” These ancient words begin one story about the origin of the universe, of the earth, of life. It is a story of new beginnings, of creation, a story of artistry and the creative process. It is a story about the powerful forces that shape our lives, forces that are beyond our control and beyond our imagining. These forces – earthquakes, hurricanes, DNA, quarks, comets, exploding stars – are described in one of the only ways that ancient people knew how: in story and metaphor, as “a wind from God” sweeping over the face of the unknown waters.

This is an ancient story of human origins from ancient people trying to find meaning and make meaning in their lives. They were attempting to answer the questions we humans still ask today: “what is my purpose?” and “Why am I here?”

Though the story moves from chaos and “formless void” toward order structure, always at the edges is a bit of fear: fear of the formless void, fear of the darkness, fear of the deep water, fear of the unknown.

We still live with these fears today: fear of darkness, fear of deep water, fear of the unknown. We humans typically don’t like surprises, we don’t like change, and we hate the feeling of helplessness, especially when it comes to diseases for which there are no cures, and approaching death. We sometimes pretend – and we sometimes pretend very well – that chaos and uncertainty are not at our doorstep. We make plans, we schedule appointments, we dream about the future. But we are moderate sized creatures in the middle of a continuum between atoms to solar systems. We are here by the grace of God, by the grace of the universe, and anything – earthquakes, hurricanes, DNA, quarks, comets and exploding stars – can impact our lives at any moment, and we have no power to stop it or change it.

Our human discomfort with uncertainty is the foundation of religion. The Reverend Forrest Church once said that, “Religion is our human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die.” Our great questions are what call us together. Once we get together, religion and ritual are what we use to help us make sense of why we are here and to mark the passage of the seasons of the year and seasons of our lives.

Just as ancient people used story and metaphor to help them understand who they were and why they were here, so we too use story and poetry and metaphor today. We use water to remind our selves of the nourishment and companionship we offer one another through the arc and cycle of life’s journey. We mingle and merge our water to represent our unity, our strength and our flexibility.

In the beginning, in the formless void, “a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.” Much later, in the book of Psalms, that same God, that same spirit, that same energy, is present with us as we walk through the valley of the shadow and are guided us to lie down beside still waters. This is the way of things. This is the way of life. This is the arc of my mother’s life. This is the arc of my life. This is the arc of my son’s life. Our life journey is not just from dust to dust. It is also from water to water.

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Ingathering Water Ceremony
Reverend Kent Hemmen Saleska

In a few moments we will recognize and celebrate our coming back to together again this fall by merging the waters of our summer. Our process is simple: I will read a poem and offer an invitation to bring forward waters from each of the four directions, and then Greg and Sam and Graham will play music. You are invited to bring your waters forward at the time most appropriate to you. If you did not bring water with you this morning, a pitcher of water is here for you to pour a bit of symbolic water if you wish. As the music plays, I invite you to speak the name of the source of your water or a word that symbolizes a journey you took this summer.

If you traveled to the Great Lakes or the Atlantic Ocean, then the East would be your direction. It may be though that your journey was through a geography of the heart or spirit. Each direction also has other qualities associated with them:

East is the direction of air, sunlight, new beginnings, and spring.

South is the direction of fire, compassion, passion, inspiration, and summer.

West is the direction of water, healing, harvest, sunset, and fall.

North is the direction of earth, death, completion of a life cycle, winter.

I encourage you to take this time of merging of our gathered waters to reflect upon the many kinds of journeys we travel, both the exterior and the interior, the physical and the spiritual. Where are you coming from? What gifts of the journey do you bring back to our beloved community?

We will begin with pouring a bit of the water that was collected last year.

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Waters of the East
East, Air, Birth, Beginnings, Spring

Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front

By Wendell Berry

Love the quick profit, the annual raise,
vacation with pay. Want more
of everything ready-made. Be afraid
to know your neighbors and to die.
And you will have a window in your head.
Not even your future will be a mystery
any more. Your mind will be punched in a card
and shut away in a little drawer.
When they want you to buy something
they will call you. When they want you
to die for profit they will let you know.
So, friends, every day do something
that won't compute. Love the Lord.
Love the world. Work for nothing.
Take all that you have and be poor.
Love someone who does not deserve it.
Denounce the government and embrace
the flag. Hope to live in that free
republic for which it stands.
Give your approval to all you cannot
understand. Praise ignorance, for what man
has not encountered he has not destroyed.
Ask the questions that have no answers.
Invest in the millennium. Plant sequoias.
Say that your main crop is the forest
that you did not plant,
that you will not live to harvest.
Say that the leaves are harvested
when they have rotted into the mold.

Call that profit. Prophecy such returns.
Put your faith in the two inches of humus
that will build under the trees
every thousand years.
Listen to carrion – put your ear
close, and hear the faint chattering
of the songs that are to come.
Expect the end of the world. Laugh.
Laughter is immeasurable. Be joyful
though you have considered all the facts.
So long as women do not go cheap
for power, please women more than men.
Ask yourself: Will this satisfy
a woman satisfied to bear a child?
Will this disturb the sleep
of a woman near to giving birth?
Go with your love to the fields.
Lie easy in the shade. Rest your head
in her lap. Swear allegiance
to what is highest your thoughts.
As soon as the generals and politicians
can predict the motions of your mind,
lose it. Leave it as a sign
to mark the false trail, the way
you didn't go. Be like the fox
who makes more tracks than necessary,
some in the wrong direction.
Practice resurrection.

We call on the waters of the east, the waters of sunrise and new beginnings. Water from the St. Croix River, Lake Michigan, from the Atlantic Ocean.

We call on waters that nourish young green plants. We call on the waters of courage and inspiration that allow us to begin again. We call on waters of birth, rebirth, new life and resurrection, freshness and springtime.

Bring forward your waters of the East.

Waters of the South
Fire, Passion, Growth, Summer

Thus Spake the Mockingbird – By Barbara Hamby

The mockingbird says, Hallelujah, coreopsis, I make the day
bright, I wake the night-blooming jasmine. I am
the duodecimo of desperate love, the hocus-pocus passion
flower of delirious retribution. You never saw such a bird,
such a triage of blood and feathers, tongues and bone. O the world
is a sad address, bitterness melting the tongues of babies,
breasts full of accidental milk, but I can teach the flowers to grow,
take their tight buds, unfurl them like flags in the morning heat,
fat banners of scent, flat platters of riot on the emerald scene.

I am the green god of pine trees, conducting the music
of rustling needle through a harp of wind. I am the heart of men,
the wild bird that drives their sex, forges their engines,
jimmies their shattered locks in the dark flare where midnight slinks.

I am the careless minx in the skirts of women, the bright moon
caressing their hair, the sharp words pouring from their beautiful mouths
in board rooms, on bar stools, in big city laundrettes. I am
Lester Young's sidewinding sax, sending that Pony Express
message out west in the Marconi tube hidden in every torso
tied tight in the corset of do and don't, high and low, yes and no. I am
the radio, first god of the twentieth century, broadcasting
the news, the blues, the death counts, the mothers wailing
when everyone's gone home. I am sweeping
through the Eustachian tube of the great plains, transmitting
through every ear of corn, shimmying down the spine
of every Bible-thumping banker and bureaucrat, relaying the anointed
word of the shimmering world. Every dirty foot that walks
the broken streets moves on my wings. I speak from the golden
screens. Hear the roar of my discord murdering the trees,
screaming its furious rag. The fuselage of my revival-tent brag. Open
your windows, slip on your castanets. I am the flamenco
in the heel of desire. I am the dancer. I am the choir. Hear my wild
throat crowd the exploding sky. O I can make a noise.

We call forth the waters of the South, waters of fire, passion, growth and summer. From
Lake Okiboji in Iowa, from New Orleans, the Gulf of Mexico, the Caribbean Sea, the Amazon,
from the Antarctic Sea.

We call on waters of the heat of the day, the precious and often spare waters of summer
and brown landscapes. We call on the waters that calm the parched mouth, that revive the
burned spirits that power us on. Bring waters of power and passion that drive us forward, help us
to grow, fill us with light and life.

Bring the waters of the South.

Waters of the West
Water, Calm, Harvest, Autumn

My November Guest

By Robert Frost

My Sorrow, when she's here with me,
Thinks these dark days of autumn rain
Are beautiful as days can be;
She loves the bare, the withered tree;
She walks the sodden pasture lane.

Her pleasure will not let me stay.
She talks and I am fain to list:
She's glad the birds are gone away,
She's glad her simple worsted gray
Is silver now with clinging mist.

The desolate, deserted trees,
The faded earth, the heavy sky,
The beauties she so truly sees,
She thinks I have no eye for these,
And vexes me for reason why.

Not yesterday I learned to know
The love of bare November days
Before the coming of the snow,
But it were vain to tell her so,
For they are better for her praise.

We call on the waters of the West, waters of harvest and sunset; on waters of the Missouri River, the Rocky Mountains, the Columbia River. We call on waters from the Pacific Ocean, from unnamed islands lost in vast blue.

We call on the sweat of harvest time, the waters of the times of completion. Bring the cooling waters of autumn, rust colored and peaceful.

Bring the waters of the West.

Waters of the North
Earth, Death, Wholeness, Winter

Conversation for Another Day

By Jay Bright

He did not have to breathe.
The night breathed through him
Until he was no longer afraid
Of its immense closeness.

He did not have to say more
Or open his eyes. He did not
Have to make good on his promises.
He was fast moving invisibly beyond

This brazen and commanding world
And he seemed surprised that the end
Was being arranged for him.
The darkness of his body brought

Its own balanced order, each
Of us bent down and listening
To the flickering of his eyelashes,
Thinking this moment of departure,

Streaming in and out of shadow,
Was also something else, a place
Of safekeeping, a source of,
How else to say it, well-being,

That his final nod was not a helpless
Flutter, but that part of the story
Where the flow of night brings comfort
Because there's no end to its reach.

We call on waters of the north, the waters of winter, of death, of completion, peacefulness, and of the grace of the world. We call on the waters of the Boundary Waters, the Quetico, Lake Superior, Hudson's Bay, the Arctic Ocean.

Bring waters of the times of preparation, of becoming ready for that which comes further along. Bring waters of death, of the night, of rest. Bring waters of the peace that comes without bidding. Bring waters of the north.