

## WATER DAYS

We possess more power than we realize. We have more control than we claim.

We have choices, you know.

How often do we say “I had to do (fill-in-the-blank)” or “I had no choice”? Sometimes that is just a colloquial expression or a shorthand way of saying we did something for reasons unexpressed. For example, you might be given an assignment at work or in school that seems way less fun or perhaps even less productive than doing something else. But if I want to keep my job or I want to pass my class, I will do the task assigned, no matter how difficult or how tedious, because there is a reason of greater importance and significance than NOT doing the task. In talking to a friend, you might not explain all of that and instead resort to saying something like: “I had to finish a report for my boss” or “I had to turn in a paper.”

I had a professor in college tell me the following and it has stuck with me all of my years, although I forget it sometimes in practice. He said:

You *always* have a choice. When making a choice, there are two questions to ask:

1. What is the price?
2. Am I willing to pay the price?

Thirty-seven years ago, I decided to embark on a 10-day backpacking trip on the Appalachian Trail through a rocky, sparsely populated stretch of Pennsylvania leading to the Delaware Water Gap. This was 1980 and the Internet was not even a gleam in Al Gore’s eye as of yet, so planning for my trip meant getting trail books and topographical maps and scouting out locations for refreshing supplies if needed along the way. I was a novice backpacker but was in good physical condition, so the potential hiking difficulties on the trail did not concern me.

When I began my trip, I was carrying about an 80-pound pack, which was about 35% of my body weight at the time. Perhaps a bit heavy, but not unreasonable for seasoned backpackers. Of course, a significant percentage of that weight was food and water. Things went swimmingly for the first day. The second and third days got tough, as I no longer

was hiking on any “trail” but over huge boulders for hours at a time. I think I hiked less than 10 miles per day on those two days, when I had been planning on 15-18 miles a day.

Days four and five were the “killer days.” And as it turns out, that almost became a literal description. In plotting out areas to replenish supplies, there was only one town within close proximity to the trail on the route I had chosen, and I was significantly behind schedule at that point. But I still had a good supply of my “astronaut” freeze-dried food. However, this was August, and in Pennsylvania the mountains on the Appalachian trail are not like the mountains we have in California. The elevation was only about 1,500 feet, so if it’s hot and humid in Philadelphia, it’s hot and humid on the Appalachian Trail. The temperatures were running above 90 degrees and the humidity was just as high. And every water source shown on the topographical map was as dry as Ezekiel’s vision of the Valley of Dry Bones (chapter 37). I ran out of water early on day 4 and could not find any flowing stream or water supply despite many being listed in the guidebook and on the map.

At the start of day 5, I calculated I was probably about 25 to 28 miles from the town and, at the hiking pace I was accomplishing, it might take me 12 to 14 hours to arrive. The day wore on and I began cramping due to dehydration, which made the hiking more difficult. I developed a fever that kept rising throughout the day and by happy hour I was beginning to hallucinate. I dropped my pack and walked the last two or three miles into town and found water and food and, after restocking supplies and recovering a bit, I hiked back to my pack and slept on the trail one last night. The next morning I went back into town, hitched a ride back to my car at the trailhead from where I departed and drove back to my home in Delaware. I loaded the car and headed to the Eastern Shore of Delaware to Bethany Beach, where I slept and recovered for the rest of my “vacation time.”

Over the past 37 years, I think about this from time to time and wonder if death was close at hand or if I am just being melodramatic. Maybe it doesn’t matter ... it just was what it was. I do know that at the time, I thought it was pretty significant and I thought I might die on the trail a few short miles from town, but I also remember not being very panicked or concerned. I just kept putting one foot in front of the other until I reached “salvation” ... the salvation that came in the source of water to reduce my fever and restore my body.

What I will say is that after that experience, I became far more diligent in my preparations for backpacking and camping trips. The fickleness of weather in the mountains and the fragility of life have become part of my consciousness in ways that I think have been helpful to me and also have given me a profound sense of gratitude for the ways life is sustained beyond our ability to explain.

And so I acknowledge that we also possess less power than we claim. We have less control than we realize.

However, we still have choices, you know.

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In reflecting on our scripture reading this morning, perhaps a little overview will help orient us to hear the message afresh. I know folks who think the Bible is “fixed” and locked down, with no room for new interpretations. Personally, I cannot land there, but I can understand the attraction in wanting that to be the case. There is certainly a case to be made that the biblical writers generally had an idea of what they were trying to communicate and had specific points they wanted to make, and that might give credence to the “fixed-meaning” orientation. But then we have Jesus telling parables that are “open-ended” without fixed conclusions, seemingly to allow and even encourage ongoing and new interpretations to be applied to our lives in our day and time. I have two quotes in my “quote quiver” that I pull out when I think of the “ongoing revelation” way I tend to view scripture.

The first is from John Robinson, who was the pastor of the Pilgrim Fathers ... the Separatists ... before they left on the Mayflower to sail to America. In preparation for their departure, John Robinson said in part: “The Lord hath more truth and light yet to break forth from His holy word.”

The second is from Gil Bailie, who is a contemporary lay Dominican theologian. He said the following: “The Bible is inexhaustible in its revelatory power. But it only reveals when the questions get real.” That’s just another way of saying it reveals when the questions we ask are personal and practical in affecting our daily lives, not questions of academic exercise.

What is NOT so readily evident in both of these quotations is the interconnectedness of prayer *and* scripture in revelation. What is it we say in our Recall? “It is necessary for us as Christians to pray every day, to study some portion of the Scriptures each day ....” Of course ... *both* are necessary ... every day.

Well, in the book of Isaiah, that connection of “word” and revelation is also significantly reflected. The writer says that God will take pity on the wicked and evil and will freely forgive them because God is unlike us ... God is different ... God is holy. In this passage, what is the “word” of the Lord? “*For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways.*” The writer continues: “*As the rain and snow come down from the heavens and do not return there without watering the earth, making it produce grain to give seed for sowing and bread to eat, so is it with my word issuing from my mouth; it will not return to me empty without accomplishing my purpose and succeeding in the task for which I sent it.*”

Is that wonderful? I have friends who wonder why we bother with the Old Testament. I would suggest there are a lot of reasons, but this as a reminder is right up at the top of the list. Thank God ... literally ... that God’s thoughts and ways are not the same as our thoughts and ways. And so my job, my choice, my price to pay is to allow myself to be transformed to be more like God ... and to be more like the Christ who is to come some 500+ years after this passage in Isaiah. We use the word “Gospel” in the New Testament, which means “good news.” To me, this is an Old Testament gospel ... good news for me and for you ... 2,500 years after being shared with the Israelites as they prepared to return from exile under King Cyrus of Persia. Chapter 55 is the culmination of the story of Israel on the brink of release ... preparing for the new Exodus returning to Jerusalem. Can they hear the promise? Chapter 55 starts “*Come for water, all who are thirsty; though you have no money, come, buy grain and eat, come, buy wine and milk, not for money, not for a price.*” The Israelites have less power and control over this situation than they realize or claim. But they do have a choice ... and that choice is to listen to God ... to hear God and have life.

We have that choice as well. Can we hear the promise of new life and release from exile as well? It is not going to come from an intellectual exercise. It is not going to come from our self-righteousness. It is not going to come from our own efforts. It will come from surrender and willingness to buy wine and milk not for money. It will come for us

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who have no money, no currency to come for water ... because we are thirsty and we are willing to drink the water of life freely given by God who freely forgives. That is the promise and these are the days full of abundant water if we would choose it.

Every month we celebrate communion, which is a personal and corporate act of remembering and celebrating Jesus. We do it together as a symbol of the unity we seek in Christ.

Today, on the table are cups of water. You are invited to come and drink this water just for you ... just between you and God. This is not for unity ... this is a personal act of surrender ... just for you.

In the Bible there are many different references to water that symbolize other things. Spiritual cleansing; God's judgment; man's purposes and God's help. All of these references are also true of our passage today, but it seems to be even more than that. This water seems to symbolize the "knowledge" of God in ways beyond description ... in ways beyond reason. And if that is true, we come to this knowledge in experience and in ways unexplainable.

We are going to take several minutes of reflection and guided meditation. In a minute, I will invite you to close your eyes and listen, reflect, pray and experience what God might want to reveal to you this day about anything in your life that seems like you are separated or disconnected or in exile. Might this be the day for release?

During our meditations, I invite each of you to come forward and take a cup of water. If you are unable to come forward and would like a cup of water, please raise your hand or ask a fellow worshiper to bring a cup to you. If you would like, you may come to the kneeling bench before the altar. As you kneel, let this be your prayer:

"Dear God ... I have no money or a price I can pay. I am thirsty and I come for water as you have called me to come. I will listen to your words. Thank you for my life I have been given and for my life you sustain. Amen."

The prayer is written out on the kneeling bench rail for you to use, if you wish. Drink all of the water in your cup. You are called by name and your name is in the water. You are known and loved and forgiven.

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I will read our scripture passage several times. When everyone who wishes has come forward, we will take another minute for our private and personal reflections. Allow the words you hear to wash over you and through you as you can and allow God's transforming love and forgiveness to quench your thirst.

Please join me now as we seek the LORD while he is present and call to him while he is close at hand.

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\*Read portions of Isaiah 55 several times until all have come forward\*

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Amen.

If you experienced God's presence, give thanks and praise. If you did not experience God's presence, do not despair or worry about this. Stay thirsty, my friend, and come again without money and claim the life promised by God.

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AND

We possess less power than we claim. We have less control than we realize.

All of this is true at the same time ... that is the reality for us as spiritual beings in a temporal world. But always remember, we do have choices, you know.

How many of us have heard the phrase, "Water, water, everywhere, but not a drop to drink"? This is a modern phrasing taken from Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner." In the poem, the mariner had killed the peaceful bird of good omens, the Albatross. The ship was becalmed and could not sail. Here is a short excerpt of the phrasing of the poem as written in 1834:

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Down dropt the breeze, the sails dropt down,  
'Twas sad as sad could be;  
And we did speak only to break  
The silence of the sea!

All in a hot and copper sky,  
The bloody Sun, at noon,  
Right up above the mast did stand,  
No bigger than the Moon.

Day after day, day after day,  
We stuck, nor breath nor motion;  
As idle as a painted ship  
Upon a painted ocean.

Water, water, every where,  
And all the boards did shrink;  
Water, water, every where,  
Nor any drop to drink.

The very deep did rot: O Christ!  
That ever this should be!  
Yea, slimy things did crawl with legs  
Upon the slimy sea.

About, about, in reel and rout  
The death-fires danced at night;  
The water, like a witch's oils,  
Burnt green, and blue and white.

And some in dreams assurèd were  
Of the Spirit that plagued us so;  
Nine fathom deep he had followed us  
From the land of mist and snow.

And every tongue, through utter drought,  
Was withered at the root;  
We could not speak, no more than if  
We had been choked with soot.

Ah! well a-day! what evil looks  
Had I from old and young!  
Instead of the cross, the Albatross  
About my neck was hung.

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We have the choice and power and control ... to throw off the Albatross that symbolizes the exile in which we remain when we refuse to acknowledge our complicity ... and to claim the promise of the righteousness and restoration promised by God.

And we have no choice and power and control as to when that will happen. We come willing, and when God is revealed, we say thank you. That is surrender and, like our Savior, we must choose it willingly. It is the only way.

May it be so for each of us. Amen.