

# **Peter Bankson: What IS This Living Water?**

**Seekers Church: A Christian Community**

*In the Tradition of the Church of the Saviour*

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## **What IS This Living Water?**

### **Summary**

Have you ever been so engaged in something that you forgot to eat? God's call on you is probably somewhere nearby. That place of call is the place where living water wells up from within: it is the food that nourished Jesus as he was able to "...do the will of God who sent me, and to accomplish God's work."

### **This week's scriptures offer us three lessons about God's call:**

1. Living water comes from God, but we have to be thirsty to find it.
2. Don't think this search for water will be easy.
3. Horeb is over here, where you get so engaged you forget to eat.

If you are searching for God's call on your life, you might start with what you wrote down this morning on that little red paper, and follow it to where it intersects with the suffering of others.

# Scripture

## Exodus 17:3-7

But the people thirsted there for water, and the people murmured against Moses, and said, "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our cattle with thirst?" So Moses cried to God, "What shall I do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me." And God said to Moses, "Pass on before the people, taking with you some of the elders of Israel; and take in your hand the rod with which you struck the Nile, and go. Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb; and you shall strike the rock, and water shall come out of it, that the people may drink." And Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. And he called the name of the place Massah and Meribah, because of the faultfinding of the children of Israel, and because they put God to the proof by saying, "Is God among us or not?"

## Psalms 95:4-

The depths of the earth are in the hand of God;  
the heights of the mountains God's also.  
The sea belongs to God, for God made it;  
for God's hands formed the dry land.

## Romans 5:1-5

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in our hope of sharing the glory of God. More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

## John 4:5-26

Jesus came to a city of Samaria, called Sychar, near the field that Jacob gave to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and so Jesus, wearied with the journey, sat down beside the well.

There came a woman of Samaria to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." For the disciples had gone away into the city to buy food. The Samaritan woman said to

Jesus, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans. Jesus said to her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked that person, who would then have given you living water." The woman said to Jesus, "You have nothing to draw with, and the well is deep; where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and drank from it, as did his children and animals?" Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give will never thirst; the water that I shall give will become in the one who drinks it a spring of water welling up to eternal life." The woman said to Jesus, "Give me this water, that I may not thirst, nor come here to draw."

## **Introduction**

This morning we confront the paradox of Lent from another perspective. The lessons for the week focus on food and drink: living water, and spiritual food that feeds the soul.

As we begin, I'd like you to take a minute to let a memory surface. Can you think of a time when you were so excited about what you were doing that you forgot to eat? Write that down. Somewhere nearby is nourishment for your soul, and a wellspring of living water for you.

## **Living Water comes from God, but we have to be thirsty to find it.**

The Hebrew Scripture for today tells us of one of those times when Moses was at his wit's end. The people were wandering in the desert, and had no source of water to quench their thirst. They were at their wit's end, too, and blamed Moses for their plight. No water here, but plenty of water back there in slavery. "Maybe things back there weren't as bad as we remember." Murmur, murmur; pick up a couple of fist-sized

stones and head over to Moses' tent.

This was no small problem. I'm sure Moses was thirsty, too. His experience leading the Israelites in the wilderness had taught him that they could do OK as long as they could find water. But they had none, and things were getting tough.

So Moses went to God, and got a very specific set of instructions:

1. Pass in front of the people, taking with you some of the elders... (Be Public)
2. Take the rod with which you struck the Nile... (Honor Tradition)
3. I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb... (Trust God to show the way)
4. Strike the rock, and water shall come out of it... (Use Ritual)

Moses did what God told him, and God led him to water, enough for all the people and their flocks and their herds.

If I read the story right, Moses knew where Horeb was. No doubt they had wandered by there at least once before. But I'd guess they hadn't seen the water then. Maybe it wasn't there. Maybe they weren't thirsty enough to stop. I don't know.

For me, the important thing is that, when things got tough, Moses went to God and got the message of where to go, and what to do to let the people know that God was in control of the world, and that God was with them. What does this tell me about my own life right now?

When I think about my work at Communities In Schools, "water" means money – the funds we need to keep our operations going, the contributions we need to provide training, technical assistance and support for the "people of CIS." Our tribe is scattered across the country, working in about 200 communities to help more than half a million kids find their own sources

of help and hope.

Now that I'm back in the government liaison business for the CIS network, I'm working with our state offices to help all of us find sources of funding. And, times are tough. People in CIS programs across the country are murmuring: "Why did you bring us up out of our former jobs as teachers and counselors, and lead us into this place where finding funding is so hard."

Last Thursday I learned that one of our best programs in Washington State is being closed because a local political shift has dried up the only funding "spring" they had. When dedicated people in local communities who are doing what I believe is God's work call up in desperation looking for enough money to make their next payroll, it feels like they've got the telephone receiver in one hand and a fist-sized stone in the other.

There I am, like one of Moses' lieutenants, in the cash-flow wilderness with staff and local program people all around me, murmuring: "Why did you lead us out here into the desert to let us die of thirst?"

O God, where is Horeb, and where is the rock? And, can I trust you to stand before me in time to save these people? And which rod is the one that we used to strike the Nile, back when this movement got started? And how hard do I have to beat on the rock to get the cash to flow?

I listen to the murmuring and feel the dryness in my own throat. I hope I'm thirsty enough to follow directions. What I've heard in the quiet sounds like this:

1. Pass in front of the people, taking with you some of the elders...

I need to take a stand: let people know what I am working on, and where I'm heading. This is a time to be public, not the time to work quietly until I have it figured out, and only then surprise people with a

success.

2. Take the rod with which you struck the Nile...

Use tools that have worked in the past. One of my tools is the **very short** concept paper, almost koan-like in its brevity. I need to forego the detailed explanations and the careful language, and focus on the core idea.

3. I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb...

I should look for God where I have been before, and listen prayerfully to hear which place is the right place.

4. Strike the rock, and water shall come out of it...

I must take clear, decisive action, to get the water to flow. That doesn't feel easy in the current environment at CIS, but its essential.

I am frustrated by what feels like a lack of support within our organization – like I can hear the murmuring, but Moses isn't paying attention. That's really frustrating, but what's even more frustrating, is that I haven't been able to get any water out of the rocks I've been tapping. Maybe I'm not thirsty enough myself.

And you? Where are you facing the thirsty demands of others? Do you know where to find the water you need? Are you thirsty enough yourself to go there and get it? Living Water comes from God, but we have to be thirsty to find it.

**Don't think this search for water will be easy.**

In the Epistle for today, the Apostle Paul seeks to reassure us that even though we are frustrated, and suffer discouragement and defeat, in the end we will find what we need.

*Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand, and we*

*rejoice in our hope of sharing the glory of God. More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.*

What does it mean, today, to "rejoice in our sufferings?"

Communities In Schools is getting started in Memphis Tennessee. It has taken us years to get to this point. We've been to the well time after time, and gotten a sip, or a cool dampness on the bottom of the bucket. But there's never been enough to keep anything going there. There's never been "living water" welling up out of that community to quench the thirst of the kids of Memphis who need help. This time it may be different. When we heard the news at the office last week, there was a real sense of celebration.

But that celebration was only a sip of warm water for me. It did nothing to overcome the sense of isolation that shapes my frustration at CIS. I know I work most happily when I work alone, but my work at CIS suffers from the lack of connection with the rest of our team. This may not be a matter of life and death for me, but it does affect many CIS people who are out there working with kids. I wonder if I'm doing this to myself, or if God is telling me "this is **Not** Horeb!"

Some say that in the crucifixion, Jesus "rejoiced in his suffering." (Although I heard Marcus Borg argue a couple weeks ago that was not necessarily the case.)

Must we suffer to find what we need to satisfy our hunger and thirst? Must we sacrifice ourselves? I think the answer is "Yes," but only if "ourselves" is two words: our/selves. That's another paradox this week's lessons hold up for us

There's a piece in Parker Palmer's Promise of Paradox that

helps me understand this idea that somehow suffering is part of this search for that which can nourish our souls, for the thirsting of the Israelites in the desert, for our own thirst for "living water:"

*When Jesus accepted the cross, his death became a channel for the redeeming power of love. When we accept the crosses and contradictions of our lives, we allow that same power to flow. When we give our hearts to the world, our hearts will be broken. But they are broken open to become channels for a love greater than our own. Only as pain is transformed by love will the real revolution come, the revolution that promises to take us toward the peaceable kingdom.*

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I think that is what it means to be part of the Body of Christ: to put my self in "not-first" place, in service to some other, to God, to community, to the poor, to my children – to some other where need has reached the point of suffering.

This is tricky. The first trick is to see myself as **not** the center of the universe, without coming to see myself as worthless.

The second trick is in choosing which "other" to serve. When we talk about God's call on our lives, we understand that this is a caring, committed response to the needs of others. The surprising truth is that once made, this commitment is a joyous response to life, even though it is frustrating.

Elizabeth O'Connor wrote often and extensively about the importance of this deep commitment. Ram Das counseled us to "follow our bliss" to find meaning and purpose in life. I remember reading an interview with Mother Theresa in which she said, "What I do on the streets of Calcutta is not a

sacrifice, I love what I do." Jesus taught the same paradox: In order to find your life you must lose it.

Don't think this search for water will be easy.

## **Horeb is over here, where you get so engaged you forget to eat.**

In the Gospel for this week, John tells us the story of the meeting of the Samaritan woman and Jesus at Jacob's Well.

I spent Friday night sleeping in Jacob's Well at Wellspring, during the Seekers Church overnight.

Yesterday morning, about a dozen Seekers spent two hours in the rain, touring Dayspring Creek with members of the Earthkeepers Mission Group of Dayspring Church. Jim Hall took us to the upper reaches of the stream, which is now in the backyards of those new mansions being built just north of Dayspring. He showed us old pictures of the source of the creek, a large spring that once ran clear in the meadow now covered with homes. The original wellspring is now a galvanized steel culvert that diverts the spring water into a silt-settling pond at the edge of the development. The water runs muddy in the creek; silt is filling the pools below each tiny cascade; and the floods, once held in check by the meadow and the forest have undercut several of the huge trees that used to stand on the creek's banks.

The Earthkeepers are monitoring the effects of all the development on the quality of water, but they cannot stop the mud. As Cheryl Hellner said: "We could go to court if someone's rights were being violated by this development. But the developers are following the law, and in this day, creeks do not have rights.

It was sad to see Dayspring Creek transformed into backyard runoff. Standing there in the rain, looking at the Caddis Fly

larvae gamely trying for one more life cycle in the sick creek, I could hear them crying out for living water. It felt like a funeral. As I turned away from the creek, up the trail toward the warmth of Wellspring Center, I could hear a bugler in my head, playing Taps in the distance, the notes washed out of the air by the rain and headed for the muddy water.

As I climbed the hill, I thought, "This injustice to the land is important, but it is **not** my call. I support those who carry it in their hearts. I want to encourage and be in solidarity with them. But for now, that is not where my heart is broken open. My heart is broken open for troubled children."

But the rain on my head was flowing much harder than the love in my heart in response to that statement. Right now, my heart is guarded at work. I feel under attack: the people are murmuring against me.

Walking in silence through the wet forest, the stones leapt out of the wet leaves. Such rich variety! I could not help but bring home a small pile. Here are two, waiting to be set apart in some way that honors the land they came from, and the God who made them.

That's what I wrote on my little red paper. When I am working with fiber and stones and beads, I forget to eat!

Is that the way to Horeb for me? Is that where living water is waiting for me? It is somewhere at the junction of my joy in crocheted sculpture and wrapping and the cries of the earth for justice and love by its human stewards. On the way home I remembered a poem I wrote six years ago, as I watched a housing development consume another farm. I offer this as a cry for Dayspring Creek, and the Caddis Flies, and the stones who are sitting on the hillsides, taking notes.

*BARREN MANOR*

*November 6, 1993*

*This field will never grow another row of corn.*

*The proud house, manor for a baron, lies in state  
at just the perfect place to watch the sun rise through the  
woods,  
her painted toenails brazen in the morning sun.*

*The baron has no serfs. He drives his own John Deere  
to keep his mistress' skirts arranged in careful disarray.*

*At this time every year the baron takes a month to surf at  
Molokai,  
and while he's out of town, his mistress takes a lover –  
a weathered man in dirty jeans  
who brings his mower in a pickup truck the baron cannot  
tolerate:  
The baron's Porsche lounges, sneering, in the place of honor  
where the well once stood.*

*The lover tends the field as though it were his own:  
with gentle, calloused hands he trims and rakes the baron's  
putting green.*

*At noon, the harvest neatly stored in plastic bags,  
he stops for one last soulful look,  
across the hill he walked those thirty years between the  
house and barn.*

*The sod has never taken well beside the drive.  
It is a challenge to the baron.  
It took the builder too much herbicide too kill the oak that  
stood beside the well.*

*The air is heavy from last week's cremation of the sunrise  
woods.*

*Pale tan and silver sprouts grow quickly  
as another manor springs to life in just the perfect place to  
watch the rising sun.*

*This field will never grow another row of corn.*

Jesus told the Samaritan woman that "...the water that I shall give will become in the one who drinks it a spring of water welling up to eternal life. Later that day he told the disciples, "I have food to eat of which you do not know. ... My food is to do the will of God who sent me, and to accomplish God's work."

If God's call for me lies where my joy intersects another's suffering, then honoring the earth may be closer to Horeb than I thought yesterday morning in the rain.

## **Conclusion**

Have you ever been so engaged in something that you forgot to eat? God's call on you is probably somewhere nearby. That place of call is the place where living water wells up from within: it is the food that nourished Jesus as he was able to "...do the will of God who sent me, and to accomplish God's work."

This week's scriptures offer us three lessons about God's call:

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Amen.