

Water. By now it's no surprise that as we talk about creation—whether the “in the beginning” kind, or the River Jordan baptismal kind—when we talk about creation; water is the very first thing to show up. Splashing and crashing against the shoreline. Drowning, washing, creating something new. In Genesis 1, water is so innate to life, so innate to the creation process, so innate to God—there's no mention of the water even being created. It just is. Water. Swirling with potential, full of possibility, each drop brimming, waiting to burst with the fullness of life to be called forth from its depth. We don't know how or why. Only that the very creativity of God; the life of all creation rises from the pooling, washing, splashing, swirling, grace-filled water-life of God.

When water is around it's pretty easy to hold onto the promise, the hope, the possibility of God. It's hard not to splash right into the creativity of it all. Like kids in rubber boots on a rainy day. Jumping in with both feet no matter how much you say, “Stay out of the puddles.” Or a day at the beach when kids and adults alike can't help but splash and play at water's edge—first dabbling their toes, then running headlong to meet the waves in a full-body, head-to-toe dunk; as the tide rushes and crashes against the shore. Such a strong and joyful sign of love and grace—wherever there's water we can't help but know there will be joy and life, that God is busy, that something new is sprouting and growing right on the spot. We can't help but drink it all in.

But what about when the river bed is dry? When the ground is cracked. When the fields are parched and barren? It's a little harder then, isn't it? To see the life? To see the promise? The creativity? With so many Alberta farmers reeling in the reality of

this summer's drought; we don't even have to imagine this scenario. In many ways we are living it. The dry brown coulees outside our window evidence enough. So strong the connection between water and life, between water and God's promise, between water and God's creation—if there is no water, it is not long before hope, too, dries up. Perhaps with our irrigation systems and underground sprinklers we have not yet come to that point. Perhaps we have become a little too reliant on our own creativity.

And yet there is so much more to this Isaiah text than drought in the fields or a brown hilly landscape. Drought means many things. And one thing was certain—this was a community suffering an abundance of drought. Hunger, disease, war, unrest. A people dragged from their homes. Like refugees. Prisoners to terrorist regimes. All around factions warring over territories and lands, over faith systems and religious traditions, over who had the right to rule over whom; in a system that constantly divided those deemed worthy of the right to live; and those deemed unworthy for whatever reason—disease, poverty, disability, life choices, faith choices; wrong skin colour, wrong god, wrong side of town, blind, lame, lifestyle, you get it—it didn't seem to matter. Any reason was reason enough; the justification to exclude, to exile, to ostracize from community and the things needed to live full and meaningful lives.

Life for the Israelites was uncertain. Chaotic. Tenuous. Hanging in the balance. For us, drought can mean many of these things too. Pictures of Haiti and Afghanistan come to mind. The floods in New York. Rubble, wreckage, ruin. Wildfires of BC and California. Smoke, ashes, soot. People with a few boxes of their most cherished

memories packed and ready to flee at a moment's notice. And wave after wave of a pandemic that ostracized us from family and community and jobs and school; from loved ones who have died. Masks, distancing, hypodermics. And even now as at last we gather back in person, a 4th wave of COVID is on the rise. Life is still, always chaotic, tenuous and hanging in the balance. Perhaps this we understand most of all. And whether drought is the field and forest kind; or whether it is the suffering kind; in the middle of drought often our faith dries up. Hope is parched and barren.

So maybe as we come back together in person today what we really want is a shot in the arm; what we want to hear is that everything is going to be OK. That this time of drought and exile is actually coming to an end. That things are going to go back the way we knew them before. For sure it is what the exiled people of Israel wanted to hear too. Words of comfort. Isaiah doesn't disappoint. "Be strong. Do not be afraid," he says. "For all of you wondering if God has disappeared or forgotten you—and I get it if you do—well, right here is your God. Right in the middle of your drought, your disease, your hunger, your thirst, your uncertainty, your pandemic, your fear. Right here in the middle of your grief and loss, in your soot and ashes and smoke. Right here in the middle of your rubble and wreckage and ruin. In your dry fields and brown coulees. Right here is your God. And your God will save you."

And then Isaiah begins to make it personal. Begins to paint a picture with his words. A blind man whose eyes begin to open little by little; shielding the unyielding brightness of the morning rays of the sun's light; then wider and wider in surprise, as

he sees the violet of the crocus and luminescent green of the croaking toad; as he sees the shimmering pools of blue in his daughter's eyes for the first time. The blind will see. A lame woman teetering and wobbling like a toddler trying to find her legs; slowly finding her strength she spins in joy, rising up to leap and dance like a deer. The lame will leap like a deer. A child twirling the tip of her tongue, as it unleashes for the very first time—her first words not words at all, but a hymn of praise to the God who created her song. The speechless will sing for joy. These are the pictures Isaiah paints. These are the promises of God.

And then at last, the full hope and promise for one community resounds in prophetic speech for all the feeble and frail, for all the ostracized, excluded and deemed unworthy; for all exiled people and communities. Without pre-qualification, blame, condition, or judgement; it is the transformative vision of God for all life and the whole of the world, "Waters shall break forth in the wilderness, streams in the desert; burning sand shall become a pool, thirsty ground springs of water." And the eyes of the blind **are** opened to the crashing waters of creation. And the ears of the deaf **are** opened to the thundering of the waves. And the hearts of the hopeless leap like a deer jumping in with both feet; dancing in wave upon wave; washing, splashing, crashing, flooding every dry and parched soul with the promise that teems with possibility and hope and life. Until all people see and know and hear. Until all people are fully immersed, washed, head-long in the promise, in the strong and joyful sign of love and grace. Water. Swirling with potential, full of possibility, each drop brimming, waiting to burst with the fullness of life to be called forth from its depth. The very creativity of

God; the life of all creation rising from the pooling, washing, splashing, swirling, full-body, grace-filled water-life of God. This is the promise God makes. A promise that God is never finished creating. That God is always busy creating something new. That wherever there is water we can't help but know there will be joy and life. Isaiah's vision of water in the wilderness evokes and calls us to view the world as God first imagined and created in the beginning—communities of abundance and welcome, fullness of life without qualification, without judgement or justification. No one can be excluded. No one exiled or ostracized. For all people, for all creation—fullness of life—just because. Because of God's love wide open in welcome for all. It is a striking promise for a community in drought. A striking promise for our world.

Perhaps we need a moment to drink that in. To be washed in it. To be drowned in God's transformative and transforming vision of grace. Because there is yet drought in our world, is there not? Beyond our fields and lifeless coulees, in our brown and lifeless hearts. Because ours, too, a world, a country of turmoil, of war and unrest. Factions warring over territories and lands, over faith systems, religious traditions, over who has the right to rule over whom; in political and cultural systems that constantly divide those deemed worthy of the right to live and those deemed unworthy for whatever reason—disease, poverty, disability, life choices, faith choices; wrong skin colour, wrong god, wrong side of town, blind, lame, lifestyle, gender. And now add to that a whole new category of the unvaccinated, who already have limited access to travel and sports venues and restaurants—and maybe we think that's ok, that it's for the safety and freedom of others. But will it still be OK when these unvaccinated soon are also denied

right to employment or grocery stores, denied right to fullness of life—to life at all—as we continue to find justification to ostracize, to exile, to exclude. How blind we are to God’s vision; how short-sighted and limited the vision we hold for our lives and the lives of others. How much we yet twist God’s vision for our purposes, excluding and denying life for others based on our judgments. How far we are from the wide open welcome and inclusion God is and has been creating from the beginning. Well, maybe that’s too political. Maybe we shouldn’t talk about these kinds of things.

But as we think about God’s transformative vision and welcome, it is not only for our life; but for the life of all people and nations—and perhaps these are the very things we need to be talking about. Not for us alone, not merely to make us comfortable or to make things normal again; the striking vision of inclusive life God sets before us will and should upend our lives. To ask for God’s creating, renewing Spirit among us, is to ask that we too, would be changed. To call on God’s healing for the world is to ask that we, too, would be healed from our dividing ways. That God would change us even as God changes the world. And what God calls us to is nothing less than a full-body, head-to-toe, splashing, crashing, drowning life. In the death and resurrection of Jesus; God is calling us forth from the depths, to a life bursting with the fullness of God’s life for all. To a vision of a wide-open world of life! And that just might be the most fearful thing of all. But even to our fearful hearts, the promise comes. “Do not be afraid. Be strong.” Because God will save us and our world. The lame will leap. The blind will see. The deaf will hear. And of course, there will be water. Because God is not finished creating, never finished creating. Life will rise from the pooling, washing, splashing, swirling, grace-filled water-life of God. And there is about to be something brand new. Thanks be to God!