

“Wonderful Cool Something”

A psalm of David, when he was in the Wilderness of Judah.

*O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you,
as in a dry and weary land where no water is..
So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory.
(Psalm 63:1-2)*

A sermon by Siegfried S. Johnson on the Ninth Sunday after Pentecost, August 6, 2017
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This satellite image shows the eastern edge of the Mediterranean Sea, an area known as the Syro-Palestinian Corridor. Guiding a group of pilgrims through the land three months ago, I led them along the rushing headwaters of the Jordan River in the Upper Galilee near Mount Hermon. At the top and center of this image you see a heavy white blotch. This is not a cloud but rather the snow atop Mt. Hermon, some 9200 feet above sea level. On a beautiful May morning we walked just beneath those mountains through the Dan Nature Reserve, alongside the rushing waters which form the Jordan River.

Gathering them by a refreshing pool far enough from the sound of the waters that I could be heard, I asked them to savor this moment, because the next day we would begin to follow the Jordan River as it forms the Sea of Galilee only some 50 miles south. The Jordan then emerges from the Sea of Galilee to flow due south. You can see it here as a faint blue ribbon descending through the Great Syrian Rift Valley, all the way to the Dead Sea some 85 miles south of the Galilee. At 1400 feet below sea level, this is the lowest surface point on earth.



The key thing I want you to note in the image is how green it is in the north, around the Sea of Galilee. This area teems with life. Contrast that with how brown it is around the Dead Sea. This area is the Judean Wilderness. It is from this vantage point that David, fleeing from King Saul, prays Psalm 63, from a “*dry and weary land where no water is.*”

When we arrive in the Judean Wilderness in a few days time, I told them, we will know better how David might use the thirst of the land as an analogy for his soul's thirst for God. In the wilderness we will remember these crystal clear waters rushing by us now, but no longer will we see their flowing. These sights and sounds would be dimmed, a mere memory. In the midst of the lush and fragrant foliage I invited them to let the water pour over their hands, then I settled them in to tell them a story which I called, *Wonderful Cool Something*. I want to share that story also with you this morning.

These words are not my own, but those of a very famous person whose name you will surely recognize. The story begins on June 27, 1880 in the lush countryside of Tuscumbia, Alabama. Arthur Henley Keller, a Captain in the now former Confederate Army, and his wife Kate, an elegant, statuesque Southern woman, greeted their baby girl, Helen. With loving embraces they nourished their newborn daughter with tenderness.

Helen's life was green with promise, but a terrifying storm would pass over the Keller family in February 1882. At the age of 19 months, Helen Keller's world went suddenly dark and silent. Helen had fallen ill with what doctors called "*brain fever*." Perhaps today we would call it scarlet fever or meningitis, but the illness left Helen blind and deaf, leaving her to grope in a dreary world, a dark and silent wilderness.

After six years, there seemed no hope for Helen. Captain and Mrs. Keller found themselves unable to care for her, and grew desperate. But into Helen's life on March 3, 1887 came an amazing teacher, Anne Sullivan. Barely a month after Anne arrived, on April 5, something happened to spark Helen's dark world with light. It was the flow of water that became the catalyst for Helen Keller's life of learning. It is as one of my favorite sayings has it, "*When the student is ready, the teacher will appear*." However much it may have seemed Helen wasn't ready and never would or could be, Helen was ready. The teacher appeared.

So stunning was this moment that in 1957 a play called *The Miracle Worker* was first performed, highlighting that amazing breakthrough when the pouring of the water broke through the isolation of a life without language. Until that day, insofar as language and communication is concerned, Helen had lived in a "*dry and weary land where no water is*." For Helen, the pouring of the water was a spark of awareness igniting a surprising remembering. "*My Teacher*," as she called Anne Sullivan, held one of Helen's hands under the pump and poured water over her hand.

In that act, something happened, something worth remembering, something worth pondering lest we fail to comprehend fully its consequence. Helen would later write, "*We walked down the path to the well-house, attracted by the fragrance of the honeysuckle with which it was covered. Someone was drawing water and my teacher placed my hand under the spout. As the cool stream gushed over one hand she spelled into the other the word 'water', first slowly, then rapidly. I stood still, my whole attention fixed upon the motions her fingers. Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten – a thrill of returning thought; and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that 'W-A-T-E-R' meant the Wonderful Cool Something that was flowing over my hand. That living word awakened my soul.*"

Given now the paradigm of a word spelled in one hand while the actual thing was experienced in the other, Helen plunged into a new world of awareness. Anne wrote in her diary that Helen learned thirty words within the next few hours. The pouring of the water was the key that unlocked the door, and now she thirsted for the flowing stream of language.

Seems to me that Sacraments are meant to be precisely this – an awakening. Whether the flowing waters of baptism or the bread pressed into the palm of the one receiving it, sacraments rightly received – when the student is ready – are sparks of awareness igniting a surprising remembering of our connection (often obscured by living) to the source of our Being. Like Helen's *Wonderful Cool Something*, sacraments can lead us to experience a “*misty consciousness as of something forgotten, a thrill of a returning thought.*”

I think that's what David was seeking as he went on in the next verse to say, “*I have looked upon you in your sanctuary.*” David wanted to glimpse the face of God, as it were, which the living of life in the wilderness had obscured. He remembers the sanctuary, and craves a return.

The 1985 film *LadyHawke* focuses on this “*misty consciousness as of something forgotten, a thrill of a returning thought.*” It's about separated lovers gaining a glimpse of the face of their beloved, a magical story -- based on a 13th century European legend -- of two lovers, Captain Navarre (Rutger Hauer) and Lady Isabeau (Michelle Pfeiffer), who are cursed by an evil bishop with black magic to make certain that if he can't have Isabeau, they will never have each other.

Navarre and Isabeau are cursed to eternal apart-ness, never able to see the other's face, he turning into a wolf by night when she is in her human form; she into a hawk by day when he is in his human form. Both live half-lives, opposite halves, so that they are never able to behold each other's face. As one is transfiguring into their human form, the other is morphing into their non-human form, a cycle endlessly repeated at *Dawn and Dusk* of each day.

Ah, but those twilight moments – those ‘tween moments of *Dawn* and *Dusk* at the threshold of day and of night, the instant when light and darkness come close enough to embrace – are sacred, enchanted moments when, while on their journey to becoming something other, the two lovers glimpse each other's face.

One of the scenes I find quite extraordinary. It's *Dawn*, the sun rising on the horizon. The camera moves back and forth between the wolf as he morphs into Captain Navarre, and Lady Isabeau as she transfigures into the hawk. For a split second which the camera holds for us (beautiful music in the background), both are in human form, moving toward each other even as the curse is pulling them apart. In that sacred sliver of a moment they behold each other's face, but the moment passes, leaving Navarre to lunge for LadyHawke as she wings away.

Isabeau, just before she became the hawk, holds her hand up as the first light of Dawn streams through her fingers. It's as if she is trying to grasp the flow of time, to make it stand still at that glimmering, cherished moment. Just as their fingers, shimmering with Dawn's pure light, are about to touch, the inexorable flow of time moves them past this moment of shining, and their lives of sorrow, bearing heavy this curse of apart-ness, continue.

Like our most sacred moments, the beholding of each other's face was exactly enough, yet never enough – leaving them thirsting for more as that sacred sliver, that almost touching, ignites within them a surprising remembering, their senses coming alive to who they really are, and what they mean to each other.

Sacraments, I think, bring us to glimpse the face of God, whether the flowing water of baptism or the wine of Holy Communion. Sacraments call us to remember something forgotten, connecting us to our source from whom we are separated by the curse of sin. When sacraments are received by a ready heart they birth within a fresh yearning to see the face of God.

To be sure, Sacred Moments require no official sacrament of the church, but can come upon us inexplicably – whether reading, meditating, driving, showering, walking, listening to music, etc. Surely all of us have experienced those serendipitous moments in which time seems to stand still, when it is as if we have stepped out of time's flow, when we sense a shimmering Presence surpassing our own. In such moments, like Isabeau, our reflex is to catch the flow of time in our fingers, to grasp it and hold it as time rushes by.

And the poet within us knows that such glimpses of the divine – these *Wonderful Cool Somethings* -- are always exactly enough and never enough.

May this wine upon your lips, and this bread placed in your hand be for you a wonderful key, a moment when something happens, something worth remembering, something worth pondering lest we fail to comprehend fully its consequence.

It is as Clara Scott wrote in 1895, the hymn we will sing after our Holy Communion today:

*Open my eyes that I may see, glimpses of truth thou hast for me,
Place in my hands the wonderful key, that shall unclasp and set me free.
Silently now, I wait for thee, ready my God thy will to see.
Open my eyes, illumine me, Spirit Divine.*

Sources and notes:

I was inspired by the story of Helen Keller as it was related in an essay by Martha Heyneman, “*The Mother Tongue*,” in PARABOLA (Fall 1992, *Oral Tradition*).