Pastor Jamie's Sermon

Good Shepherd Church, August 16, 2026
"Care for Creation: Clean Water and Sanitation"

The Message

Today we are continuing our sermon series on Care for Creation by talking about the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal of ensuring access to water and sanitation for all.

From the report of the Secretary-General of the United Nations, "water and sanitation are at the very core of sustainable development, critical to the survival of people and the planet. [This goal] not only addresses the issues related to drinking water, sanitation, and hygiene, but also the quality and sustainability of water resources worldwide."

A healthy human being can survive approximately 1-2 months without food. Some people with larger stores of fat (energy) can survive longer without food, as long as they have access to water.

On the other hand, human beings can only go 3-5 days without water, but that number can be affected drastically by variables such as environmental temperature and activity level.

We can see why this UN goal is such an important one globally.

Having no access, or very limited access, to water can be a detriment to survival for humans.

We in Calgary have some experience with restricted access to water.

This past year or so, we've had two instances of water restrictions that we have had to manage.

Now, granted, we still had access to the water we needed for survival, and most of us still were able to do even minor "unessential to survival things" as well.

The water restrictions were inconveniences for us, but not really a threat to our survival, luckily.

But, there are places in the world where access to clean water is challenging, at best, and a threat to survival, at worst.

I'll talk about some examples from the Moravian Church later, but for now, let's look at what the Bible has to say about water.

Water is mentioned in the Bible approximately 722 times.

In today's readings, we heard just four of those examples. We also know that Jesus refers to himself as living water or providing living water.

So, the Bible has a lot to say about water.

In Matthew 10:42 and 25:35, two of the passages we heard today, Jesus tells us plainly that if someone is thirsty we are to give them a drink of water.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus describes himself as living water and invites all who are thirsty to come to him (John 4:10; 7:37-39).

The prophet Jeremiah describes God as a spring of living water (Jeremiah 2:13; 17:13).

In both the Hebrew Bible and New Testament, we find life happening at a well.

Rachel and Jacob meet at a well and begin a life together (Genesis 29:9-14).

Jesus reveals his true nature as the Messiah to a Samaritan woman at a well (John 4:7-26).

Water is clearly a central biblical motif, understood both as a basic need for mortal life and as a metaphor for eternal life in Christ.

The story we heard about Hagar asks us to wrestle with some concepts that are challenging for us.

Hagar is referred to as a slave in this story, and she is treated as such, which can be very challenging for us to hear and read about today.

And while that is not the topic of today's sermon, I do want to acknowledge the difficulty for us of reading about the way she was treated, especially by Abraham and Sarah who are often held up as the founders of our faith (this is why Christianity, Judaism, and Islam are known as the "Abrahamic" traditions, after all).

So, we approach this story with caution and for a specific purpose related to water.

In Genesis 16:1-16 and 21:8-21, water plays an integral part in Hagar's story of life and death, divine favour, and human subjugation.

The Hagar stories are set near or in the Negev Desert, where water is very scarce and people had to work hard to access it for survival.

During the rainy season, there may have been some free-flowing water for humans and animals, but the semi-nomadic people primarily relied on wells that they dug by hand.

Imagine if we had to find a water source and dig our own wells by hand today. Survival would certainly be more difficult for us!

These wells that they dug by hand would then become owned by the person (or family) who dug them.

Individual families would commit the location of their own family well to memory and then they would hide it from others so that no one else could access it.

In this story, Hagar, an enslaved girl, first runs away from the harsh treatment of Sarai, her mistress (owner).

She finds a known, public spring of water on the way to Shur, where she meets God and names both God and the life-giving spring.

After returning to Sarai, as God has asked her to do, she continues the nomadic life with Abraham's family and gives birth to his son Ishmael.

As Ishmael grows, so does Sarai's jealousy.

Hagar is again banished along with her son, with only a skin of water, into what is now land that was completely unfamiliar to her.

This is a death sentence, and she fears death for both herself and her son.

In fact, she abandons her son under a bush because she knows he is dying and she cannot tolerate hearing him take his final breaths.

God finds her once again and reveals to them that they are sitting by one of the hidden wells that someone else had dug (and presumably owned).

God disregards the fact that someone "owns" the well and gives a drink of water to those who need it.

In this story, God is actually rejecting the notion that water, and access to it, can be owned or withheld.

God clearly demonstrates that water is for all.

Water is life, and life-giving.

It can be hard to for us to think about water as free, because many, if not most, people who live in cities pay for their water.

Access to water is owned by the city, and in theory, the city can choose how and when to allow access to it.

For example, in Calgary, if the city needed or wanted to, they could turn off water to areas of the city, limiting access as needed.

There are other famous examples, like the water issues in Flint, Michigan from 2014-2019. In this case, the decisions the city made impacted not just access to water, but in particular the quality and cleanliness/health of the water.

Those of us who have access to clean and healthy water can take that for granted.

But I want to share some examples of how Moravians are addressing some of these issues around the world.

These are just a few examples, but I think they are worth noting. As I share these examples, I would invite us to think about creative ideas for ministries in our community – whether they are water-related or not – that might be rolling around ready to be talked about.

Example One: Well Cleaning in Nicaragua

After hurricanes Eta and Iota hit Nicaragua in 2020, many wells were flooded with contaminated water, leaving communities without a source of clean drinking water.

The Nicaraguan Moravian youth organization, AJECIM, requested a small grant from the Board of World Mission to purchase a water pump.

The youth team traveled from community to community draining and cleaning wells.

As the wells were naturally replenished, the water would then be safe to drink.

This work continues, and the youth lead the entire endeavor.

Example Two: Cleansing Waters in Wisconsin Rapids

As I mentioned, many of us take for granted the access that we have to clean water, not only for drinking, but also for things like washing dishes and doing laundry.

Wisconsin Rapids Moravian Church became aware that people in downtown WI Rapids, especially those who were renting, were spending over $50 a week to do laundry at the laundromat depending on their family size.

As they were exploring ways that they could help people manage this challenge, they learned that high school students in particular were missing class because they were ashamed of going to school in dirty clothing.

This sparked an idea for a laundry ministry.

After considering multiple scenarios, WI Rapids Moravian Church landed on creating an outreach ministry that involved them meeting people at the laundromat to help pay for their laundry needs.

So now, people who need assistance contact the church and set up a time for volunteers to meet them at the laundromat so they can assist with helping them afford to do laundry.

It may seem like a small thing, but for the people they help, and especially for the high school students, it is a huge benefit.

Example Three: Water as a Community Resource in Cuba

In rural Cuba, some household water sources are located next to livestock holding pens, which contaminate the water used for drinking, cooking, and bathing.

Over ten years, ARMF (a mission foundation started to support the Moravian Church in Cuba) has installed ten water purification systems in Cuban communities.

These systems aren’t placed in individual homes.

Instead, they are placed in central locations so people in the surrounding community can access the clean water.

When the water systems are installed, they work with neighbours to understand how the system will be maintained and operated.

This approach aligns with ARMF’s broader approach of building relationships with local communities across all aspects of their work.

In rural Cuba, clean water isn’t just a health necessity.

It is life and dignity.

Clean water is the difference between spending hours boiling contaminated water or having time to work, learn, and rest.

As you can see, these examples of projects that help provide access to clean water in different ways based on community needs are making a difference in the lives of these communities.

Water is a resource that should not be taken for granted. Not everyone can afford to access clean water.

Our church does support the Board of World Mission through some of our donations, including our Birthday Box donations.

And, it is worth considering some of the creative ministry ideas around accessing clean water, and ways we might be able to support water (or other) initiatives here in Calgary.

Today we have heard Biblical stories that talk about both the physical and spiritual importance of water, and we have heard some practical examples of the ways Moravians are helping neighbours access clean water.

My hope in helping us think through these ideas and examples is that we might start to become more aware of how Care for Creation intersects with our faith life, and our call to “give one of [Jesus’s] followers a cup of cool water.”

By doing so, we welcome others as we welcome Jesus.

So, may we become more aware of the ways we can welcome Jesus by welcoming and caring for our neighbours - both locally and globally.

And, may we lift in gratitude our access to life-giving water on a regular basis. Amen.

Let us pray:

Dear Jesus, you have taught us that when we give a drink of water to a stranger, we have quenched *your* thirst. You, who are living water, thirst for liberation for all who are oppressed. How can we help to let justice roll down like a river and righteousness like a never-failing stream? Putting our trust in you, we pray. Amen.