

CLEAN WATER: A PRIMER FOR PEOPLE OF FAITH

Introduction

Every major religious tradition holds beliefs with regard to the importance of water. According to The Water Pageⁱ:

Water has a central place in the practices and beliefs of many religions for two main reasons. Firstly, water cleanses. Water washes away impurities and pollutants, it can make an object look as good as new and wipe away any signs of previous defilement.

Water not only purifies objects for ritual use, but can make a person clean, externally or spiritually, ready to come into the presence of his/her focus of worship. Secondly, water is a primary building block of life. Without water there is no life, yet water has the power to destroy as well as to create. We are at the mercy of water just as we are at the mercy of our God or gods. The significance of water manifests itself differently in different religions and beliefs but it is these two qualities of water that underlie its place in our cultures and faiths.

Important symbol for Christians

- Water figures prominently in the sacrament of baptism. In Colossians 2:12 (NRSV), we read, “when you were buried with him (Jesus) in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.” Baptism symbolizes new life in Christ, where we “bury” our old lives and are “resurrected” into new life.
- Jesus spoke of himself/God as “living water” to the Samaritan woman at the well when he said, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life” (John 4:13-14, NRSV). Here water represents the Spirit of God that flows in us when we receive him into our hearts.
- Water represents hospitality, and has since ancient times. Visitors were greeted with water to quench their thirst and to cleanse them physically. It also represents service and humility, as it did when Jesus washed the feet of his disciples at the Last Supper. He tells his disciples, “So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them” (John 13: 14-17, NRSV).

Without enough clean, fresh water, we could not survive

The Water Science School of the US Geological Survey tells us:

Water is of major importance to all living things; in some organisms, up to 90% of their body weight comes from water. Up to 60% of the human adult body is water. According to H.H. Mitchell, Journal of

Biological Chemistry 158, the brain and heart are composed of 73% water, and the lungs are about 83% water.ⁱⁱ

The Science Topics section of the American Museum of Natural History speaks, however, to just how little water is actually available to support human life:

Water makes life as we know it possible. Every drop cycles continuously through air, land, and sea, to be used by someone (or something) else “downstream.” Water covers 70% of Earth’s surface, but only 3% is fresh, and only a fraction of one percent supports all life on land. Climate change and growing populations are increasing the pressures on that reserve. By using water more wisely, we can make sure there’s enough to share with all living things.ⁱⁱⁱ

If only 3% of the earth’s water is fresh, and with only a fraction of one percent available to support all life on land (not just humans), it becomes imperative that we do all we can protect this fragile resource. For Christians, it is a matter of faith. We have strong scriptural and ethical imperatives to protect all of creation, and to protect our most vulnerable neighbors.

Sacred Trust/Caring for Others

First, we believe that the earth is not ours, but given to us by God to hold in sacred trust:

- The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it (Psalm 24:1, NRSV).
- The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it (Genesis 2:15, NRSV).

Second, we believe that we are called to care for our neighbors, especially the most vulnerable:

- (A Pharisee asked) "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" (Jesus) said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets" (Matthew 22:36-40)
- In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets (Matthew 7:12).
- Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me (Matthew 25:40).
- How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action (1 John 3:17-18).

There are many more scriptural references to support this call, this responsibility to care for this sacred planet and the life it sustains—more than enough to know that it is something we must do.

As people of faith, we must seize the opportunity to join our neighbors in Pennsylvania who are working to support clean water.

Water Infrastructure

Here are some things you need to know:

- Clean water is a basic human right, but too many communities in the U.S. — especially low-income communities and communities of color — are suffering from pollution and contaminated drinking water.
- Decades of underfunding and deferred maintenance have pushed America to the brink of an infrastructure crisis. In many parts of the country, drinking water and sewage systems were built over a century ago, and are in desperate need of repair today.
- Communities of color and low-income communities are disproportionately impacted by contaminated water and outdated infrastructure. Access to safe, clean water and reliable wastewater systems shouldn't be a privilege for the few.
- Rebuilding of our nation's water infrastructure isn't just the right thing to do, it is absolutely essential to making our communities stronger, safer and more prosperous. Infrastructure investments create quality jobs, and can help bring economic opportunity to low-income communities and communities of color that are too often been left behind.
- Water equity matters. Access to safe drinking water and reliable wastewater systems is a prerequisite for healthy, thriving communities, where everyone can participate, prosper and reach their full potential.
- Lead pipes, sewage pollution, contaminated runoff: these problems impact the health, safety and economies of our communities.

What You Can Do

As people of faith, based on our understanding of scripture, embrace this value statement:

Clean water is a basic human right and should be accessible to all. It is essential for community health, justice and strong local economies.

People of faith must speak truth to power, demanding protection of our water for future generations and environmental justice for all—especially our most vulnerable neighbors. Fundamental questions to ask:

- Is your drinking water safe?
- Are you comfortable bringing your family to the local lake or stream to swim?
- Can you eat the fish you catch locally?

This is an important time to demand action from the EPA and current administration to protect clean water for all, regardless of race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, or any other measure that tends to marginalize and suggest they can be treated with less respect than others.

- Learn who your elected officials are—you can find names of your elected officials at every level of government at <https://org2.salsalabs.com/o/5415/getLocal.jsp/>.
- Call, write, or visit your elected officials. If you are new to this and need help or guidance, consult “Tips for Contacting Your Legislators and Decision Makers” on the Resources page at <http://www.pachurchesadvocacy.org>. If you are doing a visit, try to enlist other constituents as well.

- Write a Letter to the Editor—find guidance for doing this at “Writing Letters to the Editor” on the Resources page.
- If you use social media, consider posting your own comments about protecting our water. For Twitter, consider including @protectourwater, @ChooseCleanH2O, @pachrchadvocacy, and/or others who can share your post to boost your reach. Hashtags might include:
 - #cleanwater
 - #cleanwater4all
 - #chooscleanwater
 - #cleanH2O
 - #safedinkingwater
 - #drinkingwater
 - #waterissacred
 - #protectourwater
 - #waterislife
 - #sustainability
 - #safewater
 - #healthywater

Choose your talking points based on your specific passions around clean water, which might include:

- Sharing your personal stories.
- Protecting federal and state law and regulations aimed at protecting our water resources.
- Ensuring the safety of our drinking water.
- Protecting our water infrastructure (for supply of drinking water and sewage systems).
- Protecting the health of our rivers, streams and oceans.
- Ensuring safety for responsible recreational use of our rivers and streams.
- Protecting the livelihood of those who depend on water (such as responsible fishing businesses).

Consider some of the information contained in this document, or find more information in the following locations:

- Clean Water for All: <https://protectcleanwater.org/>. CW4A works for commonsense protections for clean water and public health nationally.
- Choose Clean Water Coalition: <https://www.chooscleanwater.org/>. CCWC focuses primarily on protecting the Chesapeake Bay watershed.

ⁱ The Water Page, Water in Religion, <http://www.africanwater.org/religion.htm>.

ⁱⁱ The water in you, The USGS Water Science School, <https://water.usgs.gov/edu/propertyyou.html>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Water and Life on Earth, Science Topics, American Museum of Natural History, <http://www.amnh.org/explore/science-topics/water-and-life-on-earth>.