

Thirst
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My friend Jeanie Wylie-Kellermann died on New Year's Eve of 2005 of brain cancer. In the aftermath, her daughter Lydia claimed me as one of her two honorary mothers. One of the ways I've taken that beautiful tribute seriously was to be present to help catch her son Isaac when he was born three years ago.

Last month Isaac's brother, Cedar, came into the world. I wasn't present for his birth, but I had the delight of meeting him when he was ten days old and staying with him, Isaac, and their mothers for a few days. My main task was entertaining Isaac. I read a lot of books, put together countless puzzles, and played endless rounds of the game "Goodnight Moon."

Isaac and I also spent a lot of time with the amazing kid-sized kitchen that his grandfather, Bill Wylie-Kellermann, made him for Christmas—complete with fake burners and an oven that opens. I complimented Bill on giving his grandson such a politically correct gift. He said, "You mean because of the gender thing?" And I said, "No. I mean this morning Isaac turned the little spigot knobs, peered up into the faucet, and said, 'Where's the water?'"

You see, Isaac lives in Detroit. And more and more of his neighbors are having exactly this experience—turning on their faucets and having nothing come out. More than 38,000 households in the city have been denied access to safe, clean, and affordable water.

It goes like this. The city raises water rates beyond the means of people already struggling to survive. And when they can't pay, the city sends out a crew from a privately contracted "demolition and environmental service" to shut off their water. You only have to owe \$150 and be two months behind on your bill to have your water evaporate.

As always, those who are the most vulnerable—elders, persons of color, children and single parents, and residents with disabilities—are suffering the most. Local and regional officials have maliciously charged that low-income customers insist on "free water"—and these officials have recommended "behavior modification training" for them.

In October 2014, a special delegation from the United Nations declared that the massive water shut-offs "constitute a violation of the human right to water and sanitation...[T]here is no precedent anywhere for such a large-scale regression in the availability of water from a modern, advanced and functioning water infrastructure system."

Isaac and Cedar are growing up two blocks off of Michigan Avenue, one of Detroit's major thoroughfares. The street looks like a war zone: burned-out pizza parlors, shuttered storefront churches, a Coney Island hot dog shop here and there. The two businesses that appear to be thriving are a castle-like strip club and K-9 Services—advertising collars, crates, kennels...and body parts. I still haven't figured that one out, but I'm not sure I want to know.

A few years ago, Lydia and her wife, Erinn, suggested that I buy the rowhouse next to theirs. There are a lot of reasons why that probably wasn't going to work, but I was very touched by the invitation and gave it serious consideration. The opening bid on vacant Detroit properties being auctioned off is five hundred dollars—and many houses sell for that price. Nobody's knocking down doors to move to Detroit.

At least not until recently. It was bad enough when Detroit was being neglected by people with financial means. It could be argued that things are even worse now that one is giving the city his attention. Entrepreneur Dan Gilbert saw an opportunity and grabbed it.

Mr. Gilbert is the majority owner of the NBA's Cleveland Cavaliers, a real estate investor, and the founder and chair of the nation's second largest mortgage lender. He has a personal net worth of five billion dollars. Let's just say, for the sake of argument, that we're going to let Mr. Gilbert keep a hundred million dollars to live on. At \$150 each, he could use the rest to pay the water bills of 32,666,666 households. Way more than needed to solve Detroit's water problem.

Instead, Gilbert has essentially bought downtown Detroit, where he owns more than 60 properties totally 9 million square feet. His vision is for Detroit to become the new technology capital—and he's luring people there by promising a cost-of-living well below Silicon Valley's. Some of the young capitalists moving in have referred to themselves as *conquistadors*. And the people they're out to conquer are the ones who can't pay their water bills.

*Ho, everyone who thirsts,
Come to the waters;
And you that have no money,
Come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk
Without money and without price.
Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
And your labor for that which does not satisfy?*

Isaiah 55:1-2

Hanging on our dining room wall at home is a colorful collection of images from my journalistic travels around the world: a painting from Nicaragua of the Samaritan woman at the well speaking with Jesus; a tapestry of women from the Congo with water jars on their heads, and a print of Native American women holding them in their laps; a picture created from butterfly wings of South African women gathered at a well. The quote hanging in the center of them is from a Nigerian woman. Upon hearing that we in the United States have water piped into our homes, she grew somber and said, "How do the women speak to each other? If we didn't talk at the village well, we wouldn't know about our lives."

Water is a communal gift. It comes from God, and it belongs to all of us. It's critical to our survival. Only air is more essential. Without air, a person can live a matter of minutes; without water, a matter of days. We need water.

And so, thirsting has become a central image of the journey of Lent.

*O God, you are my God, I seek you,
My soul thirsts for you,
As in a dry and weary land
Where there is no water.*

Psalm 63:1

*As a deer longs for flowing streams,
So my soul longs for you, O God.
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.*

Psalm 42:1-2

I don't know about you, but I confess that I don't actually think that I long for God in this way. There are times when I believe I have—usually when the way ahead seems unclear or scary, and I'm seeking some clarity and stability in my life. But I wonder if I seek God as ardently as I seek those things. How, in our land of plenty, is it possible to think of Lent, and the spiritual life generally, as a quenching of thirst? What would it actually mean to long for God with the fervency that a thirsty deer longs for a flowing stream—or a Detroit resident without water longs for justice?

At a climate-change talk at Warren Wilson College last year, the presenter from NOAA, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, projected a map of the U.S. onto the screen. Striking in that image was a colorful dot over Asheville. The presenter explained that our area is one of the few on the entire planet whose water availability is unlikely to be affected by global warming. I've been told that's why so many breweries are moving or starting up here. But the majority of people in this country—and the world—face the likelihood of extreme water shortages by the middle of this century. The water wars are already beginning out West, and they're likely to spread. I daresay, we won't be immune.

[Then Jesus said,] "I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink...And the righteous will answer him, "When was it that we saw you thirsty and gave you something to drink?...And he will answer them, "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 25:35 & 40

If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink...Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Romans 12:20-21

While I was in Detroit welcoming Cedar in mid-January, a coalition of organizations convened a Water Crimes Tribunal. Charges were brought against Michigan Governor Rick Snyder, Detroit Mayor Mike Duggan, and their accomplices, for crimes against the people. Included was the water tragedy in the nearby city of Flint, which has received far more national and international attention than the massive shut-offs in Detroit.

In an effort to increase profits, in April 2014, Flint's manager switched its water source from the Detroit system to the Flint River. After a year and a half of city residents registering complaints about the color, taste, and odor of the water, an investigation finally revealed that it had not been properly treated. Up to 12,000 children have been exposed to dangerous levels of lead and bacteria, and the water has been linked to an outbreak of Legionnaires' disease that claimed the lives of 10 people and affected 77 more.

General Motors, whose home is Flint, recognized early on that the water was corroding its engine-production equipment and returned to Detroit water. The loss of \$400,000 in annual revenue from the GM plant meant a dramatic increase in the cost that city residents have to pay for their toxic water.

The water issue is part of a larger crisis that involves the racist replacement of three-fourths of Michigan's elected African-American leaders with "emergency managers" in cities like Detroit and Flint. Motivated by corporate profits, despotic tendencies, and what a *New York Times* article called "depraved indifference," these state-appointed managers are wreaking havoc across Michigan.

The Water Crimes Tribunal was one of the most creative acts of public liturgy that I've witnessed. The men playing the roles of defendants Governor Snyder and Mayor Duggan and their young defense attorney offered comic relief in their parodies of the authorities. In dramatic contrast, the witnesses offered heart-wrenching testimony about what they have suffered in Flint and Detroit.

One woman watched the closing of the local elementary school in her neighborhood, and then the removal of the public library. Now, water deprivation is the tactic being used to force people to leave, so that their neighborhoods can be "rejuvenated" by the capitalists. She told the tribunal that when she personally tried to stop the crew from shutting off water to her and her young children, the city retaliated by shutting off water to everyone on her block.

There was a lot of shouting and laughing, crying and cursing that went on among the large and diverse crowd in the room. The tribunal provided needed cathartic release for people who are sick and tired of being targeted and victimized.

The people chosen to be jurors were community leaders and activists who have launched a variety of advocacy and resistance efforts—including distributing drinking water and blocking the trucks that carry the shut-off crews. They were eloquent and to the point.

"Water is the source of all life, and those who withhold it are guilty of crimes against humanity," said one.

"The defendants have poisoned not only our water, but our community relationships and the democratic process itself," stated another.

"The U.S. war plan against Iraq included bombing waterworks, depriving Iraqi women, men, and children of water. Welcome to Iraq West," declared another.

“When the government is unable to safeguard and enact the will of the people, the people must take action.”

The verdict was unanimous: guilty on all counts. The jurors’ sentencing recommendations ranged from subjecting the authorities to the behavior modification training they tried to foist on Detroit residents, to death by firing squad.

All eyes then turned to Bill Wylie-Kellermann, who in addition to being a maker of kitchens is a Methodist pastor. Bill, who is facing legal charges related to blocking a shut-off truck in an act of civil disobedience, was chosen to play the role of the judge. I wondered how in the world he would arrive at a sentence that would please the emotional crowd.

He spoke calmly. He acknowledged the legitimate anger in the room, the desire to “do to the chief executives what they have done to others”: slowly poison the mayor and the governor with heavy metals and bacteria, force them out of their homes. Or send them to prison. Or worse.

But Bill, appropriately cloaked in the authority of his ministerial robe, imposed this punishment. Looking at the defendants, he declared, “You are hereby stripped of your authority to lead. People are no longer bound to respect your authority. Go! You are no longer over us.”

The tribunal, like all of life, ultimately came down to a matter of loyalty. *Where does our loyalty lie?* is a good question to ask as we journey through Lent.

With the empire, or with the commonwealth of God?
With profit, or with people?
With the spirit of capitalism, or the Spirit of God?
With bad politics, or good news?
With the world’s revenge, or God’s mercy?

*Seek God while God may be found,
Call upon the Holy One while near;
Let the wicked forsake their way,
And the unrighteous their thoughts.
Let them return to God, that mercy may be upon them.*

Isaiah 55:6-7

The creation of the world began with the Holy Spirit hovering over the waters of the deep, pushing them back to bring land out of the sea. And the creation of each of us began in the protective water of our mothers’ wombs.

Water is the source of life. Water is a gift from God to all. I give thanks that a community of courageous and creative residents of Detroit is showing the rest of us how to be generous and resilient, as we face a crisis that will eventually swallow us all.

How will we prepare ourselves? What will be our longing? For what will we thirst?

*So then, let justice roll down like waters,
And righteousness like an everflowing stream.*

Amos 5:24