It is probably not kosher for a preacher to admit that he doesn’t read a lot of theology anymore especially if he is a retired theology professor.

While I read some, at lot of it for me, seems either very theoretical and unrelated to Christian living or unnecessarily narrow, even colonial and inattentive to the ever-expanding diversity that is a hallmark of human existence.

Maybe that is why the scientific world fascinates me so much where curiosity and unsolved mysteries take the lead and so many of my unexplored presumptions are exploded with new discoveries that give us hints about the world and cosmos that we inhabit but about which we know so little.

It doesn’t take a genius to perceive that the key metaphor flowing through today’s readings is water: stories of gushing streams from rocks wisdom refrains warning against dried up hearts Pauline allusions to the Holy Spirit being poured out as an antidote to desiccated lives and liquid Jesus spiritually shape-shifting as a Samaritan friend a bucket-less font of wisdom and a purveyor of living water.

Awash in such aquatic imagery a preacher could ponder all of the biblical references to water and there are well over 700 of them to study from the very beginning of Genesis to the end of Revelation.

But I have to admit that what captivated me more is water’s role in the survival of every known species: from scorpions to rattle snakes and tuna fish to tigers.

That doesn’t mean, of course, that all creatures “drink” water.
Some, like freshwater fish or desert lizards, absorb water into their bodies from their environment through a process of osmosis.

As I got absorbed in this water thing
I learned how some creatures can survive for days, weeks, months, even years without water:
• cheetahs for 10 days
• bats for 6 months
• desert tortoises for a whole year
• and a kangaroo rat for up to 10 years.

Human beings don’t have that kind of physical tolerance. We can survive for a month or longer without food, if we are in relatively good health, but when it comes to water, it is more like 3 to 5 days and dehydration can occur when loosing as little as 3% of our body water.

When it comes to understanding why water is so critical for our biological survival scientists point to its many characteristics, e.g.,
▪ its cohesive capacity to bond with other molecules,
  • sometimes called the universal solvent
▪ its ability to support cellular structure
▪ and its buffering power against dangerous effects of acids and bases.

Folk wisdom teaches that you can’t get blood out of a turnip yet scientists are now genetically modifying plants to produce human blood proteins.

Similar folk proverbs contend that you can’t squeeze water from a stone though scientists are proving that wrong as well with astrophysicists extracting water from meteorites and hydrogeologists extracting it from the earth’s crust.

One could metaphorically suggest that the exodus people in the first reading “squeezed” water out of the rock at Massah and Meribah where they “tested” the Lord.

On the other hand, the Samaritan woman in John’s Gospel did not have to squeeze life-giving water out of Jesus.
No one did!

Rather Jesus freely gives his life-giving water
which ironically squeezes the truth out of her
liberating her for true worship and discipleship

In this encounter, the notable and essential characteristics
of Jesus’ life-giving water
for sustaining Christian living are clearly on display.
Jesus-water, like it’s physical counterpart,
also has a cohesive capacity,
not for the cohesion of molecules
but for the cohesion of people
allowing even strangers and enemies
Samaritans and Jews to bond.

And his gracious abundance has its own buffering power
against the acidic prejudice, violence and hatred
that too often poisons our environment.

These effects permeate today’s gospel
Where his countercultural hospitality
not only transformed one woman’s life
But revealed the beauty of the stranger to his own disciples.

Furthermore, the “holy hydration” of this one woman,
triggered a kind of sacred osmosis through which
an entire community was transformed
into a gathering of believers.

It may be more than fanciful theologizing to suggest
that water is a gift from heaven.
Some scientists believe water is an alien visitor to earth
arriving 4 billion years ago when a heavy bombardment
of countless meteors delivered oceans to earth

Supporting evidence is the existence
of huge amounts of water in asteroids,
which scientists are hoping to extract
in order to establish infrastructures for surviving in space.

Others believe, however, that water was inside our planet
from its origins, coming to the surface over time.
Supporting evidence of this theory are the hydrous materials recently discovered inside the earth prompting some to believe that there is more water below earth’s surface than the oceans above [up to 6 quintillion gallons!]

While I have no idea which theory is scientifically accurate in Christ both have to be theologically true.  Jesus is the life-giving water come down from heaven.  He is the divine meteorite who bombards the world with torrents of grace and love.  He is God’s Word that the prophets foretold will rain down upon us.  He is the ascended one who pours out his Spirit on disciples of every age.

But this is also the Word made flesh revealed in earthbound wells, rivers and seas who unsealed the way to eternal life in his own baptism who turned a seashore into a recruitment center for disciples and who in teaching and healing, welcoming and embracing quenched the thirst of everyone from the high born to God’s most beloved divorcee as long as they were willing to drink of his gospel truth.

The season of Lent can be appropriated in many ways with its ecclesial permission to cut back on chocolates and liquor and drop a few pounds in the process; or invitation to reflect upon our sinfulness and schedule that annual confession.

But this third Sunday of Lent, which the church designates as the premiere day for the first public scrutiny of the elect moving towards Easter sacraments reminds us that Lent is first and foremost a font journey a well-drawing opportunity a rock-striking moment for those thirsting for life eternal.

Scrutinies are an immersion into life-giving water with its cohesive capacities to bond us together in Christ,
its abilities quench every spiritual thirst
and its buffering power against greedy living
toxic prejudices
and every form of violence
that confront us with such distressing regularity.

Furthermore, it is not simply the elect
who benefit from these pointed rituals
for when Trent, Aaron, Sunayana and Kelly
step forward for exorcism and blessing
they grace the whole of the church
with their courageous witness.

They rehydrate those of us who have strayed
from that baptismal well
and in a miracle of holy osmosis
allow those of us spiritually parched
even scorched by the demands of everyday living
to be vicariously renewed, revived, even restored
so that we might take up again
the mission of the Samaritan affirming Christ

to proclaim good news to the poor
freedom for prisoners
healing for the afflicted
and freedom for the oppressed.
While not as difficult as cajoling water from a rock
this “well journey” is still demanding.
And so, for the elect as well as for those of us
washed in the gracious overflow of their journey

with the poet, we stand at the edge of that Samaritan well
And pray:

If you stand
at the edge
of this blessing
and call down
into it,
you will hear
your words
return to you.

If you lean in
and listen close,
you will hear
this blessing
give the story
of your life
back to you....

Sit at the rim
of this blessing.

Press your ear
to its lip,
its sides,
its curves
that were carved out
long ago
by those whose thirst
drove them deep,
those who dug
into the layers
with only their hands
and hope.

Rest yourself
beside this blessing
and you will
begin to hear
the sound of water
entering the gaps.

Still yourself
and you will feel it
rising up within you,
filling every emptiness,
springing forth
anew.

MUSIC