



Miracle at the Spring

PLAYFULLY THIRSTING FOR JUSTICE
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“They will neither hunger nor thirst, nor will the desert heat or the sun beat down on them. He who has *mercy* on them will guide them and lead them besides springs of water”. (Isaiah 49:10)

It was one of those cold winter mornings when the wind catches the snow in swirls of white that dance across the parking lot. People were coming into church, warm and welcoming, chatting in hushed tones. I watched a mother helping her children take off their coats when the youngest, wearing a heavy sweater, rather deliberately walked over to the immersion style baptismal font that also served as the holy water font in the rear of the church. The little girl looked at the pool of water that flowed about waist height. She then lifted her arm in the air and playfully plunged it into the water, all the way up to her shoulder. With a completely soaked sweater arm she lifted her hand out of the water, reached to her forehead and with great purpose made the sign of the cross. I remember thinking to myself, this child understands our symbols and instinctively knows how to interact with the waters of baptism.

Like that fountain of immersion in the back of the church, water also plays a prominent theme in the back of the Basilica of Saint Francis in Assisi. To the left of the doors of the basilica there is a scene from the life cycle of Saint Francis entitled the *Miracle of the Spring*. This fresco is understood as an artistic nod to Francis' *Canticle of the Creatures* where he addresses nature as an example for us to better consider our relationships with God, one another, and creation.

Looking at these frescos, one is prompted to ask: *Do I worship God in a way that engages nature to help others in need?* Francis praised God through Sister Water, who is "very useful and humble and precious and pure".

In the fresco of the *Miracle of the Spring*, Francis approaches God through nature. Saint



Bonaventure tells us how, on a hot summer day, the man accompanying Francis cried out for drink to quench his thirst. Francis then dismounted, raised his arms in prayer and declared that Christ in His mercy would provide living water. A nearby rock dutifully burst forth water for the parched man to drink. Francis' raising of his arms in liturgical prayerfulness, offers us insights of how to better engage Sister Water in a relationship that works toward the fulfilling of God's promise to provide living waters to those who believe.

This scene reaches back to Exodus 17, where God commands Moses to strike the rock with his staff to produce water for the thirsty people on their desert journey. In Numbers 20 we hear how Moses felt the need to strike the rock twice. Francis, however, only needed his simple prayer to produce living water from the rock. With such complete faith, Francis becomes the new Moses who is both patriarch and prophet.

In his address to the Congress of the United States of America, Pope Francis uses the figure of Moses as patriarch and lawgiver, reminding legislators, to keep alive the unity of the people through passing just laws. He then looks at Moses as a prophet, who at the same time led the people to God and to a greater awareness of human dignity. When we encounter unjust laws or oppression we are to cry out like Moses, speaking for the Lord by saying, "Let my people go, so that they may worship me" (Exodus 9:1).

Although the journey through the desert was important and formative for God's people, it was the worship of God that was key. For this reason, the 1971 Synod of Bishops understood the power of liturgy in developing a sense of right relationship in the journey of our lives, which is rooted in justice. In Baptism, we begin the formation of our Christian conscience. In Reconciliation, we consider both the personal and social dimensions of sin. In Eucharist we are formed and strengthened for service.

Each time we come to Mass and dip a hand (or whole arm) into the holy water, we are reminded that our worship necessarily leads us to a personal and communal response to the dryness of violence in the world. Pope Francis reminds us of this in *The Joy of the Gospel*, "...people of faith are needed who, by the example of their own lives, point out the way to the Promised Land and keep hope alive. In these situations, we are called to be living sources of water from which others can drink" (86).

In his book *The Spirit of Liturgy*, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI) considered the place of liturgy in the reality of our everyday lives of family and workplace, touching upon childlike playfulness on our way to the Promised Land. He says, "Play takes us out of the world of daily goals and their pressures and into a sphere of purpose and achievement, releasing us for a time from all the burden of our daily world of work. Play is a kind of other world, an oasis of freedom, where for a moment we can let life flow freely...liturgy is a kind of anticipation, a rehearsal, a prelude for the life to come, for eternal life" (pp. 13-14).

The child playfully approached the flowing font and put her whole arm into the holy water. This is an example of the liturgical play that Ratzinger mentions. Like Saint Francis raising his arms in prayerful worship, the little girl made a very wet sign of the cross, as if to say through her actions, "Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Water, who is very useful and humble and precious and pure". Like Francis, she became a new Moses. Through her intentional playfulness with water, she herself became living water, as we onlookers drank in the depths of her deliberate prayerful actions. She opened herself completely to Christ Jesus, the living water that alone can quench all thirsts, as she then joined her family to be nourished at the banquet of the Lord and strengthened for the work of justice in the world.