



Seven Weeks for Water 2014

Week 1

Pilgrimage towards Water Justice: Foretaste of a Redeemed Earth

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The book of Revelation is a subversive literature emerging from a colonized community, articulating their resistance and alternate visions. The book juxtaposes two journeys: the imperial voyage of conquest and destruction, and the pilgrimage of the earth community to bring about healing and restoration to create a redeemed earth. Envisioned by the vision of the new heaven and new earth, Revelation further challenges the believers to come out of the Empire and to celebrate the experience of the redeemed earth in the here and now, trusting the promise of God who is making all things new. Revelation invites us to participate in God's system-threatening mission that transforms Babylon into Jerusalem. Participating in God's mission is hence a pilgrimage of resistance and re-construction.

In spite of the demise of imperialism, conquest and plunder continue to be the order of the day thanks to the neo-colonial invasion of our lives and lifeworld. Consequently common property resources such as water, forest, and land have become marketable commodities for the corporations to plunder. This is the context in which we need to initiate new pilgrimages to redeem and restore our commons from the "bondage to decay." Survival of life is very much depended on the availability of clean water. But when the market forces converted water into "blue gold", the life-giving water has become a commodity, denying its accessibility to the community of creation, making thirst a perennial reality. Yes, we are a thirsty people in a parched land. According to conservative statistics, 1 out of every 6 people in the world lacks access to safe drinking water. Every 20 seconds, a child dies from a water-related disease. Water crisis is not an issue of scarcity, but of access, and equitable distribution within the community. Under globalization, water has become a commodity with price tag, and common property resources such as lakes and rivers have been auctioned to multinational corporations to attract foreign capital. This is the context that makes it imperative on us to initiate a new pilgrimage towards water justice.

Book of Revelation is a significant resource even as we prepare ourselves for the pilgrimage towards water justice. “And the first earth had passed away and the sea was no more” (Rev. 21:1). There is no sea in the redeemed earth. When we struggle together to restore and redeem our water bodies, John’s vision talks about the absence of the sea in the new dispensation. How do we understand this vision? John in this chapter gives a series of items that are said to be “no more” in the new city. No more death, no more mourning, and no more weeping and pain. Why is sea listed in Revelation along with death, pain, tears, and mourning? How can we accept the absence of sea in the redeemed earth?

Revelation portrays sea as a political and economic category—the symbol of systemic evil. The disappearance of sea in the New Jerusalem is hence a critique of the political economy of the Roman Empire. Sea was the means for the Roman imperial power to plunder the colonized communities and their land. Babylon’s economy was based on long-distance maritime trade in luxury goods. In the unjust imperial economy of Rome, “everyone who had ships at sea grew rich by her wealth.” For Babylon, sea was the primary agent for exercising its might and power—to invade, plunder, destroy, and enslave communities and nature in the colonies. The list of cargos mentioned in chapter 18 reveals how the landscape and the communities at the peripheries were commodified by Rome. Imperial power is always built on the colonized bodies of the other—the subaltern communities and the plundered earth. So the disappearance of the sea in the redeemed earth is not the disappearance of water *per se*; rather it is the alternative vision of redeemed earth as antithetical to the imperial political economy of greed, commodification, and accumulation. Living in the time of globalization which continues to plunder, privatize and contaminate our water bodies, the vision of the absence of the sea in the redeemed earth inspires us to involve in the pilgrimage towards water justice to make water equitably accessible and available to all.

What is the alternative vision of the pilgrimage towards water justice? Water is a free gift for all. “To the one who is thirsty I will give to drink from the spring of the water of life as a gift” (21:6). “Let everyone who is thirsty come. Let everyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift” (22: 17). This is an alternative vision of hope for people who lack the purchasing power to buy water. Here Revelation echoes the prophetic utterance of Isaiah: “Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters, and you that have no money, come, buy and eat”

(Isaiah 55:1). Revelation's vision of the redeemed earth is the vision of a gift economy where nature's bounty is available to everyone, not just to people with money. This is also a vision of the redemption of our water bodies—our oceans, our lakes, our rivers, our estuaries, and our wells. This promise of free access to clean and pure water is the Divine rejection of the prevailing political economy of privatization and commodification of water. We see the same vision in Isaiah. “When the poor and needy seek water and there is none, I will open rivers on the bare heights, and fountains in the midst of the valleys. I will make the wilderness a pool of water, and the dry land springs of water” (Isaiah 41: 17-18).

The book of Revelation ends with the vision of the river of the water of life—a pilgrimage of tiny water drops —flowing from the throne of God and of the lamb, through the middle of the street of the city. This is a therapeutic pilgrimage. Healing of the earth comes through the leaves of the tree which is nourished by the river of the water of life. For Revelation, redemption is not a reality that is limited to human souls; it is an experience that embraces the entire creation of God. Further, Revelation proclaims an alternative doctrine of salvation when it affirms the agency of the leaves and the water in the healing of the nations. In other words, the leaves and the waters participate in the Divine mission of redemption in history, and hence our pilgrimage towards water justice is nothing but participation in God's redemptive work in our midst.

The three insights from the book of Revelation that we discussed provide the rationale for the pilgrimage towards water justice. Our pilgrimage towards water justice is a campaign against all manifestations of imperial conquest in our times which commodify water. It is also a pilgrimage to affirm water as a free gift for all. Water is not a commodity; it is a salvific agent which participates in the Divine project of healing the earth. This is a pilgrimage that loudly proclaims our resolve to “come out” of the imperial and market-oriented worldview of profit and plunder, and to opt for a life-affirming worldview of healing and restoration. Yes, the pilgrimage towards water justice is the foretaste of a redeemed earth.

Thoughts for Reflection

1. What is Christian public witnessing in the context of the sway of neo-liberal market forces? What are the implications of the Divine call to “come out” of the imperial order in your context?
2. Do you consider commodification of water a sin?
3. How can you join the pilgrimage of the earth community to bring about healing and restoration to create a redeemed earth?

Questions for Discussion

1. Identify specific cases of privatization of water bodies in your country/region. How are they affecting the local communities?
2. Identify local expressions of pilgrimages towards water justice initiated by faith based and secular organizations in your context. How can your church participate in such initiatives?

Points for Action

1. Pilgrimage towards water justice involves resistance and re-construction. Identify a project where water is commodified and plundered in your country/region for corporate greed. Initiate a Lenten campaign to resist that project.
2. Initiate a Lenten campaign to reclaim/recharge a well/lake/pond in your region so that water will become a free gift to all in your community.

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