

Sermon – **MCC as Water**

22 Jan 2023

North Star Mennonite Church, 204 Francis St, Drake

Presented by Eileen Klassen Hamm, eileenklassenhamm@mccsk.ca, 306-665-2555

Contact: Lisa Martens Bartel, Jim Ewert is worship leader

Theme: Scripture Card – Living Water

Scripture: Isaiah 55:1-2

Resources: Scripture Card, Suzanne Simard, Dacher Keltner

.....
Erika - Gift with Vicki receiving

Good morning! My name is Eileen Klassen Hamm, and I serve as the Executive Director for MCC in Saskatchewan. My colleague, Erika Thogersen, our Constituency Relations and Education Coordinator, is also with me and you’ll hear from her a bit later. You are such faithful friends and supporters of MCC’s ministry here in SK around the world, and we are most grateful to be with you here in Drake this morning.



This is MCC’s scripture card for this year with the text from Isaiah 55:1-2 which Jim read earlier. Isaiah chapters 40-55 are known as the Book of Comfort. Isaiah 40 begins with the well-known words – ‘Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.’ Who are these people? They are the Jews who had been exiled in Babylon and are now being allowed to return to their homeland, to Jerusalem. The people who hear these words from the prophet are unconvinced. I think we can empathize with them. When losses have stacked upon losses, it’s hard to overcome despair, it’s hard to believe that goodness can come again. So the prophet is trying to move them from lament to courage, from hopelessness to imagining a good future in the hands of God. The prophet is trying to convince them that God loves them, that God seeks their restoration, that God’s mercy is abundant. And here at the end of the Book of Comfort, the prophet uses the image of water.



Come all you who are thirsty, come to the waters. Come. Even without money there is abundant food and drink. There is abundant life. Come.

What an amazing image to place before a people who have been displaced from their homeland, a people who have been thirsty for life, for food, for justice and peace.

Here in rural SK, we understand, deep in our bones, the significance of water. We know what parched land looks like, and we know the tremendous relief that rain brings to our fields, our animals, our gardens, ourselves.

An invitation to come to the waters is a visceral, literal gift. Water is life. Water keeps us and all of creation alive. Water brings vibrant colour back to our world. And water is also a beautiful metaphor for restoration, for the renewal of life when losses have battered us. We speak of Jesus as the living water, restoring us to God and inviting us to live into the restoration of our world. Inviting us to offer restoration to those around us who have experienced a multitude of exile-like experiences.

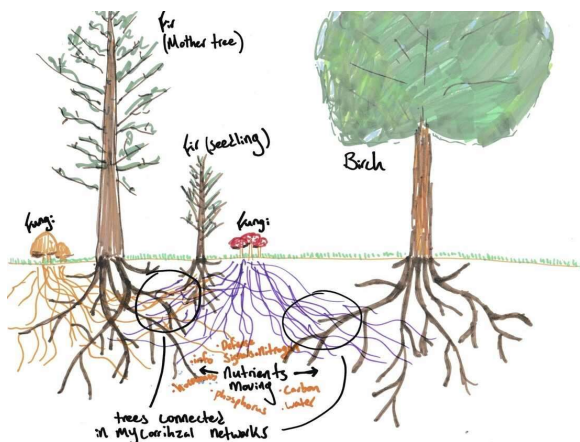


MCC's **vision** is "communities worldwide in right relationship with God, one another and creation." (MCC Principles and Practices) This is the vision we hold before ourselves as we do relief, development, and peacebuilding work in the name of Christ.

Erika and I are not MCC. MCC is this beautiful network of churches and families and Thrift communities who are all together seeking to restore lives, who are offering water into parched places, who are building lifegiving relationships.



Now, let me tell you about this woman, Dr. Suzanne Simard, who teaches at UBC. Suzanne is a forest ecologist “whose research has shown how trees communicate with and nurture each other, supported by the fungal network below ground. She sees that a forest, rather than begin a gathering of individual trees in competition with each other, is more like a single organism wherein support – nutrients, water, the stuff of life – is shared in a system of benefit rather than competed for in a system of dominance.



Her findings around collaboration include: shared underground regeneration networks, elder trees providing benefit for saplings, “Mother Trees” acting as caregivers for the network, and vast underground system of fungal mycelium that moves water and nutrients and messages between trees. Suzanne is keen to point out that what is being validated now through scientific research is not a “new” understanding. Indigenous communities have long held teachings about the networks in the soil that nurtured the

forest, and that humans are part of ecosystems, connected together, that “the world is an entwined place.” I invite you to check out Suzanne Simard’s work. It is fascinating and profound and also deeply hopeful.

Our society steeps us in dominance and competition, in scarcity – there’s not enough for everyone, and in isolation – we’re all independent.

God calls us to collaboration, abundance, community, and shared restoration. Suzanne Simard reminds us that these teachings are in the very trees and soil and water around us.

God invites us to be reconciled, to be connected, to be fed by a web of relationships that carry gifts for our lives. And then to flow those gifts to everyone who needs them. To invite everyone to the waters.



And, it turns out, we humans are like the connected trees that Suzanne Simard is studying. Psychologist Dacher Keltner (Susan Cain, [Bittersweet: How Sorrow and Longing Make Us Whole](#), 2022, p 9-12) describes what he calls “the compassionate instinct,” the idea that “we humans are wired to respond to each other’s troubles with care. Our nervous systems make little distinction between our own pain and the pain of others, it turns out; they react similarly to both. This instinct is as much a part of us as the desire to eat and breathe.” Compassion literally means “to suffer together,” and Keltner sees it as one of our best and most redemptive qualities. “When we witness suffering, our vagus nerve makes us care.” The vagus nerve is what connects our brain stem to our neck and torso. It is a fundamental part of our nervous system. So, we are wired for compassion, wired for connection. God made us that way. “Caring is right at the heart of human existence.” Keltner also found that “people with especially strong vagus nerves are more likely to cooperate with others and to have strong friendships.”



Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), a worldwide ministry of Anabaptist churches, **shares God's love and compassion for all in the name of Christ** by responding to basic human needs and working for peace and justice. MCC envisions communities worldwide in right relationship with God, one another and creation.

Through our churches in partnership with MCC, we are invited into a life of compassion, a life of connection. You, here at North Star Mennonite Church, are demonstrating God's love and compassion in so many ways through your partnership with MCC.

You are such faithful friends and partners in MCC's ministry which flows around the world. The gifts of your hands and your time provide comforters, relief kits, hygiene kits, school kits to families in need of physical, emotional, and spiritual comfort. You welcome refugee and newcomer families from distant places into your community.



Your generous volunteering hours support the presence of the Community Gift & Thrift Shop which provides a tremendous ministry to Lanigan and surrounding communities – the shop is huge community service, an environmental ministry, a ministry of friendship and support, a beautiful caring presence, an invitation to lifegiving water here in SK. And then the shop also provides lifegiving water to communities around the world, supporting relief, development and peace projects with churches and community partners in 45 countries.



Through your congregation's financial support of MCC, you provide literal water for the thirsty and compassion for those thirsting for safety and restored lives. Your contributions over these last few years have supported families in Haiti and Ethiopia and Ukraine in the midst of natural and human-made disasters. Your ongoing support of Canadian Foodgrains Bank and our Grow Hope project provides food security and sustainable livelihoods and hope for families and communities struggling to feed their children and grandparents.

As you have experienced the living water in your own lives, you have been generously offering lifegiving waters beyond yourselves.

Listen for the flow of restoration in these stories – from Haiti, from Ukraine, and from Zimbabwe:



This is Feneck Gilbert's microforest. In Haiti, MCC is working with local communities and partners to plant millions of trees in the areas that need them most. This work began in the 1980s and continues today. Not only do families benefit from nutritious food and the income from fruit and lumber sales, whole communities thrive as a result of healthier ecosystems – birds are coming back; trees provide a renewable energy source for cooking and cash for school fees; and trees reduce erosion and allow more water to penetrate the soil, reducing vulnerability to natural disasters like hurricanes and

droughts. In reforested areas, streams are flowing again. These growing techniques are being shared flowing from farmer to farmer, community to community.



Because MCC has these long-standing relationships with local churches and community partners in Haiti, when hurricanes and earthquakes strike, which they do, MCC can respond quickly. One small example after the last earthquake, MCC – together with the local Mennonite church and our community partner AVOREDES, with donated flight support from Mission Aviation Fellowship – was the first to reach the community of Saint-Jean-du-Sud in the southwest. Fifty families each received a relief kit and 12 cans of meat, which represents the maximum that aircraft could hold. Our colleague, Paul Shetler Fast, who was there for the distribution says, "All of them that we talked to mentioned someone else they knew who was facing hard times—family member, cousin, someone who they knew needed help, who they would be sharing some of their canned meat with," They said, 'You know, when God gives you a gift, then you give gifts to others.'"

Their generosity and compassion had also sustained them and given them hope before this help arrived. Paul says, "Everywhere you look, people are doing what they can to rebuild, patching houses that can be patched. Neighbours have been letting neighbours stay in their homes."



Your support of MCC’s work in Ukraine made a real difference last year. As Ukrainians’ lives were upended by the 2022 Russian military invasion, you chose to respond and give, joining a generous community. With your help, thousands of people in Ukraine received food, shelter and support during 2022. And MCC’s partners in Ukraine could continue their work even in the middle of a war.

[Left] Sasha,* left, and Natasha, pictured with four of their five children, receive MCC canned meat from MCC partner All Ukrainian Platform for the Improvement of Society (KECB) in Kharkiv.

Pavel,* the director of this partner organization, shared his thanks: “Those who do not have enough food or have run out of money to buy the food, they are coming to [KECB] and we serve food to them. We are preparing food every day — **you have given to our hands something that we can provide to other people.**”

[Right] MCC Partner Believing, Loving, Hoping (BHL) staff and volunteers unload a newly arrived container of MCC humanitarian relief in Zaporizhzhia, Ukraine.

It takes many hands and hearts to get items to people in a conflict zone. MCC typically ships containers of humanitarian aid to the Ukrainian seaport of Odesa. That port was not available after the conflict began, but our partners were not deterred! Instead, MCC shipped containers to the port of Rotterdam in the Netherlands. Then the containers were loaded onto trucks that travelled through Germany and Poland to western Ukraine.



In November – without electricity, water or heat – MCC partner Step with Hope held food distributions, group counselling, and children’s therapy in a windowless

underground passage. They hung a poster of a window to brighten the space. Step with Hope is meeting the psychological and practical needs of displaced people, helping those who experienced shelling survive the trauma and adapt to their new reality.

MCC is so grateful to all who flow gifts into these ministries. Together, we are able to share the love of Christ and help people feel less alone in their suffering.



The fuel-efficient stove in Ntombizodwa Mapfacha's dirt courtyard in Mwenezi District, Zimbabwe, doesn't look like a life-changing piece of technology. It looks like a 2-foot high, round metal can.

Nevertheless, this sturdy stove not only cooks a traditional, family-size meal of sadza (thick cornmeal) and beans. It also is empowering Mapfacha and other women in Mwenezi District.

No longer does Mapfacha have to walk six miles every other day to find firewood in the mountain, where she is wary of poisonous snakes and men who could take advantage of her in the remote area. The new stove cooks with just a few pieces of wood and dried corn cobs, which she can gather close to home.

No longer does she need to stay by an open fire, her lungs and eyes burning from smoke, tending and feeding it for the two to three hours it takes to cook a meal.

She only needs to peek into the stove periodically to make sure the fire's direct heat is keeping the beans simmering in the pot. And the stove is portable, giving her freedom

and time to pursue work that generates income for her family. She grinds groundnuts into nut butter to sell and collects fruit to sell or eat. And she spends more time working with her husband in the field, increasing the amount of produce they sell.

In 2021, MCC's partner, Score Against Poverty (SCORE), [Heidi visited this partner when she was in Zimbabwe] introduced a clean energy pilot project designed to empower women while addressing climate change.



The project provided 50 fuel-efficient stoves to women, as well as solar power systems and biogas digesters that process manure into gas for cooking and other uses.

In this rural area of southern Zimbabwe, SCORE staff see the impact of climate change — inconsistent rain, high heat, unpredictable growing seasons, heavy flooding — as one of the biggest threats to life in their community.

SCORE decided to focus its clean energy project on women. The technology gives them opportunities to earn money, gain respect from their husbands and share what they learn about clean energy with their neighbours.

“When we have empowered them, they can be able to stand on their own, and also they can be able to have a voice in the house,” says Tariro Cynthia Mutsindikwa, SCORE’s project officer for the clean energy project.

As an engineer, she has customized the stoves using women’s feedback. She also adapted three biodigesters to their locations and installed solar power systems for 12 women, a school and a clinic. And her work on these projects, as a woman, helps mothers to think more widely about what their daughters can become.



Each gain multiplies opportunities for farmers like Rebecca Murereki, a widow who uses manure from 18 cows on her son’s farm to power a biodigester.

She collects three 5-gallon buckets of dried cow dung a day, mixes it with an equivalent amount of water and feeds it to the underground biodigester. The biodigester creates gas that is piped into her kitchen and to her two-burner gas stove. She, too, no longer needs to make a long trek to find firewood.

The biodigester also gives Murereki enough power to add lighting, refrigeration and irrigation and even sell the gas eventually.

These gains — in income, in leadership and in community engagement — are exactly the kinds of opportunities that SCORE is hoping to bring to women in Mwenezi.

I love these stories from Zimbabwe. They illustrate the beauty of restoration that’s possible as networks of resources flow together.



Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters. God desires goodness for our lives and the lives of all. The prophet ends the Book of Comfort with a beautiful vision which I leave with you today:

Isaiah 55:12 – “For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.” May it be so. Amen.