

Oil and Water

Sermon at Epiclesis on Sunday, August 20, 2023

Today the title of my sermon is Oil and Water and Unity. And I want to talk about oil and I want to talk about water, and I want to talk about them in terms of something that unifies. What kind of things unify people? Today you can list a whole array of things.

Instead of agreeing on Godly things, people often agree on ungodly things. And we can only really agree on Godly things when we agree to live in God's story rather than our own. But these days, the only thing that all of us, or at least many of us, seem to agree about in our society is that we should stand on our own.

Which is ironic, isn't it? We all agree together that we are autonomous individuals who can do and say and think and be whatever we want to be. Really ironic these days.

I'm reading C. S. Lewis's "Space Trilogy" and I want to encourage you, if you have not read it, to do so. And even if you have read it, I'd like for you to reread it.

The first in the series is called *Out of the Silent Planet*, and it's where our hero protagonist, whose name is Ransom, discovers first-hand that there's a whole universe other than just Earth, and God is at work in other places. And he goes to what we call Mars and discovers a planet that has in some ways fallen and come under the effects of the fall. And what he encounters there is fascinating.

The second book is called *Perelandra*, and it's the word for what we call Venus. And he is taken to Perelandra, to do, well, to do battle with the evil one. And I'll tell you more about that in just a second.

The third of the books is called *That Hideous Strength* and it sort of wraps everything up in this really unusual, apocalyptic sort of way. All of it is incredibly ingenious, as you would expect C. S. Lewis to be. In the second story, *Perelandra*, our protagonist, the hero Ransom, is taken to this planet, Perelandra, that has not yet fallen. It exists in a kind of Edenic type state.

And our protagonist, Ransom, is introduced to the Lady, the Eve character. And what happens is that they begin to have a long, wonderful conversation about, well, what she calls mal Eldil, but is God. And she's learning about the nature of God, and she has close communion with all of the beasts and the creatures of that weird world.

Later landing on the planet is the bad guy of the whole book, who is also a professor like Ransom, whose name is Weston. And Weston has given himself over to the evil one, the Dark Lord whom we know to be Satan. And Weston's purpose in coming to Perelandra is to cause the Lady, the Eve character, to disobey Maleldil.

Weston wants this world to fall just like Earth did. And so, there's this fascinating series of conversations that go on between Weston and the Lady and Ransom and the Eve character and all three of them back and forth. It's absolutely brilliant.

But I wanted to read this little passage to you in light of what we're talking today about unity. In this particular spot, the Evil One, through Weston, is trying to beguile the Eve of this world, the innocent woman, to disobey the Creator. The Creator says, you can have everything you want in this whole planet, but you must not spend the night --you must not stay overnight—on this fixed land over here, this island over here. And Weston is saying, in essence, did God really say that you cannot do that? And she reveals to the evil one that she's not really heard from God about this-- He seems to be silent on this matter of disobedience.

And when she reveals that to him, the Evil One says this back to her. Listen carefully:

God longs, oh, how he greatly longs to see his creature become fully itself, to stand up in its own reason and its own courage, even against Him. But how can he tell his creature to do this? That would spoil it all.

Whatever the creature might do after that would only be one more step taken with God. This is the one thing of all things he desires in which he must take no active part. Do you think that he is not weary of seeing nothing but Himself in all that he has made? If that contented him, why then should he create it all? To find the other, the thing whose will is no longer his own. That is God's desire.

So, we live in a world where everyone has found themselves as their own and stood up in their own reason to become fully themselves. When I hear the words "self-care," I think of this idea of "becoming fully myself." What a narcissistic age we live in.

God's desire actually is for the pinnacle of his creation humankind to live in unity under His reign and for the worship of Him to be that thing which unites us all together, which unites, in fact, all of the created order.

Let's look at today's psalm and pay careful attention to two little phrases that have to do with oil and water.

The psalm is 133 and it's only five short verses, so I'm going to read it in both the NIV and also the New Living Translation:

How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity. It is like precious oil poured on the head, running down on the beard, running down on Aaron's beard, down on the collar of his robe. It is as if the dew of Hermon were falling on Mount Zion.

For there the Lord bestows his blessing, even life forevermore.

I'm going to read the same psalm now in the New Living Translation:

How wonderful and pleasant it is when brothers live together in harmony. For harmony is as precious as the anointing oil that was poured over Aaron's beard, that ran down his beard and onto the border of his robe. Harmony is as refreshing as the dew from Mount Hermon that falls on the mountains of Zion.

And there the Lord has pronounced his blessing, even life everlasting.

This is a short pilgrimage psalm. What's a pilgrimage psalm? Those were psalms of ascent, they're called, and they're the ones that would have been sung when worshipers were on their way up to Jerusalem. Remember, from most everywhere in the land, Jerusalem is up, and going up to Jerusalem in an act of worship which all able-bodied males, at least, had to do. Three times a year you go up to Jerusalem, and the psalms of ascent were the ones that you'd sing on your way.

So, imagine, would you, this is what some of the worshipers are singing as they're going up to Jerusalem. And David is talking about how wonderful it is for believers to dwell together in unity. Especially appropriate, right, for the idea of the throngs of folks going up together up to Jerusalem three times a year.

You can get the picture of all these throngs moving together from across the country all the way up to Jerusalem. If you are in Jerusalem on Shabbat, then you see them streaming out from all corners and alleyways and streets all over Jerusalem, coming to the wall. And that sort of gives me an idea, at least, of what it would have been like for everybody to go to Jerusalem singing psalms of ascent as they go.

And then David compares this unity to two things oil and then water. We talk about oil and water not mixing, and that's not really the point of today's sermon. But it's interesting that oil and water are used here to paint a picture of unity.

And first, he compares unity to the oil that consecrated Aaron. And that's also appropriate for this particular psalm of ascent, because they're going up to Jerusalem to do what? To worship. And there the priests and all of their helpers will be preparing the sacrifices appropriate for that particular feast.

So, this psalm is talking about the priest who is Aaron, the first priest, and more particularly about oil and his beard. In the Bible, beards are important. They denote, among other things, wisdom and maturity. They are an obvious difference between male and female. And the maturity that the beard connotes is also meant to paint a picture of spiritual maturity. In this particular place, Aaron has a beard, and before Aaron would have gone about his sacerdotal duties, he would have been anointed with oil.

So, we're not talking about plain old olive oil. Surely this is a reference to the holy oil that's described in Exodus 30. I'm going to read part of it to you in just a second. There are lots of instances where the anointing of Aaron is mentioned in the Scriptures, but it isn't just for the

high priest that the oil is prepared. I'm going to say that again. Let it sink in. It's not just for Aaron that this special oil is concocted. It's for other stuff, too:

It's for the tent to the Meeting, it's for the Ark of the Covenant. It's for the table and the lamp and the altar where the burnt offerings take place. All of that is anointed by holy oil.

What does it mean to anoint? To set aside, to make holy, to give over to a special purpose, a holy purpose. Here's Exodus 30. Listen to this. And I put in the translation of pounds and gallons and ounces, etc., just to help.

Then the Lord said to Moses, take the following fine spices, twelve pounds of liquid, myrrh, half as much of fragrant cinnamon, and also of fragrant calamus, twelve pounds of cassia and a gallon of olive oil. Make these into a sacred anointing oil. A fragrant blend.

I can imagine it would be fragrant. Right? A fragrant blend, the work of a perfumer. It will be the sacred anointing oil.

Then use it to anoint the tent of meeting, the Ark of the Covenant law, the table and all its articles, the lampstand and its accessories, the altar of incense, the altar of burnt offerings, and all of its utensils and the basin with its stand. You shall consecrate them all so they will be most holy, and whatever touches them will be holy. Anoint Aaron and his sons and consecrate them so they may serve me as priests and say to the Israelites, this is to be my sacred anointing oil for the generations to come.

So, God even gives them the recipe. Even the things that are meant to be used in the worship of Yahweh are to be anointed. You get that? Not just the people who are serving, but the stuff that they use. You might say it this way. The things that they created— the artisans created— on instruction from Yahweh to be used in worship.

Now, do you remember some of the parts of the priestly garment? Remember what Aaron was wearing? One of the things he's wearing on top of the ephod, which is kind of a close-fitting tunic, is a breastplate.

Do you remember this breastplate? It has precious gemstones on it. How many of them are there? Twelve. There are twelve gemstones. Sometime I would encourage you to Google, get on the interwebs and look at some artist's rendering of what this breastplate would have looked like. Twelve precious gemstones. And beloved, what do those twelve gemstones represent? The twelve tribes.

I want you to think about this just for a second: The oil poured on Aaron's head would have flowed. So, we're not talking about just a little bit, probably a lavish amount of oil is pouring down his head, pouring down his face.

The psalm here is saying that it's running down his beard and onto his vestments. And you could make a case for saying that it's also getting on or covering or flowing upon those twelve gemstones.

In some ways, the whole of the House of Israel is being set aside and anointed. After all, that was God's purpose for them, right? They were to be a light to the world, a light to the Gentiles, and through them, the whole world would come to see that Yahweh is Yahweh and we are not. And our unity comes through worshiping Him.

So, the oil is here symbolizing the unity of the nation in worship underneath their consecrated priest; a picture, in some ways, of what their relationship to Yahweh God was supposed to be. Maybe we can think about it this way. As the oil consecrated Aaron, so the unity of the worshipers in Jerusalem would consecrate the nation under God. The psalmist says how beautiful it is. *How beautiful it is when brothers come together in unity.* Why are they coming together? Well, in this psalm of ascent, they're ascending and they're coming together to worship. And this coming together in worship is also kind of an act of consecration. We're going together to worship.

In my introductory prayer today, and I didn't plan it this way necessarily, I mentioned that the act of drawing near is a sacrifice. Did you know that the Hebrew word for sacrifice is very nearly synonymous with "to draw near"? For the Hebrew worshipper, worship begins, the sacrifice begins, before you even get to the tabernacle or the temple.

And so now, from all over the nation, all over the boundaries of the nation, from the farthest North to the farthest South, East and West, they're coming—they're going up to Jerusalem and coming together in unity. Why? To worship Yahweh.

Oil. Oil symbolizing unity.

The psalmist also uses water. David compares unity to water, particularly the dew that flows down, and of course, also rain and snow, from Mount Hermon. Now, what do you know about Mount Hermon? What do you know about it? Well, it's a big, snow-covered most of the year, mountain in the very north of Israel, on the border between Israel and Lebanon and Syria.

In fact, the top of it is the border, and only the slopes of it that I guess would be to the south and west are in Israel itself, part of the Golan Heights. You've probably heard of the Golan Heights. The mountain itself is at the center of even what is today a pretty big dispute, oftentimes about water, because this is where the headwaters of the Jordan come from.

And you know that in the Middle East, water is a big deal. It's often fought over and is even to this day. The mountain is also called the "eyes of the nation" of Israel because its elevation makes it a very strategically important place even to this day.

And right now is home to the world's highest UN security checkpoint. They call it Hotel Hermon, and it's a big listening radar site up there, because if Israel, because it is so small and because it's surrounded by nations, many of which are dedicated to Israel's destruction, a jet plane could get there really fast, so they have to be constantly vigilant.

You ever heard of the Apocryphal Book of Enoch? The Book of Enoch talks about Mount Hermon, something that we're going to talk about later in a series that starts next month.

Mount Hermon in the Apocryphal book of Enoch is the place where the Watcher Class of fallen angels descended to earth, and they swear upon that mountain that they would take wives among the daughters of men and they take on a mutual curse for their own sin that will result from it. You see part of this story in Genesis Six with the so-called Nephilim

And in the New Testament, some suggest that Mount Hermon may be the Mount of Transfiguration where Jesus took the disciples up and was transfigured before them.

Now, when I think about this abundance of water and the fight over water and the necessity of water, my mind goes back to say when the children of Israel were being brought out of the land of Egypt, God had to, well, he brought them through water, though not a drop to drink of that. But they get to the desert and God gives them water.

Remember, there's a couple of times where God gives them water in dramatic fashion, and one of those times is when Moses disobeyed and struck the rock rather than speak to it, as Yahweh had said.

And now here's the psalmist using this idea of free, lavish, wonderful bounteous water, unearned blessing, an unearned blessing coming down the mountain to refresh God's people with unity. Think about dew for a second. It'd be hard to measure it, really.

It's little bitty drops; maybe you couldn't even see the drop itself. And yet over a vast landscape, the dew comes together and flows down the hill and eventually becomes, say, among other things, the Jordan River. The psalmist says harmony is as refreshing as the dew from Mount Hermon that falls on the mountains of Zion.

And from there the Lord has pronounced his blessing and even life everlasting.

I guess here's my point: Our day is filled with social conflict and economic distress and uncertainty and political intrigue. In the day like this, we really need Psalm 133. We really need it.

We need to have our gaze, our attention, directed upward off of ourselves and off of our present circumstances. We need to remember that our ancient enemy is beguiling us to live a life for ourselves and not in selfless worship. And selfless worship is the antidote to disunity.

We need to remember that our ancient enemy is beguiling us to think that the ultimate act is to become fully ourselves, as Weston said, to stand up in our own reason and our own courage, even against God.

People, especially Christian people, who are divided and angry and confused and mad and scattered desperately, desperately need God's command to live together in unity. It's a command, beloved, we've been commanded. Why? Because it's wonderful and it's pleasant.

So, what do we do? What are we supposed to learn from Psalm 133? I say we need to be oil and water. We need to be oil and water. Let's be God's oil and water in what is sometimes a very dry and dusty and scaly world filled with dry and dusty and scaly people.

Let's be oil, let's be water. Let's flow down. Let's take what has been richly poured on us and share it with a world that needs it so badly.

There is unity in that.

There's a wonderful Anglican bishop named George Horne. He was a vice chancellor of Oxford and also a Dean of Canterbury, and he was a chaplain to George III.

And he writes this in a commentary on this particular psalm looking toward a day when we all really do live in unity and the unity brought about by the worship of God and saying, you're God and we aren't. Listen to this. *Oh, come the day when division shall cease and enmity be done away with, when the tribes of the spiritual Israel shall be united in a bond of eternal charity under the true David in the Jerusalem which is above. And saints and angels shall sing this lovely psalm together.*

And when I read that, it reminded me of the final grand scene in the second book of the C. S. Lewis Space Trilogy, where on Perelandra that beautiful, uncorrupted world, we see life as the Creator originally intended. Just before, there was an epic battle in Perelandra between Weston, who had been taken over by the devil, and Ransom, and after a long period of arguing philosophical and theological points back and forth, Ransom comes to believe that what God is asking him to do is to slay the evil one. And he's quite nervous about that because he's not especially cut out for it; he doesn't know how he's going to do battle with the enemy.

But in the end—spoiler alert—Ransom does win and vanquishes the foe, and Eve did not disobey, and the created order did not fall. And Ransom is ushered into this final scene, and I want to read it to you. It is in that context that this passage begins:

At this moment Ransom suddenly noticed an increasing disturbance of sound behind his back—of unco-ordinated sound, husky and pattering noises which broke in on the mountain silence and the crystal voices of the gods with a delicious note of warm animality. He glanced round. Romping, prancing, fluttering, gliding, crawling, waddling, with every kind of movement—in every kind of shape and colour and size—a whole zoo of beasts and birds was pouring into a flowery valley through the passes between the peaks at his back. They came mostly in their pairs, male and female together, fawning upon one another, climbing over one another, diving under one another's bellies, perching upon one another's backs. Flaming plumage, gilded beaks, glossy flanks, liquid eyes, great red caverns of whinneying or of bleating mouths, and thickets of

switching tails, surrounded him on every side. "A regular Noah's Ark!" thought Ransom, and then, with sudden seriousness. "But there will be no ark needed in this world."

...It was with a shock of double amazement that he now suddenly saw the peaks on the far side of the valley showing really dark against what seemed a terrestrial dawn. A moment later, sharp, well-defined shadows, long like the shadows at early morning were streaming back from every beast and every unevenness of the ground. And each lily had its light and its dark side. Up and up came the light from the mountain slope. It filled the whole valley. The shadows disappeared again. All was in pure daylight that seemed to come from nowhere in particular. He knew ever afterwards what is meant by a light "resting on" or "overshadowing" a holy thing but not emanating from it. For as the light reached its perfection and settled itself as it were like a lord upon his throne or like wine in a bowl and filled the whole flowery cup of the mountaintop every cranny with its purity the holy thing, paradise in itself in two persons. Paradise walking hand in hand, its two bodies shining in the light like emeralds, yet not themselves too bright to look at came in sight in the cleft between two peaks, and stood a moment with its male right hand lifted in regal and pontifical benediction, and then walked down and stood on the far side of the water and [all] kneeled and bowed their huge bodies before the small forms of that young King and Queen [the Lord and Lady, the Adam and Eve, of this perfect, unfallen world].

...Ransom was lost for a while in the wonder of these things so that when he came to himself he found that [the angelic Lord of Peralandra] was speaking. And what he heard seemed to be the end of a long oration. "The floating lands and the firm lands," she was saying, "the air and the curtains at the gates of Deep Heaven, the seas and the Holy Mountain, the rivers above and the rivers of under-land, the fire, the fish, the birds, the beasts, and the others of the waves whom yet you know not; all these Maleldil puts into your hand from this day forth as far as you live in time and farther. My word henceforth is nothing: your word is law unchangeable and the very daughter of the Voice. In all that circle which this world runs about Arbol, you are Oyarsa. Enjoy it well. Give names to all creatures, guide all natures to perfection. Strengthen the feeblers, lighten the darker, love all. Hail and be glad, oh man and woman,[lords of this planet] dear to [God]. Blessed be He!

Wow. One day there will be a new heavens and a new earth.

One day. Will it be something like that? Yes, but better. And all there will live in perfect unity.

Until then, beloved, until then we live in paradoxical unity here in this place. Oil and water. And the only true way there can be unity in this place is in our worship and love for God and in our worship and love for God alone.

Hallelujah.

How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity. It is like precious oil poured on the head, running down on the beard, running down on Aaron's beard, down on the collar of his robe.

It is as if the dew of Hermon were falling on Mount Zion. For there the Lord bestows his blessing, even life forevermore.

Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. In the name of the Father and of the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.