



Date: January 24, 2016

Title: "Make Me Care, Part 2: Have a Drink with Me

Scripture: Genesis 2:1-2; Revelation 22: 1-2

Description: The image of God as far away in heaven, above it all is being replaced by a God who is close and connected. This is a God whose burning desire is to love and to live in our hearts, a God I can care about. We are remembering that God is often experienced in our encounters with water.

Mount Calvary Monastery, located in Santa Barbara, California, has moved. *(slide # 1)* It once occupied fifteen acres of mountaintop above Santa Barbara with sweeping views of the Pacific Ocean. *(slide #2)* Sitting on the porch of the chapel, you looked out towards the Channel Islands and down on the city. There were distant sounds, voices traveling across the canyons from nearby hiking trails, or the faint rumble of the freeway far below. But it was so far above the city, the monastery felt a bit like heaven. *(close slide #2)*

In November 2008, the California winds blew hot and a wildfire destroyed it all. *(slide #3)* As the flames engulfed their home, the terrified monks fled downhill to the city. The sisters of St. Mary's Convent, which sits in a busy residential area, took them in. Eventually the monks received a large insurance settlement. After much prayer, they decided not to rebuild in their old location. The sisters, by now only a few elderly women remaining, offered their property. Thus St. Mary's Convent became New Mount Calvary, and the brothers took up permanent residence in the city.

New Mount Calvary *(slide #4)* is still a contemplative place, destination of many who come seeking a retreat, seeking God. But it is not terribly quiet. Across the creek, schoolchildren play, cheering for their lacrosse teams. Not far away, someone stands in back of a building, talking on her cell phone. The sound of traffic on Los Olivos Street is muffled by trees, but still it is clearly traffic. Like where you live, weekends bring the constant sound of power mowers and leaf blowers. *(close slide #4)*

Once Mount Calvary offered visitors the capacity to see widely and dream vast dreams of God. The new monastery invites guests to feel the world more deeply, to experience the intimacy of the Spirit around them.



The monks miss the beauty of the old monastery—the majestic views of mountain and ocean, the sense of being above the world and safely removed from it all. But now, (*slide # 5*) walking the labyrinth in the center of the new site, peace is very present. The presence of God is at the heartbeat of things. The sense of majestic above-ness has been overcome by a sense of intimate connection with all that is around. The brothers are no longer above, they are with the world. And visitors find that God is with them.

Perhaps coming off the mountain is not such a bad thing after all.

God was not destroyed by a fire in 2008, but many sense that God has come off the mountain to dwell among us, at the heart of things. Many are willing to give up the majestic view, the safely removed God above-it-all who looks over us from heaven above in order to discover a God in the middle of a labyrinth, looking out and perhaps even up from the center of things. (*close slide #5*)

For many, God has moved off the mountain and now people are trying to figure out what that means for their lives. This is a big deal. It's hard to sustain passion for someone far away. To relocate God, to picture God near, right here in the midst of things, regrounds our lives. It is a big deal.

We inherited a template that put God far above the world and God does us a favor when choosing to draw close. The role of the church is to operate as a holy elevator between God above and those muddling around down below in the world. That's changing. There's an alternative template, that of connection and closeness. The new image of God is of one who comes close, compelled by a burning desire to make heaven on earth and to live in human hearts.

A friend who classifies himself religiously as a “none” explains, “I just don't believe that God is an old man sitting on a throne in heaven.” Me neither. Nor do millions who trust in God deeply, yet are leaving behind that particular concept of God.

God up close and personal—this view of God has been in scripture all along, but it has been obscured by the vertical, three-story template. God is no longer on a mountaintop, looking down, but in the center of a labyrinth, looking around and up. Looking for God within the circle of the world is a messy and sometimes risky business. Nevertheless, faith is shifting from a God of distance toward a God of nearness.



To talk about that God, I want to talk about the place I grew up and the river that runs through it. (*slide # 6*) In the east part of Knoxville, Tennessee, the Holston and French Broad Rivers converge to give birth to the Tennessee River, which then flows through downtown, along the campus (and the football stadium) of the university, then bends southwest to segregate the population (*slide # 7*) between the members of the Cherokee Country Club on the northern shore and (*slide # 8*) the dirt farmers of Mule Holler on the southern banks. (*close slide #8*)

Decades before the environment was invented, everyone in Knoxville knew the Tennessee River was far too polluted for swimming. So we drove by it, trying to ignore the odor of industrial waste, or drove across it on the Henley Street or Gay Street Bridges. It was always there, a background presence as omnipresent as the color of orange, yet never really there as appoint of focus.

Knoxville was also surrounded by TVA dams and the lakes they created, destination of many high school hay rides and hot dog roasts. The lakes provided the bonding agent of father-son fishing trips. Most of us remember the day we first skimmed across the surface on water skis, elevating life's potential for thrill to a height unimagined, that is until we reached puberty.

Atlanta also has a river flowing through it, the Chattahoochee. (*slide # 9*) The word "Chattahoochee" means "painted rock," probably referring to the colorful granite outcroppings along its banks. Around Atlanta, the Hooch is a wealth magnet, with communities such as Vinings, Buckhead, East Cobb, Roswell, Dunwoody, Peachtree Corners, Johns Creek and Berkeley Lake, abutting the river, in contrast to such neighborhoods as Cabbagetown and Techwood.

A river runs through the Holy Land. Like our own rivers, the Jordan is almost always part of Jesus' geography and often part of his consciousness. (*slide #11*) "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit," he tells Nicodemus. "Jesus is teaching you need to be baptized and Spirit-filled," explain the Pentecostals. Presbyterians counter with the interpretation that "water" refers to physical birth and "Spirit" refers to spiritual birth. Both of us quickly jump to the Spirit, relegating water to theological runner-up. Jesus did not do that. He paired water with Spirit as equal partners. (*close slide #11*)



Does Jesus know something about God partnering with water to touch us? Maybe water is just water, and the Chattahoochee is just the Hooch, but maybe God is in water as well as in bread and wine, breath and wind. When Jesus said, "No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit," maybe he meant we discover God's presence through water as well as through sermon and song.

Living near two rivers all my life, I never pondered that water could teach us about the nearness of God's presence. I never noticed how many people in the Bible have religious experiences at wells or pools or on the Sea of Galilee.

According to Genesis, in the beginning water was the only thing that existed with God before the rest of the world was made. "The earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. And God said, 'Let there be light.'" (Genesis 1:1-2) God's people told of Moses parting the Red Sea, of the people of Israel entering the Promised Land by crossing the Jordan River. Isaac, Jacob, and Moses each met their wives at a well. In the last book of the New Testament, Revelation, life-giving water flows from the being of God's own self.

"You must be born of water and of Spirit," Jesus said. Maybe we need to experience God physically as well as mystically and emotionally. So God created the world, covering our planet with 71 percent water. Our own bodies are nearly 70 percent water as well. Is this one of God's ways of always, always being present to us?

In the story of The Woman at the Well (John 4), Jesus doesn't just promise to give the woman water, he implies that he *is* living water. At the well, Jesus and the woman reenact the story of Eve in the Garden, only with a different result. In Eden, the serpent tempts the woman with forbidden fruit to gain divine knowledge. At the well, Jesus is the one inviting the woman to drink God's water to gain spiritual wisdom. The woman's eyes are opened; she understands.

One remarkable aspect of the story is how ordinary it is. There are no miracles, no supernatural elements, no demons, no monsters. There is only Jesus, the woman, and water.

It's easy to forget about water. It runs through the tap as we brush our teeth. It runs through our city, but is often only in our way, causing traffic jams as commuters



merge into lanes to cross outdated bridges. We sometimes give it a quick glance as we drive over it on Pleasant Hill or Abbots Bridge, but it is only water under the bridge.

God acts like nourishing water flowing through our world, flowing through our lives. Revelation 22:17 says, "Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift." What if God's presence flows through our lives as real and as near as the rivers that flow through our world? "Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift."

Odds are, you might not attend worship every Sunday this year. You won't be at church every single week, I get that. When you're not here, don't spend your precious Sabbath inside, connected to keyboard and screen. Get outside and walk on real dirt beside the creek that runs near your home. Park your car for a time along the banks of our river or the shore of a lake. Say hello to God there. In the scripture's final scene, "Let everyone who is thirsty, come," Jesus invites. In the Bible, water is the beginning, water is the end. God is the Alpha and Omega of rivers, streams, and seas.

Go with the flow.

1. The story of Mount Calvary Monastery and its transformation is told in the opening pages of Dorothy Baker Bass's new book, "Grounded".