

# From Their Belly

“Belly” seems like such a funny word.

I can't help it - it's the funny things about bellies that come up for me when I encounter that word in the text. “From their belly shall flow streams of living water.”

Do you know the Sandra Boynton book about belly buttons? “Belly Button Beach! Where tons of hippos stand around in bathing suits too little because they hope you will admire the button on their middle.” Oh how we used to laugh at that book.

And perhaps I am the only one in this room that thinks of Austin Powers, but I admit that I do. “Get in my belly.” Now that is an unlikely sermon reference.

And jelly bellies. Have you ever filled Easter Eggs with those?

Then there is belly dancing which, though not funny, is certainly not a thing of propriety and decorum. It might make me giggle a little.

Our bellies are the center of our digestion and sustenance, and also our gut and all that is connected with “following our gut” and our “gut reaction.” And of course, our ancestral lines are often understood to be birthed from the bellies of our matriarchs.

The belly is like a wonky, evocative, source of power.

And Dr. Gaffney's decision to drop “belly” right in the middle of this gospel passage captured my imagination. Did it capture yours?

These passages together, the Hebrew Bible, the Gospel, and the Epistle, tell a story about body and power.

They point to the question of the source of Jesus' power and worth. And about our own.

We've been telling David's story in this season between Pentecost and Advent. We've been following the king whose royal line Jesus is shown, by some texts, to inherit. But we have had the privilege of reading more of David's story than perhaps we have read in the past. And so we prepare to turn to the Advent season of waiting, and the Christmas season of celebrating, with a more fully formed backstory.

And in today's passage we encounter a fully impotent King David. In the portion excluded from our reading today we see that David's political and physical impotence co-exist. In what we did read, we see division about who will inherit the throne. And not only division, but scheming and treachery.

David's body is no longer a source of power. And those around him use theirs to worm their way in. And did you catch the work that Bathsheba does here? Bathsheba who David assaulted. Advocating for her son Solomon, prostrating herself before the king. It is Solomon through whom Jesus is traced.

In the Gospel, in the passage from John, there is division in the crowd about Jesus' power - and that division is rooted in whether Jesus comes from the line of David - whether Jesus has come through the belly of the line of David. But what evoked this bickering to begin with?

Jesus' invitation: "anyone who thirsts, come to me and drink."

And why was this promise of sustenance so evocative?

Because the backdrop is the Festival of Booths, a remembrance of God's provision. The people of God, the people Israel, observed this festival by living in temporary shelters, or booths or stalls, for seven days in order to remember that when their ancestors were in the wilderness, God provided them booths to dwell in. In the midst of this sacred remembering of God's provision, Jesus positions himself as one who provides. He is dancing a little too close to claiming divinity for those in the crowd who do not believe he is the inheritor of the line of David.

But the description that rivers of living water shall flow from their bellies is a cue that Jesus is talking about something more than physical provision for thirst.

Where Dr. Gaffney uses "belly," the NRSV uses "heart" - with a note that the Greek is, indeed, "belly." And the Message says this "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Rivers of living water will brim and spill out of the depths of anyone who believes in me this way, just as the Scripture says."

(Interestingly, and an aside, we don't really know what scripture says this. There is no direct quote in Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek texts.)

This passage in John is speaking to Jesus' power and to the power we inherit as followers of Jesus - spiritual power that is described in physical terms. The living waters that nourish our soul fill us and slosh about, splashing into the spaces around us, flowing from our being. Living water, the provision of Jesus, is not something that can be packed away and neatly carried around in your bag or set on the desk in your office. No - it is a flowing river. When we open ourselves to provision in the wilderness we are caught up in something that moves and that moves us. This flowing power is a threat to those who want to argue about credentials. This flowing power is a threat to those who do not want you to thrive.

Jesus' promise to provide living water against a backdrop of wilderness remembrance evokes division because it elevates him. It enacts what the Colossians passage describes: "Now in Christ dwells the whole fullness of divinity bodily. And you all have in Christ come to fullness, Christ Jesus who is the head of every ruler and authority." This passage which has already begun

overlaying the physical and the divine goes on to talk about being buried (and raised) with Christ, the uncircumcision of the flesh, and release from legal demands (of which circumcision was one).

This is a passage that one would say has a “high Christology” because it emphasizes Jesus’ divinity. But it does so using the body - Jesus’ body and our bodies. So that we have been invited to a new sort of life in the bodies that we have. We have been invited to be so filled with living waters that it overflows the boundaries of our flesh.

Family of God, we inhabit a story of division and power jockeying, swimming in the promise that there is living water to sustain us - to fill us, and to flow from our bellies.

Where are you in the story today? Are you with Bathsheba, getting what you can from broken humans in a broken world? Are you with the crowds, remembering God’s provision but wondering what is so divine about Jesus? Are you in the wilderness? Are you overflowing with living water?

Whatever work you are doing with these stories, you are welcomed here. May the living water find you.