The Oasis Effect

By Laurel Moffatt

Water takes on new meaning in a desert, whether in a place like Zion or a place more stark and barren. There, you can see what water can do, what beauty it can create, but also the life that is possible because of it.

In places like Zion, erosion by water results in great beauty. The agent of this erosion is the river that flows through Zion, breaking down the rock slowly over time. It is a gradual destruction that has transformed a place of sediment and stone into a canyon of incredible beauty, layered strata of rocks bright with earthy pigment.

The beauty of Zion is relentless. You can't look away from it. What is harder to spot in the face of such beauty is the importance of the water to the life in that place. I mean, it's obvious, when you think about it, that the water is what allows the plants and trees to grow along the banks of the river and the animals there to survive. But the nature of the water as life-sustaining seems to pale in comparison to the powerhouse capability of water to carve a canyon out of a mountain. Each year the river through Zion moves about a ton of sediment, soil, stones and boulders, carving the canyon deeper and wider and more beautiful still.

When I was 10, I had to memorise a poem for school. It was a song from the Jewish scriptures, Psalm 1. I'm not sure why the teacher chose this song. And now, in this our secular age, it may seem strange to think of asking a child to memorise a passage of Scripture at school. But I suppose that in some ways it is only as strange as asking a child to memorise any piece of poetry. We don't ask that of our memories anymore. The poem was about the person who finds their greatest joy in God.

That person is like a tree planted by streams of water,
which yields its fruit in season
and whose leaf does not wither—
whatever they do prospers.

While I thought I was simply memorising a poem, spitting it back out to get the immediate reward of a teacher's praise or tick of approval, unknown to me at the time, those words and cadences, and the image of that tree sank into my memory, deep into the folds of my mind, waiting for a day that would not come for another 20 years.

What happened roughly 20 years later, was that I went through a very hard time. During that time, a friend brought up that tree from Psalm 1. The tree that I had first

pictured as a 10-year-old leapt into focus. It was a fully mature oak tree growing on the bank of a stream in a field of neatly-mowed grass. It was a postcard tree, plastic in its perfection. I felt very far away from that tree.

In the midst of my hard time, that tree seemed as foreign and strange to me as a landscape from another planet. I did not feel like a tree. I felt like Mars. I felt like the desert. I felt lost. I couldn't really see my way back to any stream or grassy field and most certainly not to any grand and towering lush green tree. I felt dry and brittle. "A faded leaf…dwindled to a husk" as Christina Rossetti writes in one of her poems.

A few years ago, I went to the desert to see a canyon. It was the middle of summer, and by the time I got there, it was nearing the middle of the day, which it turns out, is not the best time of day to go to the desert in the summer. It was far too hot to go for a walk. The moment I opened the car door I felt like I'd walked into an oven.
I remember thinking: How can anything live here? There is no way that anything could actually live here. It felt a bit like what it feels like in the middle of a very hard time.

A ranger told me that there was an oasis nearby, which, as it turned out, looked nothing like what I'd imagined. Granted, what I'd imagined was more informed by Looney Tune cartoons than anything else. There was no blue pool surrounded by bright green palms. There were only shaggy brown ones, clumps and clusters of them. They looked dry and almost dead.

The ranger told me to follow the water. What water? I wondered. From where I stood I couldn't see it. I walked into the clump of palms. Then I heard it, a trickle of water. And as I walked further into the palms, the temperature changed. It dropped quite a bit. Even though I couldn't see it at first, the water was there, and because it was there, the palms were there. Almost impossibly so. And because the palms were there, a place that metres away might bake you and leave you for dead, became instead a place of life. I felt like I'd walked into another climate. It turns out I had.

The presence of an oasis can create a microclimate in the desert that is habitable, liveable. Even flourishing. As a result of the presence of an oasis in a desert, wind speed can decrease, it can lower the temperature of an area in summer, or trap warmth on a winter's night. And, it makes it possible for more plants to grow and animals to live, which in turn helps the oasis to continue to grow and flourish. This is known as the *oasis effect*.

While standing in that oasis, it was clear that while the trees were an essential part of creating the oasis, the trees themselves were not the source. The place was only alive because of the water.

Water equals life in the desert. Even when you can't see it, you know it is there by the presence of living things. It is the essential thing that can create a refuge out of a furnace. And while at first glance I would not have called the oasis beautiful - not as I might the rock walls of Zion - after experiencing the heat of the desert without it, and then the drop in temperature because of it, the oasis *became* beautiful to me, the water in particular. It was the beauty of a living thing. The water was alive, and as a result, the place was alive, and it was beautiful to me because it was alive, and I was alive in it.

The phrase 'living water' shows up only seven times in the biblical scriptures. But they tend to stand out to me. Mainly because the phrase is at first so innocuous. So simple. *Living water*.

It almost begs to be unpacked. Is it that the water is alive? Or that the water sustains life? Or both?

If you try to track down "living water" in a literal sense, you may find yourself landing on the website of a bottled water company based in the Zagoria province in Albania, where supposedly the purest drinking water in the world is found, bottled and sold in plastic bottles.

But the living water that is mentioned in scripture is not so much a consumable thing, as completely immersive. It's used to describe God and his Spirit as the spring or source of living water, not in a bottled way or static way, but a dynamic way. It flows, it streams.

And it is something that moves through people and places and fills and cleans, and revives them.

It is *alive*.

Jesus mentions this water a few times, even promising those who believe in him can have their own inner spring of this water. (John 7:38).

When everything is easy to come by, the offer of water is easy to turn down. It's easy to forget the miracle that it is. The gift that it is. And it's easy to take for granted just how transformative an offer like living water is. Particularly the offer of living water as a renewable, portable resource.

Such an offer is impossible to ignore in a desert. In the desert I would never refuse it.

The trees in the oasis did not look the way I'd imagined the tree in Psalm 1. They were not green and lush. But I knew when I saw them that the brown oasis was far closer to that tree than anything I'd ever imagined. In contrast to the tree of my

imagining, there was no such thing as a lone tree in the oasis. They were clustered together, clumped, drawing life from the water and strength from one another, growing together in one another's company. And growing together as they did, they created a new climate - a place where you could live.

Maybe this is what it looks like to be satisfied in God. To enjoy him. Maybe it looks less like a postcard tree, less like the beautiful heights of Zion, and more like those palms, clustered along a hidden stream, drinking the water down in gulps with their roots like their lives depend on it. Because they do.

Links:

If, like me, you have gone through a hard time, you might find some comfort in the Christina Rosetti poem I refer to in this episode, 'A Better Resurrection'.

Christina Rossetti, 'A Better Resurrection'
https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44991/a-better-resurrection

I have no wit, no words, no tears;
My heart within me like a stone
Is numb'd too much for hopes or fears;
Look right, look left, I dwell alone;
I lift mine eyes, but dimm'd with grief
No everlasting hills I see;
My life is in the falling leaf:
O Jesus, quicken me.

My life is like a faded leaf,
My harvest dwindled to a husk:
Truly my life is void and brief
And tedious in the barren dusk;
My life is like a frozen thing,
No bud nor greenness can I see:
Yet rise it shall—the sap of Spring;
O Jesus, rise in me.

My life is like a broken bowl,
A broken bowl that cannot hold
One drop of water for my soul
Or cordial in the searching cold;
Cast in the fire the perish'd thing;

Melt and remould it, till it be
A royal cup for Him, my King:
O Jesus, drink of me.

For more information on microclimates in the desert, you could read this article from the pages of *Agricultural and Forest Meteorology*:

Liu, Rui, et al. 'Investigating microclimate effects in an oasis-desert interaction zone,' *Agricultural and Forest Meteorology* 290 (2020): 107992

https://reader.elsevier.com/reader/sd/pii/S0168192320300940?token=EB79876093690D9F01AD6154EC482DBD605DB03F49AAEF856B47CAD118A02C43E22E9FE94BB227FAE09464B685466680&originRegion=us-east-1&originCreation=20220426221413

'Living water' that is bottled, marketed and sold from Albania.
Living Water from the Zogoria province in Albania
https://gtglivingwater.com.au/

And here are the words of the man who claims to be the source of the real thing, Living Water himself:

John 7: 37-39
https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John%207%3A37-39&version=NLT