

Water: A Vision of Restoration and Transformation

Reflection: Church on the Farm on August 20, 2017

Community Mennonite Church of Lancaster

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Wherever you look

In the beginning, when God created the heavens and earth, 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.

Thus begins the great creation story, in the first line of Genesis. Thereafter, water appears in story after story, throughout the Old and New Testaments. And it appears in many forms – as fresh water, and salt, as rain, spring, river, flood. It appears dramatically, like a parted sea, and a pillar of cloud leading the Israelites through the desert. And it appears simply, as in a basin of water for washing dirty feet. Water represents creation, destruction, the word of God. It represents peace, forgiveness, escape, abundance, and solace during troubled times. It represents justice.

Water is there at the beginning, and it's there at the very end. Revelation 22 - the last chapter of the New Testament - begins with this: "The angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb, down the middle of the great street of the city. This last chapter ends with Jesus promising his return and inviting all to "Come! Whoever is thirsty, let them come, and whoever wishes, let them take the free gift of the water of life."

A few notes on this service. We'll reflect together on the role of water in our lives, and in the lives of those who have gone before us. We are grateful that we can do this here at the Kennels' farm, where the physical waters of life – "that beautiful stream" – is flowing through our sanctuary, and among these fields, where water turns into wine.

We won't be following the lectionary text. Hymns and scripture will be interspersed throughout. We'll pause in silence after each hymn, so the land, trees, water, and animals can also speak to us.

This grove is sacred space for our congregation, so we invite you now to be present in this space in any way you feel comfortable...be free to remove your shoes, or to sit on the ground, or close your eyes. Feel the earth beneath your feet, and think about the silent rivers of water that flow there, underground, hidden and abundant. That groundwater - under your feet - grows these grapes and these trees, fills the wells, and emerges above the ground as this little stream.

The idea for this reflection started several years ago with a discovery. In preparing for a presentation to a group of farmers, I came across a passage from Ezekiel that I knew I needed to share with them. It speaks directly to us in this century about our relationship with water, and offers a vision that gives us hope and optimism as we work to clean and protect waters that reflect centuries of abuse.

Marcy got involved when we reflected on how water infuses so many of our old and new hymns. To end part 1, instead of reading a litany of the many Bible stories that involve water, let's remember some of these stories in a hymn.

Hymn – Water has Held Us #82 in STJ

Living Waters in a Parched Land

I have the great pleasure of working in a world of water, at a freshwater science facility called the Stroud Water Research Center. I work with farmers who want to do their part in cleaning and protecting their streams while farming their land. Our scientists study how healthy and unhealthy streams function. Our educators help children and adults understand what lives in their streams.

I've come to realize that many Americans don't feel very connected to the water around them, unless something goes wrong. Unless their water supply is suddenly shut off – like residents of Pittsburgh experienced earlier this year – or their basement gets flooded or wedding rained out. Otherwise, we typically go

about our days without thinking much of our clean drinking water that also takes waste from our homes. That's not true for everyone – I know plenty of anglers and paddlers who take their streams and rivers very seriously. The people of Montana – a parched land that is literally burning in wildfires – aren't taking their water granted either. But most of us are comfortably supplied with this essential resource, and we focus on other things.

Not so for the ancient people of the bible who lived in a dry land. Compare your day to day interaction with water to the shepherd, negotiating his thirsty flock through dry hills. Or the mother struggling to keep her family fed and hydrated during one of the many biblical periods of drought and famine. Or the fisherman on the Sea of Galilee, hoping to fill his nets...always an uncertain endeavor. These were people whose very lives depended on whether or not they had access to water, on a day to day basis. No wonder so many of their stories are animated with water.

My niece Jenna lives in Montana, and she loves to sing. I imagine the words of the next hymn may have new urgency for her: Send down your waters upon this land, this land is burning and parching. No seed will flourish. Send down your waters and let the deep roots nourish.

Hymn – Oh Healing River #372 [then silence]

Ezekiel 47:6-10 – A vision of restoration and transformation

We've seen how water bubbles up in so many texts. Most of these stories are as relevant as ever. Who doesn't need a place of solace in troubled times? Who of us doesn't wish that justice would flow in this land like a great river. Who isn't looking for new meanings for God in the world around us?

Water pollution is a different matter, however – pollution is not mentioned much in the Bible, though references to "salty water" occasionally appear, usually referring to water that is non-useful or despoiled or even cursed.

While the people of the bible lived in a dry land, where access to fresh water meant survival – here in northeastern US we still have abundant water supplies

punctuated by only occasional drought. Pollution and flooding are more our concerns.

Indeed, many of our streams in Lancaster County are officially “impaired,” as documented by scientists and regulators. This includes the Chiques Creek that this little stream flows into. An impaired stream is one that does not support basic stream life that should be there, and it doesn’t provide safe uses to people, like fishing and swimming. Those clean water insects that I showed the children are largely exterminated from these streams. In fact, about half of Lancaster County’s streams are impaired. Because agriculture has such a big impact on streams in our area, many groups like ours are working with farmers to reduce runoff and restore stream habitat, while municipalities’ jobs are to address stormwater runoff.

Despite improvements in sewage treatment, unhealthy streams and rivers are a problem all over this country, due to farming, development, mining, dams, climate change and other impacts. On top of all this we have a special challenge here in central PA – all our waterways in this area flow into one of the most unique and historically productive estuaries in the world, the Chesapeake Bay. As H.L. Mencken once wrote, the Chesapeake Bay is “a giant protein factory. “ It’s unique in how its waters don’t flush out to the ocean quickly, unlike the Delaware Bay at Philadelphia. The Chesapeake retains much of the good and bad materials that flow into it from its tributaries, and our Susquehanna is its largest tributary.

This *conservative* nature – the Chesapeake’s ability to “conserve” and recycle nutrients and sediment - was once its greatest asset, back when the entire watershed was forested, when only a meager amount of nitrogen, phosphorus and sediment were washing off the landscape. In that context, a slow, shallow, stagnant estuary is supremely equipped to turn these nutrients into seafood.

Now, those nutrients that were a trickle 500 years ago, have become a torrent today – over 100 million pounds of nitrogen a year from PA alone. And for many decades the Bay has suffered from too much nutrient flowing off the land. Abundance is a curse for the bay.

Happily, it looks like we've turned the corner on this problem, though PA is still on EPA's watch list for continued missed milestones. Many of the Chesapeake Bay's indicators are finally trending upward. Many of our local streams are better too, but it's a painfully slow, decades-long process, with good news always tempered with bad. New threats – like pipelines and fracking and pharmaceuticals are setbacks. It's easy to get discouraged.

And this is where Ezekiel comes in, by offering a vision of hope in which he describes a beautiful future for his people, and ours.

He asked me, "Son of Man, do you see this?" Then he led me back along the bank of the river. As I came back, I saw on the bank of the river a great many trees on one side and on the other. He said to me, 'This water flows towards the eastern region and goes down into the Arabah; and when it enters the sea, the sea of stagnant waters, the water will become fresh. Wherever the river goes, every living creature that swarms will live, and there will be very many fish, once these waters reach there. It will become fresh; and everything will live where the river goes. People will stand fishing beside the sea from En-gedi to En-eglaim; it will be a place for the spreading of nets; its fish will be of a great many kinds, like the fish of the Great Sea.

This is a powerful story for our times. Ezekial speaks to his people about a return from exile and a restored temple. To describe this new paradise, he chooses the image of a thriving river – a river we know as the Jordan – which in his dream so freshens and transforms the Dead Sea that it actually flourishes with fish and people celebrating with nets overflowing.

He is describing the river not as a source of degradation to downstream waters, but as a source of life and restoration. He describes a watershed and a human-nature community in balance. While perhaps not what he intended, I take this passage's vision literally – this is our Chiques Creek and our Susquehanna, restored to health and once again supporting a Chesapeake Bay ecosystem where fish, oysters and crabs are again plentiful. Where people again cast lines, and spread nets, and congregate and swim and paddle without fear of getting sick.

Finally, Ezekiel's vision foretold what present day scientists now know about our own "living waters" - that streams and rivers, ESPECIALLY very small headwater streams like that one behind me, have enormous capacity to self-cleanse, to literally retain and remove some of the pollution that gets into the water. These meandering corridors of water moving over algae-covered rocks are exquisitely designed water treatment systems that can turn dirty water into clean.

But only healthy streams do this water treatment magic well. And once again, Ezekiel nails it. As he paints a picture of a river with a great many trees on one side and the other, he's describing a river ecosystem in balance. It turns out that streams need trees to be healthy. Streams need trees if they're going to be transformed from barren ditches into water treatment systems that do work for us. This should come as no surprise: trees shade the water, keeping it cooler. Trees filter pollution and their roots secure the stream banks. Tree leaves that float into the stream each fall feed the stream with life giving carbon. And when big trees die they fall into the stream and their trunks and limbs incorporate into the channel to create new habitat for fish. Perhaps Ezekiel was our first stream ecologist.

Loving our Neighbors, Downstream

What does all this have to do with that core Christian value of loving our neighbors? We're instructed to love our fellow human beings. We are to care for people, in ways ranging from a hot dish delivered to parents with a newborn, donations to a food bank, a friendly ear to a troubled friend, or speaking to truth to power while laying down arms. It's the golden rule from Matthew. Jesus repeatedly calls on us to love not just our friends but our enemies.

This golden rule is grounded in connectedness; it reflects the reality that we are all connected to others by a rich network of affiliations including friends and family, money, food...an infinite web. We are connected to people past, present and future through our DNA. We are connected to people in Charlottesville, and Sierra Leone.

Water, too, is shared among humans and non-humans but with a difference. Because water always moves downhill, this connection between people is not always two way. People living upstream of those living downstream are in a position of power and influence. We literally have the fate of downstream neighbors in our hands, as we make decisions about how we use and abuse water that's on its way to someone else.

Protecting our watersheds - and the streams and rivers flowing through those watersheds - enable all our downstream neighbors – people, plants and animals - to live out their lives more fully. Or to live at all.

Let it be so. Let us fulfill Ezekiel's dream.

Hymn: **Let Justice Flow Like Streams - #65 in STJ**