

In the Watershed

Revelation 21:10, 22:1-5
Sermon by Mark Schloneger
May 22, 2022

In the beginning of the Bible, in Genesis, chapter 2 --
we're given the story of Creation, the beginning of time.
We're told that God created human beings,
planted a garden, and then placed them in the garden.
We're told that the trees of Eden were beautiful,
and that they produced fruit that was good to eat.
And we're told that there was a river that watered the garden --
it flowed out of Eden and then divided into four branches.
Those four branches, carrying the waters of Eden,
nourished the entire world.

At the end of the Bible, in a vision of the end of time,
John, the author of Revelation, saw this:
Revelation 21:10, 22:1-5:

And in the spirit, [the angel] carried me away to a great, high mountain and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God.

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month, and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.

(Revelation 21:10, 22:1-5, NRSV)

In the thumb of Michigan's mitten,
just south of the village of Columbiaville,
a spring-fed lake trickles into a river that you can cross, bank to bank,
with three well-positioned rocks,
and a hop, a skip, and a jump.
It doesn't look like much
because it isn't much.
Here, it looks more like a stream, a creek,
than a river.

At its beginning, its genesis,
 this river's water flows clear,
 gurgling over slippery smooth stones,
 between banks lush with green,
 beneath branches stretching for the sun.

With bends and twists,
 the river grows in size and strength
 as creeks join its march.

Kearsley Creek, Thread Creek, Swartz Creek, Misteguay Creek.
These and other creeks
 give up their waters to become one, one with the river.
And inch by inch, through the millennia,
 this river has carved its trail for seventy-eight miles,
 first southwest, then north,
 before emptying into another river making its way
 to Luke Huron's Saginaw Bay.

This river, the Flint River, is the watershed for portions of seven counties,
 twenty cities and villages, and fifty-eight townships.

It drains 1,358 square miles of pure Michigan.
And for decades upon decades, down its drain,
 have gone pollutants from lumber mills, then paper mills,
 then auto manufacturers, meatpacking companies,
 packaging companies, and landfills.

Needless to say, the Flint River suffered.
And while protective regulations and clean-up efforts
 steadily improved the river's condition,
 it was repeatedly ruled out as a primary source for drinking water.

Until 2014.

You know this story.

2014 is the year when the state of Michigan
 tapped the Flint River to provide water for the city of Flint.

Why? Well, Flint was bankrupt, its finances were run by the state,
 and the state wanted to cut costs.

Immediately after the switch, residents complained about the water's funny taste,
 its cloudy appearance, its foul odor.

The city's most important resident, General Motors,
 noticed that the water was corroding its engines.

General Motors received a waiver to disconnect from the city's water
 and to hook up to the previous source.

Flint's human residents wouldn't get that option until a year later.

But by then, the Flint River water had corroded the city's aging pipes,
 poisoning the drinking water with lead.

Lead poisoning causes developmental delays and neurological impairments,
particularly in children.

For children, this means lower intelligence, decreased attention spans,
and underperformance in school.

These effects are permanent.

And you go back to village of Columbiaville,
and you stand at the place where that spring-fed lake
trickles into this river.

You see this place of Genesis, this place of such promise,
where the water flows clear,
gurgling over slippery smooth stones,
between banks lush with green,
beneath branches stretching for the sun.

And then you think about all that has happened downriver,
all the injustice, all the deception, all the corruption,
all the pain, fear, sickness, and heartbreak.

And you wonder,
God, how is it possible that all of that -- that --
lies downriver from this little, gurgling brook --
the one that you can cross,
bank to bank,
with three well-positioned rocks,
and a hop, a skip, and a jump?

Lord, have mercy.

There's something in the water that shouldn't be there.

In Revelation, chapter 16,
John describes a vision of the city of Babylon.

Babylon is the kingdom of darkness,
full of people who curse the name of God, who refuse to repent.

He sees Babylon's land, rivers and seas being poisoned.

Sores break out on people,
everything in the water dies.

This is how John portrays the wrath of God.

Because Babylon is invested in bloodshed,
its waters are poisoned with blood,
and its people drink what they have wrought.

Degrading God's creation is not only sin --
it reflects God's judgment of sin,
our sin.

What a contrast this is with John's vision of the Holy City,
coming down out of heaven, shining with God's glory,
brilliant like precious jewels, completely pure.

As John wrote, “Then 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.
On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing fruit every month.
And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.”
(Revelation 22:1-2, NRSV)

Healing, not harming.
Nourishing, not destroying.

How different from Babylon’s rivers.
How different from the Flint River.
How different from Indiana’s rivers,
which just this year were named as the most polluted in the United States.¹

But so what?
Really, so what?

Of what value is a beautiful *vision* of crystal-clear water
when you follow the gurgling brook of Genesis
and watch it grow into an ominous river
that brings such suffering, such misery, such pain?

Of what value is a vision of clean water for people in need of a drink?

What does a vision of healing mean for people who are sick?

We could go on.

What does the promise of God's shalom mean
for people who are broken and hurting and world-weary?

What does it mean for you?

I mean, here we are,
standing among these polluted rivers,
drinking these waters,
breathing this air.

What, now?

The word “apocalypse” simply means the unveiling,
the revealing, of what is to come.

There are some who read the book of Revelation
and take comfort in what they think it communicates.

This where history is headed, this reading goes,
evil will be vanquished, evildoers will be punished,
the earth will be destroyed,
and we will dwell with God in heaven forever.

¹ Rebecca Thiele, “[Report: Indiana has the most polluted rivers, streams of any state,](#)” *WFYI* (PBS, Indianapolis) (March 17, 2022).

*Some glad morning when this life is over
I'll fly away.
To a home on God's celestial shore
I'll fly away.
I'll fly away, oh glory, . . .*

As catchy as that song is,
as comforting as its words might be to people
who are suffering or facing oppression,
its message is not the one we find in Revelation.
And when it is sung by people with power and privilege,
it promotes a theology of escapism from the earth
that has resulted in its degradation.
After all, the thinking goes, this all is temporary,
why give yourself over to temporal concerns
when our focus should be on the eternal?

The thing is that both in the prophets and continuing in Revelation,
the primary message concerning God's judgment in scripture
is not about the destruction of the Earth but its renewal.
The empires will be destroyed, but the earth will be rehabilitated.
The prophet Isaiah raged about the deforestation of Israel's hardwoods,
causing desertification,
and he prophesied about a return of the trees and waters:
and the healing of creation itself:
from chapter 41, verses 17-19:

*When the poor and needy seek water,
and there is none, and their tongue is parched with thirst,
I, the Lord, will answer them . . .
I will open rivers on the bare heights
and fountains in the midst of valleys;
I will make the wilderness a pool of water,
and the dry land springs of water.
I will put in the wilderness the cedary, the acacia. (Isaiah 41:17-19)*

There are similar prophecies by other prophets, like Joel and Jeremiah.
But, for our purposes, of particular interest in the prophet Ezekiel.

In a vision, Ezekiel is brought to the Temple in Jerusalem.
The temple, God promises, will one day be rebuilt and refilled with God's glory.
Ezekiel gazes upon that temple,
and he sees a trickle of water emerging from it.
It doesn't look like much
because it isn't much.
But, led by the Spirit,
Ezekiel follows that trickle,

and it becomes ankle deep, then knee deep, then waist deep,
until it becomes a vast and mighty river flowing out into the desert,
making fertile what had been barren ground,
making sweet what had been salt water.

Echoing Genesis 1, God fills up this river with fish of every kind,
and along its banks grows trees bearing fruit for eating
and leaves for healing.

Does this sound familiar?

It should.

What Ezekiel prophesied,

John sees fulfilled in Revelation, chapter 22.

But the river in John's vision flows from the throne of God and the Lamb,
meaning Jesus, for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the temple.

John points to Jesus as the one who fills Ezekiel's vision to the fullest.

In the beginning, Genesis tells us, the river of Eden flows east, watering the garden,
and then dividing into four branches to nourish the entire world.

In the end, Revelation tells us, the river of life flows from the throne of God
and of the lamb, right down the middle of the holy city.

In my mind, I see these rivers flowing towards each other,
and emptying their waters into Jesus,
the holy river mixed in with our heartbreak
cleansing us from sin and empowering us to walk towards
where the river leads.

The waters of baptism is where those rivers flow.

As Anabaptist believers, we reject the idea that our identity as Christians
is grounded in the shifting political geographical boundaries of nation-states.

No, our identities are found in Christ,
and we are bound together by a living faith in Jesus
rather than by man-made blood-soaked borders.

That's right, I think, but that statement is not complete.

If we are bound together by a living faith in Jesus
and not shifting geographical borders,
then our identities as Christians should be tied more closely
to the land on which we walk than away from it.

What would it mean for us to re-center our citizenship
in the radically local, in the landscape of Creation?

What would it mean for us to ground our discipleship practices

in the watershed where we reside?
What would it mean to practice watershed discipleship?²

Those questions and a lot of my thoughts today,
come from Ched Myers,
an activist and author who advocates for an understanding
of following Jesus as watershed discipleship.

In his explanation, the term “watershed discipleship” alludes to three things:

1. It recognizes that we are in a watershed historical moment of crisis, which demands that environmental justice, social justice, and sustainability be integral to everything we do as Christians and citizen inhabitants of specific places.
2. It embraces the inescapably . . . [local] and incarnational following of Jesus: our discipleship and the life of the local church must reflect and prioritize our watershed context.
3. It suggests that we must become disciples of our watersheds. The challenge is to paraphrase the argument made in 1968 by Senegalese environmentalist Baba Dioum: “We won’t save places we don’t love; we can’t love places we don’t know, and we don’t know places we haven’t learned.”³

Yes, there is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
And when you stand in the place where it begins,
its Genesis,
you stand with Jesus, the Creator God in the flesh,
And Jesus said,
“Whoever believes in me, streams of living water will flow from within them.”

And you go back to village of Columbiaville,
and you see this place of Genesis, this place of such promise,
where the water flows clear,
gurgling over slippery smooth stones,
between banks lush with green,
beneath branches stretching for the sun.
where that spring-fed lake
trickles into this river.

And then you think about all that has happened downriver,
all the injustice, all the deception, all the corruption,
all the pain, fear, and sickness.

And you stand in the river with Jesus and walk.

² Ched Myers, “From ‘Creation Care’ to ‘Watershed Discipleship’: Re-placing Ecological Theology and Practice,” *Conrad Grebel Review* 32:3 (Fall 2014), 265.

³ Ched Myers, “Prophetic Visions of Redemption as Rehydration: A Call to Watershed Discipleship,” *Anglican Theological Review* 100:1 (Winter 2018), 74.

First it becomes ankle deep, then knee deep, then waist deep,
until it becomes a vast and mighty river
making fertile what had been barren ground,
making sweet what had been salt water.

And on each side of the river stands the tree of life,
bearing twelve crops of fruit,
yielding its fruit every month.

And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations,
And the river runs through it.

May we be where that river flows. Amen.