

*Come To the River*  
August 18, 2019, Pastor Mary Koon  
Worship at Moir Park

## **The River Calls Us**

The psalmist writes: (Psalm 46:4-5)

There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved; God will help her when morning dawns.

Water is life.

Rivers capture our imagination. They move, flow, dance, rush, curl, jump – they begin in a distant land, and leave us behind in their rush to sea. Rivers are home to diverse eco systems -- insects, birds, amphibians, micro- organisms. They are teeming with life! Rivers provide water for drinking, bathing, watering crops. Fish, crabs and other creatures provide food for various species. Rivers grow economies and support transportation and recreation, refreshment, and play – all things that connect us and build community. Rivers are part of larger watershed networks, all working together. A river is poetry in motion – delight to our senses.

Our sacred story, the Bible, is bookended with rivers. In Genesis 2, God plants a garden called Eden – in the east. God puts humans in the garden, and all kinds of trees – loaded with fruit, good to eat, and dancing with leaves and flowers - beautiful to look at. The Tree of Life is in the garden, as is the Tree of the knowledge of Good and Evil. The text reads, “A river flows out of Eden to water the garden and from there divides into four rivers.”

We see a river again in 22<sup>nd</sup> chapter of Revelation – the very last chapter of the Bible. At the fulfillment of the ages, the time when a new heaven and earth will be, John of Patmos envisions a river – the Water of Life River, crystal bright. On either side of the river are trees, whose leaves

are for the healing of the nations. A promise that peace will one day reign.

In between creation and God's ultimate, new creation, water plays a role in God's story. In the Hebrew Bible -- The Red Sea parted as the Israelites escaped from bondage in Egypt. The prophet Isaiah uses rivers in dry deserts to symbolize hope and new life. God's gives water to Hagar in the desert so that she and her son, Ishmael, could live. And who can forget Moses' arm stretching out and water flowing from the rock into the wandering Israelites' mouths, parched from their journey.

Water plays a role in the New Testament, too, as Jesus calls disciples and preaches overlooking the Sea of Galilee, calms the storm and walks on water. He offers living water to the woman at the well.

But perhaps no body of water sparks our faith memories and imaginations like the Jordan River. The third chapter of Joshua tells of the nation of Israel crossing the Jordan into the promised land, after its overflowing banks miraculously dried up when touched by the priests bearing the Ark of the covenant, that vessel of the 10 commandments and what people thought was God's very presence, touched the water. Each gospel tells the story of Jesus being baptized and commissioned in the river. We've had some of the Jordan at Oak Grove, since Nancy Scott brought back some of that water to use in her grandchildren's baptisms.

Why is it that rivers and springs, fountains, lakes, and wells feature so prominently in the Bible? First of all, bodies of water are part of the landscape. Fresh water would have been something to think about in ancient times in an arid land. The fact is that no human can live for more than a couple days without water. I love the unity of the images -- water supports and nurtures life, God gives and sustains life. The spiritual and the physical -- always intertwined. And rivers? They represent the very fullness of God -- moving, creating, nourishing, enlivening. Rivers are meant to be shared and protected. They are

sacred, and are show up in origin stories of faith traditions throughout the world, and for first nation people in our own country.

So the river calls us to honor the sacred, fragile strength of life, of diversity, and to remember that we are earth, we are water. The River calls us to embody our sacred story, to gather in love, to share and to ensure that all have enough, both spiritually and physically. The river calls.

### **The river claims us: the Story of Jesus' baptism**

Mark 1:9-11 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

(Mary tells this story to children)

<sup>9</sup>In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. <sup>10</sup>And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. <sup>11</sup>And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved;<sup>[a]</sup> with you I am well pleased."

As we gather at the creek today to be part of Sammy and Hudson's baptisms, we remember for ourselves God's claim on our lives. For God calls us each beloved, just as we are. Alive for God's good purpose. Alive like the river.

### **The River Sends Us**

John 7:37-38

Jesus is in Jerusalem for the Festival of Tabernacle, the time when God's people remember and celebrate God's provision of food and water as their ancestors wandered in the desert. The gospel says this...

On the last day of the festival, the great day, while Jesus was standing there, he cried out, 'Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, <sup>38</sup>and let the one who believes in me drink. As\* the scripture has said, "Out of the believer's heart\* shall flow rivers of living water."

Called by the river of everflowing grace, claimed as God's beloved, we are sent to be living water for the world. Living water!

Joy Williams wrote a book of short- short—stories called *Ninety-Nine Stories of God*. Here is the one called “Wet”:

The Lord was drinking some water out of a glass. There was nothing wrong with the glass, but the water tasted terrible.

This was in a white building on a vast wasteland. The engineers within wore white uniforms and bootees on their shoes and gloves on their hands. The water had traveled many hundreds of miles through wide pipes to be there.

“What have you done to my water?” the Lord asked. “My living water . . .”

Oh, they said, we thought that was just a metaphor.

(<https://www.christiancentury.org/article/critical-essay/living-water-isn-t-just-metaphor>)

We live in a real world, where humans thirst – spiritually and physically, which are not opposites, but part of an integrated whole.

Loving God, living the life of the spirit, means caring for bodies as well as souls. Committing to the needs of real, flesh and blood people as fervently as we commit to prayer.

Living water has been on my mind this summer.

We've had tons of rain these last months, and rivers are high -- flood warnings are issued weekly.

And knowing we have had so much water, I try not to grumble when most of the sprinkler's water lands on the asphalt on my street instead of the tiny patch of grass seed she's growing.

Just this Thursday, before all that rain could wash the chemicals down into the grates, our granddaughter jumped off her neighbor's grass, for fear of the poison at her sandaled feet after a big national company had treated the lawn and left a sign asking children and animals to keep off.

And, I think the youth will back me up, being in Guatemala invited a deeper appreciation of access to clean water and efficient indoor plumbing. The knowledge that accidentally opening one's mouth in the shower, or running a toothbrush under the faucet could give you a parasite made us all super vigilant. It is such a great feeling to know that Oak Grove was part of the partnership, both financially and physically, digging ditches and laying pipes that now bring clean water to the town.

At Synod School in July we watched the film, "Flint: The poisoning of an American City" that will be released by Presbyterian Disaster Assistance in the fall. The movie offers a candid look at how the city government officials in Flint, Michigan ignored the evidence that people with little political voice or agency were being poisoned by local drinking water, which came from the Flint river. The river had been off limits for drinking since the 70s due to its pollution by industry. Thousands of people continue to deal with the horrors of lead poisoning while still unable to drink from their faucets.

It is critical for us, as people of faith, to make the connection between Jesus' living water to literal drinking water!

Water is not mine, it is ours. It is on loan from our creator, who is counting on us to share.

Jesus calls us to the river, the beautiful river of God. The God who claims us, and sends us as living water, flowing in God's grace. When we lose our way, when we grieve, are confused, when we are overwhelmed by the complexities of 21<sup>st</sup> century life, the river of God offers refreshment, possibility, community and abundant hope. May it be so. AMEN