

“Let the Waters Flow”
Ezekiel 40:1-4, 47:1-12

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I get some of my best ideas in the shower. Whenever I get a little preacher's block, I'll jump in the shower and let it flow. There must be something about that warm water beating down on my bare scalp that stimulates my synapses and I'll almost always make my way back to my computer still wet behind the ears, quickly writing down whatever good idea mystically occurred to me. Woe betide the church which has me as their pastor during a summer of water rationing. Except for the shower, I could pretty much live without a lot of water. I hate rain, I'm not much of a swimmer, only water skied once, never thought about a cabin on the lake, don't do much fishing, and used to live on the bank of a river but rarely went down to the water's edge. Just give me enough water to make a good cup of coffee and to baptize a child and we're good to go.

It is a good thing that Ezekiel was not as indifferent to water as I am, or we might have gone without the wonderful image of today's Scripture reading. I might have just shrugged at the ankle-deep water, looked the other way when it was knee-deep, thought about where else I could be when it was up to my waist, and looked for the nearest bridge at the sight of a river I could not cross. I probably would not have stuck around long enough to learn what benefits the river brings,

nor would I have written it all down. And I might not have connected it to the rest of Scripture in which rivers play an incredibly key role in the story.

A few weeks ago, we read again the story of the birth and rescue of a young Moses, who was kept alive by the cunning of his family and current of the Nile River. A few weeks before that, we read about Jacob's late night wrestling match with God at the ford of the Jabbok River. Three weeks ago, we heard about the river that flowed out of Eden, the branches of which were named Pishon, Gihon, Tigris, and Euphrates, and of the River of the water of life, shining like crystal in the New Jerusalem. You remember too another river, the Jordan River, across which the Israelites marched to occupy the promised land of milk and honey, and in which Jesus was baptized, that we might enter the promised land of eternal life. I think that God has a thing for rivers. And that means *we* should have a thing for rivers, since there are aren't too many things about which God cares, that we should not also care.

As we read in chapter 40, Ezekiel is brought in a vision to the temple where a man whose appearance was like bronze, says to him, "Mortal, look closely and listen attentively, and set your mind upon all I shall show you, for you were brought here in order that I might show it to you; declare all that you see to the house of Israel." With a divine version of a tape measure, he shows Ezekiel length and breadth of the new temple, the measurements of the wall around the outside of the temple area, the wall of the temple itself, the outer court, the inner court, the

gates, the chambers, the vestibule, the pilasters, the nave, all the doorposts, pillars and everything else. There is seemingly no part of the temple that goes unvisited. Then God tells Ezekiel the terms under which people may come into the temple, who may serve as priests, what offering must be made, the festivals to be celebrated, and much, much more, finally culminating the tour of the new and promised temple with an image of great beauty and power, the living water which flows eastward from the temple.

Before we spend more time in the water, let us take note that our passage today is included as part of a very long series of visions given to Ezekiel by God, visions Ezekiel in turn shared with those who had been with him in exile for twenty-five years. These visions are the essence of hope; even though this people is in exile, overthrown by the Babylonians because of their sin and idolatry, even though this people is not worthy of it, God promises, and shows Ezekiel, a new temple, the place where God's glory resides. For those of a certain age it would be a place for which they could scarcely hope, uncertain as they were about when or if they might return. For those of the younger generation, those born in exile, those who had never known a temple, it must have been beyond their imagination, having nothing with which to compare it, save the stories of their elders. To all, however, it symbolized a return to their holy ground, their sacred space, their beloved Jerusalem, their home.

But what significance the water, the increasingly rising river? Probably nothing more or nothing less than a metaphor for life. The obvious necessity of water for any life, much less abundant life, gives us a clue. Here were a people in a foreign land, far from anything they knew as home, as life, far from the glory of their past. They are in the equivalent of a desert in Babylon and so God shows them the opposite of the death they are experiencing. Abundant plants, abundant animals, abundant fish, abundant fruit, abundant health. It's all there, promised by God. Everything they want for themselves and their children is pictured as a result of that river which flows eastward from the temple. "Declare all that you see to the house of Israel," Ezekiel. From the temple flows life. From the throne of God proceeds life. From the practices of the faithful runs life. Ezekiel has been clearly shown, and instructed to tell everyone, that the temple is the source of life of the whole nation because it is where God resides. Do not forget that the presence of God was perceived much differently than today. The people of Israel believed that the temple was the very house of God, the container of the glory of God, the seat of all God's power. God is reminding them of this fact and promising that this holy place will not go unrebuilt.

More than two thousand years later, we are of a different sensibility about where the glory of God dwells. Jesus helped us with that change in our thinking; "Destroy this temple," he told the moneychangers, as he cast them out of the temple, "and in three days I will raise it up." "Believe me," he told the Samaritan

woman at the well, “the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem.” No more confined to the temple, we are more inclined to believe that God lives within each one of us, in our faith, or in our bodies as a temple for the Lord. Often, that image is part of a pitch for sexual purity, or physical health, admirable reasons to be sure, but the analogy can be so much deeper. What if we applied the image we find in Ezekiel and thought of ourselves as the droplets of a river that brings life. Listen again to the vision: “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. On the banks, on both sides of the river, there will grow all kinds of trees for food. Their leaves will not wither nor their fruit fail, but they will bear fresh fruit every month, because the water for them flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for healing.” Blessing upon blessing, God’s amazing gift of life.

From God flows faith, from faith flows life. Just as the water is a blessing wherever it goes, so too must we be life-giving. Ezekiel’s vision is God’s provision for a people in exile, people who need to return home. The vision still rings true, for there are still people who need to come home to God, and God is providing us. If Christ is alive, and indeed lives within each of us, isn’t it worth thinking about the volume of blessing that issues forth from each of us individually and from us

corporately? Is it a trickle or a torrent, a drop or a flood? Does it reach parched places, or does it get dammed up somewhere and diverted from where God wants it to go?

Last Sunday, I spoke a little about how I believe we are called to minister to nature and wilderness as one of the “least of these,” about whom Jesus spoke and cared. “When did we see your forest in danger and turn off our chainsaw?” Tonight I want to suggest to you that our volume of blessing is linked to how we treat God’s non-human creation and how we treat the human beings whom God has called us to care for. This works at a couple of levels, one more negative and the other more positive. If you will pardon a rather extreme and unpleasant example of the more negative form of that link, I would remind you of the mass murderer Jeffrey Dahmer, whose famous case brought to light the evidence that shows that a high percentage of adults who commit mass murder were also know as children to abuse and torture animals. To borrow some language from the world of alcohol and drug treatment, violence against nature is a gateway to violence against humans. However, it is not a problem only among mass murderers, but among all types of criminals and abusers. According to one source, studies of prison inmates reveal that as many as 75% of violent offenders had early records of animal cruelty. There is also a high correlation between family violence and animal cruelty. A study in 1983 of New Jersey families referred to youth and family services for reasons of child abuse reported that 88% of cases had at least one

member of the household who physically abused animals. An English researcher found that 83% of families reported for animal abuse also had children listed at high risk of abuse or neglect. In the words of the philosopher Immanuel Kant: “He who is cruel to animals becomes hard also in his dealings with men. We can judge the heart of a man by his treatment of animals.”

The more positive level, and the one which presents us with a wonderful opportunity, is challenging as well. This is flipping the negative evidence on its head, and helping us to become better humans toward one another by being better human beings towards God’s creation, by both direct and indirect means. It is clear that as we take actions that care for the earth, human beings benefit. Cleaner water and cleaner air make for cleaner people, people without treatable diarrhea and asthma. We become a more peaceful people where there is more beauty. We become a more reflective people where there is less noise pollution. All of these positive changes are brought about directly, but there are indirect benefits as well, and that is why I wanted to share with you the symbolism of the river from Ezekiel.

You will remember that the waters the man of bronze showed Ezekiel were in a vision, a vision of hope and a vision of the future. He showed Ezekiel what it would be like under the love and care of God who remembered them in their captivity. It was representative of a life they were not currently leading, but one to which they were headed, albeit on God’s time. It is one of the most beautiful

visions in the Bible, with life, growth, healing, meaningful human work and activity. But imagine if the man of bronze had showed Ezekiel the Rio Tarcoles here in Costa Rica, or any of the other of the world's most polluted rivers. Would there still be such life, such hope? What I am suggesting is that it is the vision we cast, the life we lead, that shares hope with others in despair, and it will be upon the evidence of our faithfulness to our call that we will be judged, not only by God when that time comes, but also by those who are watching us, seeking a glimmer of hope in their own lives. And if they see us taking care of a forest, or a river, or an animal, maybe, just maybe, they can imagine us caring for them as well, and take our invitation seriously to be in relationship with the God of life. You see, it is not just how we conduct ourselves in our dealings with human beings that gives testimony to our faith, but how we are seen caring for all of what has been entrusted to us. The complete tour Ezekiel received of the temple, its furnishings, its activities, and its people suggests something to us of the completeness with which we are called to view all of life, and not just human beings. The vision of the river of life flowing from the temple is only as strong as the cleanliness of the rivers flowing through our lands, when we have something to say about it. Are our rivers as pure as the rest of our witness? May God help us to have, and share, clean hearts, and clean rivers. Amen.