

RIVER OF LIFE

a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, Jan. 15, 2017
Based on Isaiah, Ezekiel 47:1-12, Rev. 22:1-2, John 4:3-24, 7:37-38

Last fall, we had a sermon series entitled, “Navigating the Storm,” in which water, especially the water of a sea, was very often a threatening image. Indeed water in the Bible can sometimes be an image of death, as for example in the book of Jonah, where Jonah described his experience of nearly drowning with the words: “The waters closed in over me; the deep surrounded me.” (Jonah 2:5) But more often in the Bible, water is a symbol of life. Sometimes in northeast Ohio we do not fully appreciate water, since we may get too much of it; but in the arid lands of the ancient near east people had a strong sense that water brings life. Thus a powerful symbol of abundant blessing was the image of a river. There are many places in the Middle East where there is a sharp contrast between a river valley, along with the adjacent lands watered by it, and the surrounding desert. So in the Bible the river becomes a prominent symbol of how the waters of God’s blessing can bring life out of death, and how God will provide what we need.

All this forms the backdrop for the three-week sermon series that begins today, entitled, “River of Life – opening our lives to the healing streams of God’s grace.” Let us begin with a moment of prayer . . .

There is a river that runs through the Bible. There is a river at the beginning: the story of the Garden of Eden describes rivers running out from the garden to water the earth. There is a river at the end: the vision of the heavenly city in the book of Revelation describes a river running through the center of the city. And there are rivers everywhere in between – in the stories of the people of Israel, in the visions of the prophets, in the prayers of the Psalms, and in the stories of Jesus. River images are augmented by additional water features, such as fountains, wells, and pools. We heard some of those images in the Scripture readings this morning.

If the image of thirst represents human beings in our need, then the image of the river represents how God will satisfy our need. As Isaiah said, “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 heights . . . and in the dry land springs of water.” (Isaiah 41:17-18)

The image of the river as a symbol of God’s abundant blessing reaches its zenith in the Old Testament in the vision of Ezekiel, which we heard a few moments ago. Ezekiel, one of the later prophets in the Bible, had a vision that God one day would create a new temple – which he describes in great detail in chapters before the one we heard – and out of the midst of that temple, he said, there would flow a river. In his vision, he is led by God’s angel into the river. They go into the river 1000 cubits, that is, 1500 feet, or the distance of 5 football fields, and the water is ankle deep. *[He measured a thousand cubits*

and brought me through the waters; the water came up to my ankles . . . Ezekiel 47:3] They go another 1500 feet into the river, and the water is knee deep. They go another 1500 feet, and it is waist deep. They go another 1500 feet – they have now gone the distance of 20 football fields, and they'd have to swim to go yet further. [*. . . it was too deep – one had to swim . . . Ezekiel 47:5*] This is one big river. Ezekiel finally describes it as “a river that could not be crossed.” (Ezekiel 47:5) Ezekiel's river is a powerful declaration that God's blessing is without limit.

Then in his vision Ezekiel is brought along the river, and everywhere he sees a bursting forth of life – there are fish everywhere; there are all sorts of trees along the banks. [*there will be a great multitude of fish . . . and along the banks all kinds of trees. Ezekiel 47:9,12*] Moreover, there is life bursting forth out of previous dead zones. He refers to “the sea of stagnant waters.” [*when the river enters the sea of stagnant waters . . . Ezekiel 47:8*] That would be the Dead Sea, which is so loaded with mineral salts that nothing lives in it. But when in the vision God's river hits that dead zone, “the water will become fresh,” as he says, and full of life. [*Ezekiel 47:8*]

What an image of transformation! It is an image of how God can thoroughly transform our troubled world, and how God can thoroughly revive our own personal lives. The vision declares that the waters of God's grace can touch the dry and dead places within us and bring about new life.

We come to a profound fulfillment of that in the New Testament. In New Testament days, when people thought about Ezekiel's vision of the new temple, and the river flowing out from it, [*the water was flowing from the threshold of the temple . . . Ezekiel 47:1*], they tended to be somewhat stuck on the idea that the temple had to be a building. But Jesus transformed this whole image when he said that he is the temple; and then he spoke of himself as the source of living water. As he said, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me.” (John 7:37)

In short, Ezekiel's vision is powerfully fulfilled in and through Jesus. From Jesus there now flows the water of God's grace which is without limit, and which can bring us out of spiritual death into abundant life. We find a personal example of that in the story that we heard from the gospel of John about the Samaritan woman at the well.

We heard how Jesus, traveling from Judea to Galilee, journeyed through the land of Samaria. This was an action which in itself was quite notable. Samaria lay in between Judea and Galilee, but most Jews when traveling between Judea and Galilee would cross over the Jordan River to loop around Samaria, because they did not want to have any contact with Samaritans. Jews hated Samaritans, and Samaritans hated Jews. They were ethnically different, they had different religious ideas and different customs, they disagreed on everything and were in constant conflict, and so they avoided one another at all costs. But Jesus went straight through Samaria, sat down at a well, and started a conversation with a Samaritan woman, which busted yet another taboo, because a rabbi

or teacher like Jesus not only would typically avoid Samaritans but was not supposed to engage in religious conversation with a woman. Instead, Jesus carried out with this Samaritan woman one of the most in-depth theological discussions recorded in the New Testament. So much for exclusionary taboos. In Jesus' behavior, it is clear that the river of Jesus' blessing, like the river of Ezekiel's vision, flows deep and wide.

The story says that "it was about noon." (John 4:6) This indicates that something else unusual was going on in this story. Women in these villages generally went to draw water in the cool of the early morning, so as to avoid the midday heat and have water available for the day; and they would all go about the same time so that they could visit around the well. It's where you got caught up on the village happenings. But this woman came by herself at noon. Was she perhaps not welcome among the others?

Her circumstances soon become apparent as the conversation with Jesus unfolds. She has had five husbands and is now on her sixth, but is not married to him. [*Jesus said, "You have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband." John 4:18*] Especially in that culture, this means she has a poor reputation, and likely has been ostracized by the rest of the community. The rejection by her neighbors would add to the inner pain she already feels after going through so many broken relationships. This is a troubled woman. As she comes to the well, her empty jug is an appropriate symbol for the emotional and spiritual emptiness that she feels.

Jesus offers to give her living water. He says, "Those who drink of the water that I give them will never be thirsty. The water that I give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." (John 4:14) It is a powerful word about what Jesus can do in each of our lives – how Jesus can meet the hurting and sinful and empty places in us with transforming grace that will bring us into newness of life.

The woman is so impacted by Jesus that at the end of the story she leaves her water jar and runs back to the city, where she proclaims to everyone, "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! Can he be the Messiah?" [*she left her water jar and went back to the city, where she proclaimed, "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! Can he be the Messiah?" (John 4:29)*] She has been touched by the mercy and the promise of Christ; and now she begins to have an impact on others, as she shares the story of her encounter with Jesus.

If you get into a river, you begin to be moved along in its flow. So as we open ourselves to the river of God's grace, we not only experience the refreshment and renewal of God in our own lives, but we are moved to share in the story of Jesus in the world at large. Along with Jesus we overcome barriers between people, we reach out to other people who are hurting, and we become instruments of God's grace and blessing. Ezekiel's vision had said that wherever the river flows there is life [*wherever the river goes everything will live. Ezekiel 47:9*] It is a good picture of our calling and destiny as Christians – that as

we enter into the river of God's blessing, we experience new life ourselves and participate in bringing new life to the world.

That destiny then comes to a final expression in the Bible in the closing verses of the book of Revelation. In John's vision of the heavenly city, Ezekiel's river appears one final time, as John describes "the river of the water of life . . . flowing from the Lamb" – from Christ – through the middle of the city of God. (Revelation 22:1) In Ezekiel's original vision, he described trees along the river, whose "leaves do not wither nor their fruit fail, but they bear fresh fruit every month . . . and their leaves are for healing." [Ezekiel 47:12] Now precisely the same vision appears again, as John says, "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. (Revelation 22:2) What this says is that God's river of life is flowing somewhere – into eternity. Through Christ we are brought into endless blessing.

But this also has implications for the present day. The vision says the river nurtures trees whose leaves are for healing. Our focus next week will be on God's river as place of healing. But it is not only individual healing; the vision says that "the leaves are for the healing of the nations." God's water of life can transform not only an individual woman at a well but also the brokenness of whole societies.

How much do we need God's river to flow in our lives and in our world today! May we come to the waters, and let God's river of life flow in and through us.