

August 20, 2023

Water

Ezekiel 47:1-12

Then he brought me back to the entrance of the temple; there, water was flowing from below the threshold of the temple towards the east (for the temple faced east); and the water was flowing down from below the south end of the threshold of the temple, south of the altar. Then he brought me out by way of the north gate, and led me round on the outside to the outer gate that faces towards the east; and the water was coming out on the south side.

Going on eastwards with a cord in his hand, the man measured one thousand cubits, and then led me through the water; and it was ankle-deep. Again he measured one thousand, and led me through the water; and it was knee-deep. Again he measured one thousand, and led me through the water; and it was up to the waist. Again he measured one thousand, and it was a river that I could not cross, for the water had risen; it was deep enough to swim in, a river that could not be crossed. He said to me, 'Mortal, have you seen 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. But its swamps and marshes will not become fresh; they are to be left for salt.

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.'

John 6:16-21

When evening came, his disciples went down to the lake, got into a boat, and started across the lake to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. The lake became rough because a strong wind was blowing. When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the lake and coming near the boat, and they were terrified. But he said to them, 'It is I; do not be afraid.' Then they wanted to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the land towards which they were going.

Intro: This morning we continue our series on Christian engagement on climate issues. The topic today is water. With a dearth of water in some places and too much in other places, how could we not mention it?

I want to begin with a mental exercise. Consider a moment on or near water which gave you a sense of awe, wonder or gratitude. [pause] Consider a moment on or near water which caused you terror, to use the biblical term from John 6. [pause] Now consider a moment you have truly appreciated a drink of water. [pause] Water renews our bodies. Water restores our spirits. Water can terrify us. Not enough water is a cause for concern as is too much water.

There are essentially three ways our biblical authors thought about water: water as the essence of life, water as the flood, and water as a means of healing.¹ I will touch upon these three topics interspersing the flow with considerations of the discipleship of water. We begin with water as the essence of life.

Water Is:

The human body can survive without food for an extended period, but without water death will occur within about a week. It is no wonder the wandering Hebrews complained bitterly about a lack of water in their sojourn through the wilderness (Ex 17:1ff), and why wells were often a source of tension among clans and tribes (e.g. Gen 21:25). Someone has estimated that each of us in our lifetime will, on average, take in more than 60,000 litres of water: in the liquids and food we consume, and in the air we breathe. We are mostly water and our bodies crave it.

Although water covers more than 70% of the earth's surface, only 3% of this is fresh water. There is as much water on the earth, and in the atmosphere above the earth, as there ever was or will be. Through the water cycle it moves through various forms. It is for this reason, I give thanks for the "water accord" signed earlier this year which recognizes the importance of protecting the shared oceanic water resources of our globe.² Every glass of water contains molecules of water recycled countless times, which is why the health of our oceans and rivers is so important. This process represents the ultimate in recycling. Our Creator God was in the recycling business long before we ever thought about it!

Access to clean water is a problem our world faces. Drought has and is causing mass migrations on our planet. The migrants don't want to leave, but neither do they want to die of thirst and the hunger which comes from drought related crop failure. Floods cause migration as well. The floods of Pakistan last year resulted in mass migration from parts of that country. In drought or flood the

¹ *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (volume VIII), edited by Gerhard Kittle and Gerhard Friedrich; and translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1972), pp 314-333.

² [U.N. treaty: Countries agree on historic treaty to protect international waters : NPR](#)

people must go somewhere, and there is not always a generous welcome when they arrive. New and old residents suddenly are competing for resources.

Floods and droughts have been a part of planet earth since we began keeping records and even before then. The manner in which industrialization has made such droughts and floods more regular and intense is being explored. Discipleship questions around the prudent use of water in the home or industrial sector abound. What we do know is that water is the essence of life. Pay attention to your water use. When there is too much of it or not enough of it, there will be a crisis.

And on this point, it is striking to me that in an industrialized country such as Canada that we have 1st Nation Reserves which still languish without potable water. We can create sand dams for fresh water in sub-Saharan Africa, but we can't find a mechanism for drinking water in this country? Water is the essence of life. We do well to insist people have access to clean water here and abroad.

Water is Chaos:

While water is essential for our lives, in the biblical narrative water can be perilous; just as it is in our world. Those in the Northern Indian state of Himachal Pradesh, those millions flooded out in Pakistan last year, those of the lower 9th ward of New Orleans, those south of Halifax and those in communities of central BC know this to be the case. In the words of Led Zeppelin, “when the levee breaks, baby you got to go.”

The ancients understood the destructive power of water. The Ancients even ascribed a name for the sea as a personification of the chaos water can inflict. “Yam” (יָם) is the Hebrew name of a deity within the Ancient Near East pantheon of gods³; Yam also translates as sea. In the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, they make a point of telling stories in which God and Jesus give order to the chaotic sea gods with all their blustery wind. A few biblical highlights... In the beginning God's spirit / breath (רוּחַ) covers “the waters” (הַמַּיִם). To begin creation, God puts a blanket on the chaos—isn't that cozy? In the next book, God leads ill mannered Hebrews through the Red (reed) Sea on the way out of Egypt (Ex 14:15); God parts chaos so the chosen people can escape. Various Psalms speak of God stilling the roaring sea. Fast forward to the Christian scriptures. By now the Canaanite god Baal has supplanted Yam; Baal operates in a similar destructive fashion, and so the concerns about chaos on the waters continue. On numerous occasions Jesus walks on the sea or stills the storm; Jesus rises above the chaos and can bring calm with a word. In the last chapters of the Revelation of John we hear that “sea will be no more” (Rev 21:1). In other words, chaos and furor will be no

³ [Yam \(god\) - New World Encyclopedia](#)

more. This is a symbolic and metaphorical reading of the texts, and I think the biblical authors and the Spirit which inspired them would have it no other way.

You see, the chaotic waters continue to roil and boil around us. What is the chaos in our lives? How are we grappling with the bills, the tensions in the home or at work, the uncertainty about health or the health of loved ones, the effects of climate or climate change on our loved ones and our places of beloved creation? Chaos is still a vibrant reality around us. In some mystical way, our tradition says, God is able to bring a good creation over the chaos. Our tradition says that inviting Jesus into our boat will help us find the way safely to shore.

Perhaps the presence of the Risen Christ will help us discern what to do about those tensions, those health concerns, climate change, and other burdens we carry. And some scholars hold that this sea side story of Jesus and Yam from John chapter 6 is, in fact, a prelude to the post resurrection account of John 21.⁴ Amidst the night time and turbulence of the sea, a resurrection happens. The risen Christ comes to us in our terror. He climbs into our boat. The story points us to One that can see us through the chaos. Water is chaos, and we are not left alone in it.

Water is Healing: Ezekiel 47.

In Ezekiel 47 we have an immensely compelling story from the Old Testament. In this passage, Ezekiel has a vision of water which is flowing from a newly erected temple. At the time of Ezekiel's vision, the old temple lay in ruins having been demolished by the Babylonians during the sacking of Jerusalem in 587 BCE. To the east of the old temple was a gentle rise to the top of a mountain range and then a steady descent through a barren stretch of rock and caves. At the base of the descent is the dead sea which is so named because the sea supports no life on account of its saltiness. The sea has no outlet; in the evaporation process the water leaves and the salt stays.

The mystical stream of Ezekiel's vision emerges from the temple and trickles its way uphill. From there it flows down through rocky terrain, known as the Arabah, into a stagnant sea. The water of the stream causes fruit bearing trees to grow in sand and rock. The trees have leaves, and like the trees of John's Revelation the leaves are for the healing of the nations (Rev 22:1-2). The waters of the temple stream permit fish to return to the dead sea; and much attention is given to the sheer numbers of fish which are on par with the Mediterranean Sea. Some salt flats remain, in part, because salt is a valuable commodity. The upshot is that the dead and broken creation is restored by God through the healing waters flowing from a new sanctuary.⁵ The message to the exiles in Babylon receiving this

⁴ [When and where did the resurrected Jesus first appear? | The Christian Century](#)

⁵ Millard Lind, *Ezekiel* in the Believers Church Bible Commentary Series (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1996), pp 349-351.

prophetic word from Ezekiel is this: do not fear your situation; wade in the water; head back to Jerusalem; work at rebuilding the temple.

Biblical scholar Katheryn Pfisterer Darr comments on this vision in relation to ecological concerns. She writes: “Would that such a stream might traverse the most diseased regions of our planet, ridding the world of the poison inflicted on creation by our own gross exploitations of natural resources! But we dare not wait until Ezekiel’s final vision is fulfilled to address ecological disasters. If we have thoroughly deforested the land that it is reduced to desert-like terrain, then our responsibility is to replant and tend it. If we have transformed our lakes, rivers, and oceans into “dead seas,” then our responsibility is to clean them up.”⁶

I would suggest Darr’s perspective applies to the larger issues around us and the internal condition many of us carry. Where there is brackish water, internally and in our water sources, we are invited to wade in the water and be part of the healing. Where deserts exist, internally and environmentally, we have been invited to wade in the water and be part of the restoration.

Conclusion: I close with a quote which worship deacon Don Klaassen sent to pastoral staff when pitching a Christian ecology series. Randy Woodley compiled a book of daily reflections on our relationship to our environment. This one is entitled “First Medicine”. Woodley begins with a quote from MLK III.

“Because no matter who we are or where we come from, we’re all entitled to the basic human rights of clean air to breathe, clean water to drink, and healthy land to call home”

In Minnesota, a group of women take their sacred duty to protect the water seriously. They are the Anishinabe Water Protectors. These women, young and old, walk the shores of lakes and rivers, praying through ceremony for the protection of the Earth’s sacred water, which is the Earth’s blood. It seems only right that women, who consist of more water than men and who are more physically reactive to the moon that governs the tides and other waters, would be on the front lines in protecting the waters.

Our traditional North American indigenous people often refer to water as the “the first medicine.” Water is the Earth’s most precious resource, and it is necessary for all life to survive. It is in and around everything. We need it.

Water in Cherokee tradition—and every other Indigenous tradition I know—is considered sacred. What do I mean by *sacred*? I mean every ocean, every lake, every bog and slew and estuary, every creek, every waterfall, every

⁶ Katheryn Pfisterer Darr, “The Book of Ezekiel” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible in Twelve Volumes*, vol VI (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994), p. 1607.

spring, and even the rain—perhaps especially the rain—are considered gifts from Great Mystery.

Many American Indigenous peoples have ceremonies that involve water or that reference water. The ceremonies almost always, if not always, involve deep appreciation for water and the life it brings. Whether it comes from rain, or springs, or rivers, or oceans, there is much gratitude expressed by Native Americans, all across this land, for water.

Perhaps this is true of all peoples, including Western Europeans. I think that many of the European tribes also understood water's sacredness at one point in their history...I also think their descendants have largely forgotten just how important and just how sacred water is".⁷

Let us not forget our stories. Water is the essence of life, and when we offer drink to someone who is thirsty we are doing it to none other than Christ (Mt 25:35). When the waters seem to be overwhelming us, One comes to us and brings us to safety. When the land and our lives need renewal, healing waters flow from God to us and our world. God grant us eyes to see the vision and courage to wade into the waters. Amen.

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⁷ Randy Woodley, *Becoming Rooted: One Hundred Days of Reconnecting with Sacred Earth* (Broadleaf Books, 2022), day 71.