“River of Life”

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Boulevard Presbyterian Church
August 16, 2015

1 As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God.
2 My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God?
3 My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me continually, “Where is your God?”
4 These things I remember, as I pour out my soul:
   how I went with the throng, and led them in procession to the house of God,
   with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving, a multitude keeping festival.
5 Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?
   Hope in God; for I shall again praise God, my help and my God.
   My soul is cast down within me; therefore I remember you
   from the land of Jordan and of Hermon, from Mount Mizar.
7 Deep calls to deep at the thunder of your cataracts;
   all your waves and your billows have gone over me.
8 By day the Lord commands God’s steadfast love,
   and at night God’s song is with me, a prayer to the God of my life.
9  I say to God, my rock, “Why have you forgotten me?
   Why must I walk about mournfully because the enemy oppresses me?”
10 As with a deadly wound in my body,
   my adversaries taunt me, while they say to me continually, “Where is your God?”
11 Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?
   Hope in God; for I shall again praise the Lord, my help and my God.

~ Psalm 42:1-11

1 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away,
and the sea was no more. 2 And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven
from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne
saying, “See, the home of God is among mortals. God will dwell with them; they will be God’s peoples,
and God, God’s very self, will be with them; 4 God will wipe every tear from their eyes.
Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.”
5 And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this, for
these words are trustworthy and true.” 6 Then he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega,
the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.

~ Revelation 21:1-6

22 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 2 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. 3 Nothing accursed will be found there any more.

~ Revelation 22:1-3a
This has been a watery summer! As you know if you’ve been here for even one Sunday, we have been using the study series *Come to the Waters* in our Thursday Bible study classes, and the themes of that study have served as the springboard for our summer sermon series.

We began with Genesis, and the turbulent waters of chaos from which God created the universe.

We remembered the life-giving waters of baptism, and renewed our own baptismal covenant.

We moved into the story of God’s liberation of God’s people: the crossing of the Red Sea from slavery into freedom, the gift of water to a people trudging through the desert, and the crossing of the Jordan from desert journey to promised land.

We talked about the stormy waters in which we encounter Jesus, and about the waters of justice which we are all called to serve.

We plunged into the streams of mercy, which represent both forgiveness and abundance. We wondered with the woman at the well about living water, the gift of the Holy Spirit, and last week we pondered the rivers of living water -- our own spiritual gifts, be they hospitality or teaching or compassion or something else.

And today – today we reach the river of life in the Book of Revelation!

In other words, we have hopped, skipped, and jumped across and through the entire Bible, with a view toward how many, many times water appears as a means by which God engages with us. Water, water everywhere, as we realized at the very beginning. Water at the beginning and at the end, and all the way through.

Now I am wondering today: How many of you have ever read any of the Book of Revelation, the final book of the Bible? How many of you remember ever hearing a sermon on the Book of Revelation?

Revelation is a book we tend to steer clear of.

For one thing, we like to focus on the Jesus of the gospels, on his story and on the stories he tells. When we move out of the gospels, we head for the epistles, the letters of the early church in which we are advised on how to be church ourselves. And when we take leave of the Greek Bible, we like the basic stories of the Hebrew Bible: Adam and Eve, Noah, Moses. David . . . and the prophets, who remind us of our call to social justice. Revelation? We avoid that one!

Revelation seems like a weird and incomprehensible book to us. It’s filled with strange visions and symbols, and who knows what those mean? Seven seals? A woman clothed with the sun? A rider on a white horse? Who understands any of that? It can help to know that the Book of Revelation is basically a book written in code, a book for the persecuted Christians of the first century, a book designed to conceal its meaning from the Roman authorities. But you still have to decode the code – and that’s not easy in a book of apocalyptic literature.
Apocalyptic – now there’s an unhelpful word! What does that mean? It actually means disclosure, or revelation, of something hidden, and in the Book of Revelation, it means a disclosure about end times. Many of us, thanks to movies and books like the Left Behind series, have come to think about the end of the world as a time of terrible violence and destruction, and if that’s the case, of course we don’t want to read about it, code or no code.

In our culture, we have developed another theory, a vision of end times, at odds with this idea of a violent, bloody was with disastrous consequences for almost everyone. We have developed an idea of heaven – heaven as a place to which we get to go after we leave this crisis and sorrow-ridden world, heaven as a really nice place in which we will dwell in some sort of disembodied form – and which yet will be filled with all the things we like, whether those be chocolate or golf courses, as well as with the people we love and yes, God, too – all in some kind of spiritual form.

This world, this creation, will be done for – it will disappear, and we will all go to a heaven filled with flowers and waterfalls and other lovely things.

But in reality – in reality, as we are promised in the Bible, something much grander lies ahead for us.

The reality is a renewed and restored creation, a city filled with the blessings of a garden, and the river of life running through it.

That’s what the Book of Revelation is about!

Let’s listen to what theologian N.T. Wright says about this new creation:

The God in whom we believe is the creator of the world, and . . . will one day put this world to rights. That solid belief is the bedrock of all Christian faith. God is not going to abolish the universe of space, time and matter; [God] is going to renew it, to restore it, to fill it with new joy and purpose and delight, to take from it all that has corrupted it. . . .

The last book of the Bible ends, not with the company of the saved being taken up into heaven, but with the New Jerusalem coming down from heaven to earth, resulting in God’s new creation, new heavens and new earth, in which everything that has been true, lovely, and of good report will be vindicated, enhanced, set free from all pain and sorrow. God, [God’s very self], it says, will wipe away all tears from all eyes.

One of the great difficulties in preaching the gospel in our days is that everyone assumes that the name of the game is, ultimately, to ‘go to heaven when you die’, as though that were the last act in the drama. . . . But -- Heaven is important, but it’s not the end of the world; God will make new heavens and new earth, and give us new bodies to live and work and take delight in [God’s] new creation.

And the ‘good news’ of the Christian gospel is that this new world, this new creation, has already begun: it began when Jesus of Nazareth rose from the dead on Easter morning, having
faced and beaten the double enemy, sin and death, that has corrupted and defaced God’s lovely creation.¹

This, as Bishop Wright tells us, is the “real theme in the scriptures which gives meaning and purpose to all of our life . . . . This theme is present in a thousand passages, celebrated in poetry and song, articulated in rich and dense theology, lived out by the Lord Jesus himself.”²

So what is the new creation, and what has it got to do with us and our water sermons?

To start with, we thirst. Our Psalm reading today reminds us: as the deer thirsts for water, so we thirst for the living God. Others of our readings this summer have reminded us: the Israelites thirsted in the desert. We thirst for justice, and for mercy. The woman at the well discovers that she thirsts for living water. We pour out our longings, as the Psalmist says. Water represents our hopes, our dreams.

And so often, the result of all this pouring out of longing is that we find ourselves in watery storms. The Psalmist says that, too: “Deep calls to deep at the thunder of your cataracts; all your waves and your billows have gone over me.” We are lost in difficult waters; we are submerged by the waves. Think of the disciples out on the sea in their little fishing boat. Think of how we try, and yet we sink, just like Peter.

And then – ahead – promised by God: a new creation! Heaven and earth BOTH renewed and restored. A time in which the sea is no more! (Now, that line has always bothered me. I love the sea. How can its disappearance be a good thing? But we need to remember what we talked about at the beginning of the summer: to the people of the Bible, sea represented chaos. “The mention of the absence of the sea in this new creation is meaningful [because] in the ancient accounts of the creation of the world, the sea represents the most formidable element of creation, associated with the primitive abyss that is opposed to the Creator.”³ So perhaps there will be seas in the new creation – I, for one, hope so – but there will not be chaos.)

Instead of chaos, there will be a holy, glorious city. A city whose gate is never locked. A city – and let’s pay attention here – not a city to which we go “up,” but a city which comes to us. The renewed creation is our creation, not a distant, far off heaven in the sky.

God will dwell with us; God will make God’s home with us.

God will wipe away every tear.

Death will be no more.

All who are thirsty will drink.

God will make all things new.

² Ibid.
And in the midst of this renewed creation? The river of the water of life, bright as crystal. No more scary, churning, chaotic waters of the deep seas, but a bright, shining, flowing, river of peace. A river of joy. A river of justice. A river of healing. A river along which the tree of life grows and produces fruit and healing leaves.

We, today, we live in an in between time – in between the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the complete restoration of his universe. We live in the already-but-not-yet time of Jesus Christ – the reign of God among us, but not yet complete. The work of the kingdom awaiting our participation.

But we live in a time of great, good news. The world will not always be as it is.

People will not always hunger or thirst.
Bullets will not always fly; bombs will not always explode.
Young women will not always be sold into sexual slavery.
Rivers will not always turn orange.
Racism and other –isms will not always hold people captive.
We will not always be separated from our loved ones.

Because – because God is going to renew and restore all, and God is going to dwell with us, and death, in all of its insidious forms, will be no more.

Because all of creation will be healed, and a river will run through it.

Amen.