

The Sunnybrook Pulpit

Rev. Ross Smillie

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God With Us – Not?



Several years ago, I hiked the West Coast Trail, which hugs the western edge of Vancouver Island through the Pacific Rim National Park and the temperate rain forest that absorbs a couple of hundred inches of rain a year. It was a gruelling hike, one of the hardest I have ever done, as the coastline is rugged and we were constantly scaling the walls of steep valleys, climbing over massive fallen logs, slogging through mud and muskeg, and hopping from boulder to boulder.

But one of my most vivid memories came as the sun came out after a hard rain and I watched a cloud rising from a patch of forest. You could actually see the heat from the sun sucking water out of the trees, converting it into water vapour and forming a cloud.

It was the water cycle at work, as visually clear as I have ever seen it.



At some point in my school career, I must have learned about the water cycle, how evaporation from the surface of oceans, lakes and rivers, and respiration from trees produces water vapour that accumulates in the atmosphere until it comes down as rain and feeds the trees, lakes, rivers and oceans. What they didn't tell me, I don't think, is that I am a part of the water cycle, that the same water that evaporates from the ocean, and is respired from the trees and forests, and falls in the Red Deer River Watershed, also flows through me.

This blue-green planet is covered about 70% water, and my body is made up of at least that amount. Every cell in my body is a little sac of water, in which float all the enzymes and lipids and nucleic acids which, combined, make me ME.

And so when the water is polluted and contaminated, then I am polluted and contaminated. The water is part of me, and I am a part of it. The apostle Paul wrote

that when one part of the body suffers, the whole body suffers together. He had this vision of the body of Christ as an integrated whole. In the same way, I am learning, natural systems are an integrated whole, and we are all connected. When the ecosystem suffers, I suffer, we all suffer. When the watershed suffers, I suffer, we all suffer.

There is something else they didn't tell me in Junior High Science class, and that is that the same water that flows through this Red Deer River watershed also flows through the Red Sea and the Jordan River. What happens here flows South and East, through the Red Deer River into the South Saskatchewan, and then into the Hudson's Bay, and the Arctic and Atlantic Ocean, and from there makes its way around the world, through ocean currents and the water cycle, until it touches every place on earth. And every place on earth is connected, in the same way, through water, to this place. The sacred stories of Noah and the flood, of Moses crossing the Reed Sea, of John the Baptist and Jesus at the Jordan, and Paul's shipwreck, those stories are all connected to this place by this life-giving fluid that is around us and within us.ⁱ There are molecules of water flowing through the Red Deer River today that touched Jesus at his baptism, and there are molecules that touched Jesus that day in the Jordan, in every font, at every baptism. Water connects us. Water itself is a sign of God's grace, a sacrament of a God who is both with us and within us.

Water. God with us. Emmanuel. That is one of the great proclamations of Scripture, that God is with us. But is God really with us? Do we proclaim that too glibly? Too easily? Too cheaply?

Many of our sacred stories are about the prophets, and I have been thinking about them recently, of how they were sent to proclaim God's judgment and God's mercy, of how they said, "God is not with you, in this, when you oppress the poor, and humiliate the widows and orphans, and mistreat the refugee and alien." Remember, for example, the words of Ezekiel in today's reading, who starts by promising God's care for the weak, but then promises God's judgment on the strong and wealthy. God is not with us in the way in our frenzy of consumption, we spoil it for everyone:

Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture, but you must tread down with your feet the rest of your pasture? When you drink of clear water, must

you foul the rest with your feet? And must my sheep eat what you have trodden with your feet, and drink what you have fouled with your feet?"
[Ezekiel 34:15-19]

God is not with us in this, that we foul the water, and pollute the streams. God is not with us in this, that we fail to respect this sacred thing that surrounds us and connects us. God is not with us, but against us.

There is another story that it is worth remembering as we think about water, and how it connects God and all God's creation. It is the story of a reluctant prophet, a prophet named Jonah, who was sent to tell the people of Ninevah that God was not with them, that God was against them. Jonah didn't want to go, and sets off in the opposite direction, West across the Mediterranean. But God can be persuasive, and sends a storm and a great fish, who swallows Jonah and three days later manages to vomit him up on the beach near Ninevah.

That, by the way, is a pretty neat trick, since from the Mediterranean to any beach near Ninevah, a fish would have to either jump over a mountain range and a desert, or go around Africa, which is, by my rough estimate, about 15,000 kilometers. This fish did that journey in three days, which means the fish was averaging something over 200 kilometers an hour, which is pretty fast for a fish! The impossible geography of that story would have been obvious to anybody from that region, just as the impossible biology of a man living three days inside a fish is obvious to us, and they would have recognized it as a fictional story, intended to poke fun at us reluctant prophets.

I take hope from that story, partly because I too am a reluctant prophet, I am reluctant to share the word of judgement, because it is in large part a judgement of myself, my lifestyle, my family and my community. But the story of Jonah is the good news that the word of judgment is the word of hope, and the word of love. The message of the prophets is that unless we hear the hard word that God is not with us, we will not change. I am a reluctant prophet, and I suspect most of us are. But this is the calling I sense today. God is calling us to pay attention, to wake up, to affirm the sacredness of water, to be shepherds and stewards of, and advocates for, this precious, but vulnerable thing. It is us and we are it, and when it suffers, we all suffer.

¹ According to biblical scholar Barbara Rossing: “Our task for River Sunday is to help people find and follow God's river of life in their lives.” She summarizes the importance of rivers in biblical geography:

Rivers play pivotal roles in biblical geography. God encounters people at river crossings, such as the Jabbok River where Jacob wrestled with God, or the Jordan River where the Israelites crossed over on stones. River reeds protected the infant Moses, whose name means "I drew him out of the water" (Exod. 2:3, 10). Rivers are locations for healing; for example, cleansing Namaan the Syrian from his leprosy (2 Kgs. 5:12). "There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God," the psalmist sings (Ps. 46:4). The biblical river of life, first mentioned in Genesis, flows east from Eden (Gen. 2:10). The prophet Ezekiel envisions a wondrous river flowing out from the new temple-ankle deep, knee deep, then [too deep to cross – a great river] bringing life to all it touches. Stagnant water becomes fresh, providing habitat for fish, birds, and people, and watering the fruit trees on each side of the river (Ezekiel 47).

In the New Testament, the river of life flows from the heart of Jesus in the Gospel of John, becoming for anyone who thirsts a spring of water gushing up into eternal life (John 7:37-38). Baptismal life centers around rivers, such as the place of prayer beside the river where Lydia and her community were baptized in Philippi (Acts 16). In Revelation, the river of the water of life flows out from the throne of God and the Lamb, right through the middle of the city of God. The invitation is addressed to everyone who thirsts: "Come, take the water of life without cost" (Rev. 22:17; my trans.).

Rossing, “River Sunday,” in Norman C. Habel. *The Season of Creation: A Preaching Commentary* (Kindle Location 1475). Kindle Edition.