

I speak to you in the name of our Creator, the Risen Christ and the Holy Spirit, the one who heals, restores, and transforms us. Amen.

I really love the reading from Ezekiel. By now you will have learned that I love water in Scripture. And this reading from Ezekiel is amazing. It really helps if you understand the landscape and geography of the text. So let me hopefully create an image in your mind.

The general area of Jerusalem and Judea is a semi-dry to very dry climate. Around Jerusalem the average summertime temperature is around 29-35 degrees and at the Dead Sea, the “sea of stagnant waters,” it’s often over 40 degrees! The Judean hills and all the way to the Dead Sea, about 30 km away, are desert-like conditions. This is the wilderness the Bible talks about. This isn’t like the sand dunes of Saudi Arabia. It’s more like rocky, dry, parched soil. Very little grows, just some small shrubs unless there is an oasis. The Judean hills used to be heavily forested and, while there are some isolated areas which still are, they are almost exclusively new forests planted in the last 100 years. The trees were harvested for buildings and cooking and heating with no thought to the future. When an area is deforested, the soil erodes and becomes hydrophobic, meaning it becomes compacted and does not absorb water well. The undergrowth and crops which used to grow no longer can.

The Dead Sea is called that because it is so full of salt and other minerals that nothing can live in it beyond some microorganisms and algae. Over the past century, diversion of water from the Jordan River for agriculture to the north, combined with less rain in the Galilee and around Jerusalem over the winter months, means that the level of the Dead Sea is dropping by more than one metre

every year and it's only half the length it was just a century ago. The Dead Sea is the lowest place on earth at 430 m, or 1,412 ft, below sea level.

The Temple in Jerusalem is on a hill, by Canadian standards, and a mountain by Middle Eastern standards, at 785 m, or 2,575 ft, above sea level. That makes a difference of 1215 m, or just under 4000 ft, between Jerusalem and the Dead Sea! On the east side of the Temple Mount is a dramatic drop-off down to the Kidron Valley. The water would have flowed down here like a waterfall. Although there are many hills between Jerusalem and the Dead Sea, there are many valleys where the water could flow down that 1200m ft over 30 km. Can you picture that?

Ezekiel is given a vision of some point in the future. He tells us that many trees were growing along the banks of the river as it flowed down to the Dead Sea. The river is full of life with many kinds of fish. Once this water enters the Dead Sea, the salt water becomes fresh and full of life! 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 Mediterranean Sea. Fruit trees will grow on both sides of the river and produce fresh fruit and healing leaves every month. Not just one season, but continually! The image of this abundance is so incredible, it's extremely hard to envision, especially if you have been there and have seen the barren desert conditions. Ezekiel is using an ecological impossibility to proclaim a theological truth. The Hebrew verb *rapha* means to heal, restore or make whole. God does not bypass the place of death. God enters it. The river flows into the place where life seems impossible, and there, life begins again.

We all know something about places that seem barren. We know what it is like to experience loss, grief, disappointment or failure. We know that there are

relationships and situations in which we may wonder whether anything can grow again. Ezekiel's vision does not suggest that these places don't exist. He is speaking to people who have experienced enormous loss. Rather, he gives them an image of God's ability to bring life and healing precisely where life appears to have ended.

One thing which struck me this week is the line: "But its swamps and marshes will not become fresh; they are to be left for salt." Isn't it wonderful that God preserves the swamps and marshes with salt water? It would be another kind of ecological disaster if God wiped out all the salt in the area. Salt is needed, as are swamps and marshes for nesting birds which use this corridor to migrate. In God's creation **all** is in balance. Ezekiel's vision is not about turning all of creation into one thing. The vision is about life flourishing in the particular environments in which God has placed it. Salt water has a purpose. Fresh water has a purpose. Marshes have a purpose. The oceans themselves are salt water and yet are full of life and are essential to the health of the planet. The Season of Creation theme this year, "Living Water," is a biblical vision of hope and ecological healing in which water renews land, water, biodiversity and our human responsibility towards the whole creation.

It's important to understand the context in which Ezekiel receives this vision. The Book of Ezekiel is set during the Babylonian exile, after the fall of Jerusalem at the beginning of the sixth century BCE. Ezekiel himself is among those who have been exiled. Jerusalem has been destroyed, and the Temple of Solomon has been razed to the ground. Many of the people of Israel have been carried away from their homeland. They are living with the loss of their land, their city, their Temple and the life they had known.

Ezekiel's earlier message is largely concerned with judgment. He interprets the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in the context of Israel's idolatry and injustice. But his message does not end with judgment. God has not abandoned God's people. God remains present even in exile, and Ezekiel begins to proclaim restoration. Significantly, the Temple is at the centre of this vision of renewal. Although the Temple has been destroyed, it is transformed in Ezekiel's vision into a source of blessing, healing and God's presence throughout creation.

And that helps us understand what is happening in chapter 47. Ezekiel has been describing a new Temple from chapter 40 onwards. It is an impressive structure, but it is empty and lifeless. It is only in chapter 47 that life finally appears. From beneath the threshold of the Temple flows water. At first, it is only a trickle, but as Ezekiel follows the water it becomes deeper and deeper until it is a river that he cannot cross.

The water flows out from the Temple. In Israel's tradition the Temple was the place of sacrifice and worship, but here the water of life flows out from it into the wider world. Ezekiel's vision shifts the emphasis from blood flowing on the altar to water flowing outward from the Temple threshold. Divine presence is expressed through generative abundance. The purpose of worship is not simply what happens inside the Temple, or for us, what happens inside the church. What happens here is meant to flow outward into the world. The relationship between God and God's people has consequences for the land, the water, the animals and the whole community of creation. Care for creation follows naturally from a restored relationship with God.

I love Ezekiel's image of going deeper. First the water is ankle-deep, then knee-deep, then waist-deep, and finally it is too deep to cross. The Season of Creation Guide connects this progressive immersion with baptismal imagery. Early Christian baptismal fonts were often entered by steps, and Ezekiel's movement into deeper water can be understood as an image of transformation. We witnessed Tabitha and Samuel enter the ocean on August 30th to be immersed in living water. What a joyous occasion that was! That is a particularly rich image for Christians because baptism is not simply something that happened to us once. It is the **beginning** of a life of transformation. Earlier in Ezekiel, God promises, "I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean," and promises a new heart and a new spirit. Water in Ezekiel is therefore connected with cleansing, renewal and the restoration of relationship with God. This connects to the wider biblical imagery of water as healing and renewal and with Jesus' promise of rivers of living water flowing from within us. It also connects to our lives. At first the water is manageable. We can stand in it. We know where our feet are. But eventually the water is deeper than we are tall, and we have to trust it to carry us. Faith can be like that. There are times when we have a great deal of certainty and a sense that we know what we are doing. There are other times when life takes us into deeper water and we discover that we can't control everything. Perhaps part of spiritual maturity is learning to trust God's grace when we can no longer touch the bottom.

And this brings us to the other readings today, because Matthew's parable of the labourers in the vineyard is also concerned with our difficulty in receiving God's abundance. I confess for most of my life I had a real struggle with this parable. The workers who have been there all day are unhappy when those who have worked only a short time receive the same payment. We can understand their

reaction. It just doesn't seem right! They have worked longer, and they think they have earned more. But the landowner says, "Are you envious because I am generous?" We think in terms of merit. But Jesus is inviting his hearers to think differently about God's generosity. The kingdom of God is not governed by the same calculations we use when we decide what someone deserves. The parable is not really about employment practices. It is about the unsettling generosity of God.

That fits beautifully with Ezekiel's vision. The trees produce fruit every month. The fish are abundant. The water brings life wherever it goes. The point is not scarcity but abundance. God's grace is not a limited resource that becomes smaller when somebody else receives it. We live in a world where we are accustomed to thinking in terms of scarcity and competition. We talk about resources as though they exist simply for human use. We think of water as something we purchase, forests as timber, land as property, fish as a commodity and the natural world as something separate from ourselves.

Ezekiel gives us a different vision. Creation is an interconnected community of life. Water sustains trees, trees sustain animals and people, wetlands support birds, rivers support fish, and all of these things are part of the world God has made. Our relationship with the non-human creation is one of sacred partnership and mutual custodianship rather than domination.

That doesn't mean we can simply leave everything to God. Ezekiel's vision is a vision of God's healing, but we are invited to participate in that healing. This is where Paul's letter to the Philippians is helpful. Paul speaks about living our lives in a manner worthy of the gospel and about standing together and striving together. Christian faith is not simply an inward experience between ourselves and God. It is

a way of life that is lived together. What we receive from God changes how we live with one another and how we live within God's creation.

The image of the river gives us a way of thinking about that. The water that flows from the Temple does not remain at the source. It moves outward, becoming a source of life for everything it encounters. In the same way, the grace we receive is meant to flow outward through our lives. The river begins as a tiny stream flowing from the Temple, and it becomes deeper and deeper as it moves outward. It is an image of God's grace, but it is also an image of what happens when grace is allowed to move through us.

The vision Ezekiel gives us is ultimately a vision of God's abundance and healing. It begins in a place of exile and destruction, but it leads toward a world in which the waters are alive, the trees are fruitful, and the leaves bring healing.

So come on in, the water's fine. Trust the living water of God to heal your wounds and give you abundant life! Allow that living water to flow through our lives for the healing of all God's creation.

Amen.