

A Spiritual Spring for the Week

Rev. Dr. John V. Callahan Jr.

Sermon Text: Ezekiel 47:1-12

Sermon Title: "Water Always Wins" (Baptism of Our Lord)

Morrow Presbyterian Church, Morrow, GA

January 8, 2012

There are scientists throughout the world who are concerned with water levels of our oceans. Scientists have been measuring the temperature of the planet, and they have noticed that ice in the north and south poles are turning into water, which is raising the level of the oceans, which is causing coastal areas to flood many more times than normal. The water doesn't go anywhere but up, flooding the land on which people live. Some of us may have seen a picture of New York City overtaken with water, if all the ice melts. You would have to reach the tenth floor of most skyscrapers just to escape the floodwaters.

As we read Ezekiel 47, we might think of the arguments for or against global warming. Ezekiel talks about waters rising, so we might think (incorrectly) that he is warning us about taking care of our planet. Ezekiel is not talking about taking care of the planet as much as he speaks about taking care of people. People who have been lost. People who have been far away from God for too long. Ezekiel speaks of

water as though he speaks of radical change. Spiritual transformation that completely turns people around.

The prophet says that he is brought to the door of the temple. Realize that Ezekiel is nowhere near the temple, and nowhere in his home country of Israel. He was deported to Babylon like so many fellow Jews. He lives far away from his familiar homeland, familiar customs, and familiar lifestyle. He wishes he could go back home, but that isn't going to happen anytime soon. However, God has been able to transport him to his homeland, and specifically to the temple of God. He might have been literally taken to the temple, or just taken there through dreams and visions; but the situation that Ezekiel is experiencing is very real. He is truly standing right there at the door of the temple.

There he sees water flowing toward the east from the entrance of the temple. Is the water real or not? Who is to say? We do know that the water originates from the temple of God. Or, more specifically, the water originates with God. It was believed that God's holy presence resides in the temple; the temple itself is the symbol of God being with us. All blessings are poured out from him, not from a building. So the water is flowing from God himself.

Something else is happening. A man comes forth

to measure the height of the river. At first it is a tiny stream, just barely covering Ezekiel's ankles. The man measures it again, and now the water is covering Ezekiel's knees. Once more, and the water is waist-high. Once more, and the river is a raging torrent that nobody can cross easily. All of this is coming from God himself. Are we talking about global warming and oceans rising? No. We are talking about God rising. We are talking about God making his presence known. We are talking about God moving, and disrupting events and situations, and nobody is able to stop it. Just accept it, or get swept away by the floodwaters.

When we think of floodwaters, we tend to think of destruction. We think of bad things happening to people's homes and towns. Almost a year ago, Japan experienced one of the worst earthquakes and tsunamis in its history. We watched the ocean rising and overtaking cars and telephone poles and buildings and people, and all we could feel was fear and gloom.

When it comes to the floodwaters of God, however, we want them to rise. We want God to move like a sweeping tidal wave. When God moves like a raging flood, there is no destruction but construction.

Ezekiel sees trees growing strong and vibrant along the river. Things are growing next to this river surging

from God's temple. When we see trees, we think of life. We think of all the little squirrels running over the branches, and birds making nests among the green leaves. We watch the trees swaying to and fro with the wind, as though they are lifting arms up to God and worshipping him. We see a forest full of trees, and we marvel at the sight. A field barren without one tree doesn't inspire us much. My family and I live next to a neighborhood in McDonough, and we call it "the boring neighborhood." It's boring, because there are hardly any trees. Whoever built those houses cut down every tree and shrub, and when they finished planting houses they failed to replant trees. They left it up to the neighbors to install their own trees, but nobody has gotten around to doing that. The neighborhood is boring, because practically none of the front yards have trees. Developers who build houses around the trees make more interesting neighborhoods. Ezekiel the prophet sees life growing around the river, starting with the trees.

He is also told that there are fish in the water. This is another indication that the water is fresh, alive. Fish are as attractive as trees, because fish bring people to the river. People will eat the fish, and help to cultivate them so the supply doesn't run out. The

people will build towns next to the river, and fellowship will grow among the people, and they will work together to catch fish and harvest crops and build tables and chairs. If there are no fish in the water, why go to it? Why plant a community next to the river that cannot yield anything beneficial? The river is nothing more than an obstacle one has to cross to get to better land. Ezekiel sees trees and fish, and a river that is swelling and flowing nonstop toward the sea.

To Ezekiel this vision of God's temple and the river that flows from it is not an illusion, a fake image, a callous trick pulled on him. To Ezekiel the river is very real. The temple is very real. God's presence among his people is very real.

God tells Ezekiel (as he is telling all the exiles in Babylon) that better times are coming. Ezekiel and the people will not stay stuck in their exile, far away from God. They will not end their days wondering if God can do anything wonderful for them. God is on the move. God is moving through this world, making things new again. God is moving, finding those who have been lost, restoring those who have been falling apart. God is moving like a river that cannot be stopped by any hill or valley, by any obstacle living or

non-living. God is on the move, and he means to heal and restore and sanctify not only his creation but us as well.

When we enter a new year, we want everything to be new and fresh. We want the New Year to be like a clean slate with none of the bad written on it that we had to endure in the last year. We want to be able to start again, and hope this New Year doesn't turn into another bad old year.

Too many people think it is the New Year that will magically make things better. When 12:00 strikes on the clock, they expect the calendar or time itself to make things fresh, as though a magician just waved his wand and made it all happen. As we find our way through these infant days of the New Year, maybe we have already noticed that those things we went through last year have followed us into this year. We still have the same concerns. We still have the same relational problems in the home or school or office that hasn't changed. That job hasn't come yet. The money is still tight. The political and social problems of a month ago linger on.

The calendar or time doesn't make things fresh. God does. No magic word or New Year's resolution is going to change anything for us. God will.

God is on the move, like a tidal wave, like a raging river. He is moving toward us, and God means to move through us. We want God to move like an immovable waves, because when he does the doubts and fears of last year and even this New Year lose their strength. They may even wash away entirely, as we wade in the waters of God's blessings. We may become so satisfied with the life that God has given us, that we may praise him even when bad things happen. We may trust so thoroughly in the love of God that when bad things happen we know we can get through them. God's rising and moving through our lives convinces us that all things will work out for the good.

Have we ever felt the waters of God flow over us and even through us? Something terrible happens, and we panic. We sink so far down in the dumps that we might as well make our homes in the basement. We might even cry, or shout, or become quiet. And then we remember the waters of God. We remember the swelling river that brings life to anyone who approaches it. We feel terrible, but we pray. Praying calms us down. The Holy Spirit touches our hearts and minds in ways that we haven't dreamed up for ourselves. We feel more content, as though things will work out. We feel more strength, as though we are young trees, and the waters of God have hit our roots,

and the healing waters make us tall and strong.

God is on the move. Ezekiel needed to hear this, although he was a prophet of God. The people living in exile with Ezekiel needed to hear it, although they were God's chosen people.

God is moving. His healing waters are flowing, wider and higher. And the waters of God empty into the sea. Did we catch that? Ezekiel sees the waters flowing from the temple of God and going right into the sea. The Dead Sea, in fact. Let me tell you something about that Sea: it is 462 square miles of salty, dead water. Nothing can live in it, because the saline levels are so high and toxic. The Dead Sea resides 1388 feet below sea level, which is the lowest level anyone can visit on earth. If God can move his healing waters into something so hauntingly dead and so abysmally low, then we are never beyond God's reach. We are never be so far gone that God cannot move toward us and rescue us.

We who were once lost are found. We who were once wounded are healed. We who seemed to be far from God are very close to God. Let the waters flow.

The Assurance of Pardon:

Hear the good news! Christ Jesus lives and reigns in heaven above, holding the keys to death and death's dominion. Christ reigns in power with God the Father as Lord of all creation, and he tells us to not be afraid. God our Father forgives all sin, large and small, secret and revealed. We are saved from death, and life is our reward. Believe this good news. You and I are forgiven through Christ our Lord. Amen.



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