

A Life-Giving River
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Hebrew Scripture Reading—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 toward 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 around on the outside to the outer gate that faces toward the east; and the water was coming out on the south side. Going on eastward 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 the one side and on the other. He said to me, "This water flows toward 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."

Those of you who have been to Wisconsin might be familiar with the Wisconsin Dells, a popular tourist destination. If you have been there, you are undoubtedly familiar with Noah's Ark, the world's largest water park. I have been doing some research on this water park because I thought it might give us some ideas for our capital campaign. Who knows, we might want to turn our roof into a mega-slide, and what better way to attract young families. For those of you who have never been to Noah's Ark, let me share with

you some of its history and features. On the Noah's Ark website, I learned a little "Ark-o-logy 101." For example, I learned that Noah's Ark started out in 1979 with bumper boats. It's amazing the things I seem to miss when reading the Bible. Noah's Ark has come a long ways since those first bumper boats. Today, it "boasts America's Longest Watercoaster," the "Black Anaconda." Among the park's many rides are the Big Kahuna, Congo Bongo, Flash Flood, Kowabunga, Jungle Rapids, and the Sting Ray.ⁱ I am sure there are lots of theological lessons imparted through these rides.

Maybe we need to start trying to convince our treasurer Jim Ferner to invest part of our budget in bumper boats. In the meantime, I want to propose to you another idea: that we begin to educate ourselves as a church about what is becoming one of the most significant issues of our time and that is water. Until recently, I was largely un-educated about this issue, so I can understand if some of you are a little skeptical about this. Nevertheless, I have come to realize that water is truly relevant to our faith today, and it has been relevant for a long time, even before bumper boats.

As I began doing research about water this past week, I came across an article written in 2005 that really jolted my senses. The article was written by a former *LA Times* reporter named Jon Markman. The headline for the article read "Invest in the Coming Global Water Shortage."ⁱⁱ In essence, the article foresaw the potential for huge profits in a crisis that could well mean the misery of millions. Despite the moral gratuity of this idea, the article did paint an accurate picture of the crisis. It told of farmers in India who some decades ago could haul up buckets of water from "a few feet below the surface," but who now "pump it from 1,000 feet below." As India's population has boomed, water has become harder to reach. Underground sources of water are being

“sucked dry.” “Once-fertile fields,” are slowly turning into sand. At the time of the article, there were 21 million water holes in India that had been drilled with oil field technology.

In India, Markman saw a glimpse of what was becoming a global problem deeply affecting the United States as well. A calamity with multiple contributing factors was brewing. On the one hand, the world’s population had doubled since 1950, while, on the other hand, water use had tripled. The amount of water in the world stayed the same during this period. Despite the abundance of water on the earth, less than 2% of that water is fresh. The rest is salt water. As if this does not make matters hard enough, the fresh water that exists is “bombarded by industrial pollution, disease and cyclical shifts in rain patterns.” To some, this might be an enormous crisis, but for Markman it was a giant opportunity. With eager anticipation, he cited water activist Maude Barlow who declared that water has become our “blue gold.” More and more, fresh water would be surrounded and commodified. It would be “divvied up” in a mad grab like a new oil. Markman further cited a report that predicted the rise of “a cartel of water-exporting nations” similar to OPEC.

Well, less than five years later, the mad grab has more than started. It has become full blown. As one recent documentary tells us, “Water is now a \$400 billion global industry, the third largest behind electricity and oil.”ⁱⁱⁱ It involves everything from extracting new water to cleaning dirty water so it can be sold back to us. The control of water by corporations may seem fine to many. Why shouldn’t we pay for water like everything else? If corporations are able to do the job, why shouldn’t they do it? Even if one is a fierce advocate of markets, there are some other questions worth considering. If

oxygen became a scarce commodity, would we want the market determining who should get it and who shouldn't? Would it seem fair that only those who have money to buy oxygen should get to buy it and live while everyone else dies?

Instead of viewing water as a commodity to be bought and sold, there is another way to view water and our relationship to it. The water activist Markman cited Maude Barlow states it succinctly, "Life requires access to clean water; to deny the right to water is to deny the right to life."^{iv} Therefore, access to water should be a right. To ensure this right, water cannot be controlled by the few. It has to be controlled by the many as part of our collective commons. In other words, as a public trust. Barlow spells out in some detail what is needed in terms of water conservation, water justice, and water democracy. Interestingly, her most recent book is entitled "Blue Covenant." What Barlow has in mind is a United Nations covenant pertaining to water, but her title made me think of another covenant: the covenant of our Judeo-Christian heritage.

In our scripture for today, Ezekiel is having another one of those visions that makes us wonder whether he had been smoking the wrong pipe. Some background, however, makes it more understandable. Ezekiel was living in exile after the Temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed. As would have been natural in his time, Ezekiel interpreted this event in terms of Israel's failure to keep its covenant with God. In our reading for today, however, Ezekiel is conveying a vision of what will happen when the covenant is fully restored and the Temple is re-built. It is in this context that Ezekiel paints a picture of a life-giving river coming forth from the new Temple. In a society that was dependent for survival on local agriculture in a dry climate, rivers were literally the

central life-giving force. What better way to imagine a future of abundance and life for the people of Israel than to imagine a life-giving river flowing from the Temple?

All of this sounded distant and foreign to me this past week until I read what a local water conservationist named Holly Van Fleet had to say about the Columbia River. About the river, she wrote, “Without it, we would not be here, cities [would be] un-built, communities un-developed upon its shores, art un-realized, fine and fresh wines un-tasted, northwest foods and fare un-created, recreation un-explored, and how the heck would Lewis and Clark have traveled and experienced that sense of awe and purpose.”^v

This past week I happened to take a day off to go down the Columbia River and enjoy its beauty. In the midst of my relaxation, I thought of how my own relationship to nature has evolved over the past two years. This past week marked the two-year anniversary of when I first met Eunita. It was not long after we met that I re-discovered my love of the outdoors. Not since I was a kid had I really spent much time enjoying nature. I had spent all of my young adult years to that point living a life that was fairly alienated from it. Nature seemed like a waste of time. It didn't help me accomplish my goals as a student, although recent studies about the benefits of nature might disagree with that. Nevertheless, not long after I met Eunita, we began to go hiking on a regular basis. Since that point, I would say that my relationship with nature has been something like that of a tourist. I would go on hikes to see the sights.

This past weekend, however, I began to consciously think of having a different relationship with nature. I thought to myself, “What if I viewed nature as sacred? What if I viewed the Columbia River as a profoundly sacred part of my world?” For awhile, I thought I was on track to develop beliefs similar to the kind many of us might associate

with American Indians who hold certain lands to be sacred, but then I remembered the scripture I had selected for this week, and I thought, “Brooks, how did you miss it? Your own faith talks about rivers being about as sacred as anything can be.” And, that’s when I realized I needed to reclaim part of my own faith heritage.

So it is that I stand before you this morning as a recent convert to thinking of the local nature around us as a vitally important part of our sacred universe. I am not sure where this new understanding will take me, but it is causing me to ask certain questions of myself: If water is a vital part of my sacred universe, what sense of responsibility does that provoke or inspire within me to care for water, to care about whether it is clean or polluted? What does that compel me to do when I learn of all the contaminants that are in the Columbia River and how that affects everything from mayflies to us?” This morning I invite you to think of the Columbia River, Lake Vancouver, or some other local body of water as part of your sacred universe and to consider what that might stir you to think and do. Who knows perhaps water, minus the bumper boats, might still become an important part of our church’s vision for the future. Amen.

ⁱ Noah’s Ark, <http://www.noahsarkwaterpark.com/>

ⁱⁱ Jon D. Markman, “Invest in the Coming Global Water Shortage,” *MSN Money*, (January 12, 2005), <http://moneycentral.msn.com/content/P102152.asp>

ⁱⁱⁱ Amy Goodman, “Blue Covenant: Maude Barlow on the Global Movement for Water Justice,” *Democracy Now!*, (February 27, 2009),

http://www.democracynow.org/2008/2/27/maude_barlow_on_the_global_movement

^{iv} Maude Barlow, *Blue Covenant: The Global Water Crisis and the Coming Battle for the Right to Water*, (New York: New Press, 2007), xii.

^v Holly Van Fleet, “Columbia River Journals,” *Lower Columbia River Estuary*, (Spring 2005) http://www.lcrep.org/river_journals.htm#vanfleet