

Season of Creation, Finding God in the World: Water
“Water”, Dr. David Cozad
Genesis 1:1-2, 6-7, 9-10; Genesis 7:11-12, 17-19;
Psalm 104:10-16; Revelation 22:1-2
Sunday, May 5, 2019
Blacksburg Presbyterian Church

Around this time each year, in the African nation of Botswana, a *slow-motion miracle* is in process.

-a miracle, because it transforms conditions at the edge of the Kalahari Desert from life-threatening to life-sustaining;
-slow motion, because this miracle begins two nations away, and takes over six months to travel some 500 miles before it manifests in that part of Botswana in *July*.

And when it finally happens, it is cause for great celebration.

What we’re talking about here is the annual flooding of the Okavango River and its delta. And strange as it sounds to our ears in *our* part of the world, the flooding of the Okavango is a *good* thing.

Only, this is not your ordinary flood.

That part of southern Africa is so flat that it takes the flood waters *four* of those six months just to travel the final 150 miles.

(By the way, don’t even try to calculate that in miles per hour; spoiler alert--it comes out to about 265 *feet* per hour—... or about 30 minutes to ooze the length of this sanctuary).

Yet the creeping pace of relief does not take away from the joy that it brings to all manner of living creatures:

human grownups who rely on it to grow their crops and fish its waters, and children dancing with delight in the thin layer of water as it advances foot-by-foot; bull elephants lumbering toward the sweet smell of the water, waving their trunks in the air; frogs and catfish who, during the dry season, have burrowed into the mud and hibernated, but now spring to life.

It is an exercise of trust, in that people in the delta have been relying on this annual ebb and flow for at least 100,000 years (the animals and vegetation, much longer).

Yet this annual miracle is not *entirely* reliable:

some years the flood waters arrive a few days too late to save the hibernating frogs and catfish;

over decades and centuries, the exact flow of the flood waters has occasionally shifted eastward or westward somewhat, so that human migrations become necessary;

and in the channels where the water collects deeply enough, it brings with it crocodiles and hippos who can wreak enormous destruction on human life.

So in fact, it's more of a *mixed blessing*—the water giveth, and the water taketh away.

The Bayei tribe, who live along the Okavango's delta, have a saying: "I am the river. My surface gives you life. Below is death."

Now, this little vignette has been drawn from an article published in *National Geographic* about 15 years ago (December 2004, pp. 46-67). It has stuck with me, because it captures so much of our experience of water:

This almost magical liquid that brings sustenance and beauty, but also carries the potential for death and destruction
either by there being too little or too much of it;
and by our tragic misuse of it.

In today's scripture readings, you heard the first voice (from the balcony) recount the creation of the heavens and earth in Genesis 1. Although we tend to hear the parts about the separation of land and sea, earth and heavens, we often miss the part that portrays the whole of creation as emerging out of a watery chaos, or *void*.

It reminds us that primates such as you and me are the result of earlier life forms, who crawled ashore out of that primordial soup, and began to develop lungs
[--even as we now emerge from the waters of the womb and draw our first breaths].

And in elementary school, we learn that the Earth's surface is 2/3 to 3/4 water, that water is the necessary precondition for life as we know it,
and that so far our planet is the only chunk of matter in the known universe which appears to possess that characteristic.

(All of which causes the noted science fiction writer Arthur C. Clarke to observe that we have misnamed our planet by calling it *Earth*, when it clearly should be called [Planet] *Ocean*). (Diana Butler Bass, *Grounded*, New York, 2015. p. 70).

But after the voice from the balcony recounted water's role in Creation, there came a voice from the lectern, reading from Genesis 7. Already, just seven chapters in, water becomes the great destructive
—or should we say, *purging*—

force that Noah and his family have to ride out in order to preserve human and animal life.

You *may* know that this account is the biblical slant on a story that we share, in remarkable similarity of detail, with numerous other peoples and religions of the ancient near East:

The story of a great flood which interrupted and threatened human life on this planet.

But such threat and destruction is not the final word.

From one side aisle of the sanctuary comes a voice reading parts of Psalm 104, celebrating the creative and beneficial effects of H₂O for plants and animals and human agriculture.

And then from the opposite side aisle a voice reads from Revelation 22, the last chapter of the Bible.

Behold, through the middle of the heavenly city, flows the river of life, nourishing the tree of life for the healing of the nations.

And so it is that even as we cannot live without water, we continue to abuse it and take it for granted;
even as we fear what water can do, we are drawn by its allure.

How else to explain my home state of Florida, where the mere presence of *ocean and beaches*

has turned that relatively inhospitable sliver of land into the third most populous state in the union;

where despite being surrounded on three sides by water, the entire southern half of the state is populated far beyond the ability of water resources to sustain it, while simultaneously being threatened by rising sea levels because of human-induced climate change.

Diana Butler Bass's wonderful book, entitled *Grounded*, is the inspiration for this three-part Seasons of Creation series. In it, she reflects at length on this ambiguous, complicated relationship with nature.

In a chapter entitled "Water," Bass describes how daily walks and journaling along the Potomac River transported her into a higher spiritual realm and lifted her out of a severe case of writer's block.

She had lived within a mile of it for much of her life, but had never taken the time to attend to its wonders. Yet even as her daily visits became the most life-giving aspect of her existence, these visits were interrupted periodically by destructive algae blooms, due to a multitude of fertilizer and pesticide runoffs that had washed downstream from who knows where.

And one of her most compelling vignettes involves the disappearance of Malaysian Airlines Flight 370 over the Indian Ocean a few years back. For weeks the world held its collective breath while authorities used the latest technological devices to search both the ocean's floor and its surface, looking for any indications of what had happened. Finally word came that satellites had spotted a large field of what might be *wreckage* in the southern part of the Indian Ocean. However, when reconnaissance planes drew near, what they discovered was a huge floating island of *garbage*—plastic bottles, disposable baby diapers, etc., etc.--having drifted on the ocean's currents from God only knows where, and coalesced into a monument to our abuse of the waters of Creation.

Yet even in the midst of such folly, the author remains spiritually spellbound by water. She lifts up the story from John's gospel,

in which Jesus encounters the woman at the well.
You know this story ...

Bass suggests that Jesus doesn't just offer the woman *living water*, but also implies that he indeed *is* that living water.

And so we come, in a few minutes, to that sacred meal in which we are spiritually fed by the bread of life and the cup of salvation

--both of which are only possible through the gift of water.

Remember, then, as we partake, the One who offers his body and his blood, and sustains us with living water that does not threaten or destroy, but only nourishes and delights.

Will you pray with me:

O You who *are* the living water, flow through our lives this day. Amen.