Losing Paradise: What Happened to the Water of Life?

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Genesis 1:6-8; Revelation 22:1-5

One morning 45 years ago I climbed to the top of a mountain ridge in the Peruvian Andes and found myself standing next to the ruins of an ancient Inca temple. I looked down into the valley below and saw a river glinting in the sun. It was the Urubamba, and this was the Willka Qhichwa, the Sacred Valley of the Quechua-speaking indigenous peoples of Peru.

I was peering into Pachamama, the mother of the earth, who, together with Viracocha, the creator god, had given birth to the world as the Quechua knew it. Humankind originated on a river high in the Andes.

One afternoon last fall I stood with a group of pastors under the trees on the flats below Fort Snelling, next to the Mississippi River. We listened as Native American pastor Jim Bear Jacobs told the story of the origins of the Dakota people. Humanity began there, at Bdote, the place “where two rivers come together,” the Mississippi and the Minnesota. For the Dakota people that place
is the center of the world, the place where life began. Humankind originated on a river where the prairie meets the forest.

The world begins like that in many traditions: *at the water*. That’s our story, as well. At the start of the Genesis narrative the world is overflowing with watery chaos. Water is so abundant when the creation story opens, that on Day Two the Creator spends the entire day simply dealing with the water – all that water. The Creator decides to separate the waters above the earth from the waters on the earth.

Later in the story, out of the primordial Garden four rivers flow to the ends of the earth, bringing life. In *our* story, as in so many others, the human family first emerges at the river. And later in the narrative, the Great Flood will prefigure the water-based disasters that would come one day to threaten human life on the planet.

Water is the God-given source of life, yet we take it for granted. We do notice the central role water plays only when it’s missing. Take Australia, for instance. They’ve been going through what they call *the big dry*, the worst drought ever in that nation, exacerbated by heat brought on by climate change. The extreme heat speeds up evaporation, which makes things drier, which feeds the heat – a cycle that has continued unabated for years. *The big dry.*
In recent months they have experienced the worst wildfires the world has ever seen. The megafires produced a flume of smoke larger than the continental U.S. They burned more than 16 million acres; by comparison, the recent fires in California and the Amazon burned about 4 million acres total. Australia’s fires were four times bigger.

Wherever it is dry, it will get drier. Today’s fire season in the American West is 78 days longer than it was in 1970, and in some areas, it basically never ends. Two years ago, in Cape Town it was so dry that water was rationed at 23 gallons a day per person, one-quarter of what you and I typically use every day: 80-100 gallons of water.

With climate-related phenomena we used to speak of “historical averages” or 100-year events. Not anymore. Water-related disasters are the new normal, as climate change continues to wreak havoc on natural systems of ecological balance.

Wherever it is wet it will only get wetter. Hurricanes are some of the most destructive weather events; with climate change warming the waters over which they form, the storms have intensified. In 2017 Hurricane Harvey dumped 4.5 feet of rain on Houston in four days – 127 billion tons of water. The city actually sank by a couple centimeters.

It’s even worse in other parts of the world, especially where populations are less equipped to respond and recover. Fully 80% of the nation of Bangladesh, with its population of 160,000,000, is
a flood plain that is covered with water periodically. With rising sea levels, as much as one-third of the country – one of the poorest on earth – may be permanently under water by the end of the century. It’s a version of the Biblical Flood. (http://www.icccad.net/rising-sea-level-challenges-ahead-for-bangladesh/)

In the Garden at Creation, the rivers flow within their banks. Water gives life. And that’s true elsewhere...Moses breaks open a rock in the wilderness with his staff and fresh water comes forth to quench the thirst of the Hebrews...The prophets speak of springs opening in the desert...Jesus offers the woman at the well “living water” that “gushes up to eternal life.” (John 4:10, 14)

Water is everywhere in our story.

The concluding scene in the Bible in the Book of Revelation echoes the account of Genesis, and returns us to the garden:

“Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life...flowing...through the middle of the...city. On either side of the river is the tree of life...producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.” (Revelation 22:1-2)

That text was the inspiration for Jim Dayton’s design of Westminster Hall, with its leafy walls and ceiling.
The Bible’s opening and closing images of an ecology in balance leave us with the question: what happened to the water of life? At the rate we’re going, the destruction of the climate and the degradation of the waters of the earth will not bring about the healing of the nations. We are losing Paradise, and it will bring us into terrible conflict.

Water-related crises will be the source of massive upheaval in the human family. We saw that in Syria. We think of that conflict as originating in politics or tension between differing factions and tribes, but it was drought that set the stage for the violent civil war in that land. That conflict, because of the drought, produced a massive exodus into neighboring nations, and into Europe. More than 5,500,000 people have fled Syria, and another 6,500,000 have been internally displaced – because of political violence made worse by drought brought on by climate change.

Vast numbers of climate change refugees will be the norm in coming years. The World Bank predicts that by 2050 as many as 143 million people will be displaced by climate-related water crises, in Latin America, Africa, and South Asia.

Water, not oil, will be the new destabilizing force in the world. We can see that already in the Middle East. Anyone driving along the West Bank of the Jordan River in occupied Palestine has seen the long pieces of Israeli-controlled land, well-watered, lush and productive, wedged between stretches of Palestinian land, dry and unproductive, where nothing grows. The average Palestinian uses 80% less water than the average Israeli. Only 10% of the

Those who control water control life.

We don’t need to go to a distant land to see the impact of the struggle over water. Last week’s action by the Ely City Council in support of mining is our local version of “Who controls the water?” That action came in response to the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe taking a position in support of prohibiting the proposed Twin Metals copper-nickel mine near the Boundary Waters. A boycott of a Chippewa-owned resort on Lake Vermillion has begun – pitting neighbor against neighbor. The leaves on this tree are not yet for the healing of the community.

Our local struggles over water give us a taste of what is coming on a global scale. We are losing Paradise at an increasingly rapid pace, either by degrading the waters of the earth or by living in ways that exacerbate climate change.

After the wild fires fueled by climate change in beautiful northern California, Nora Gallagher wrote,

“We think it will happen somewhere else…or some other time. But we are here to tell you, in this postcard from the former paradise, that it won’t happen next year, or
somewhere else. It will happen right where you live and it could happen today. No one will be spared.” (quoted by Bill McKibben in *Falter* [New York: Henry Holt, 2019], p. 33)

In this Lenten season, our cry of lament goes up, "What happened to the water of life?"

Climate scientists see three scenarios in response to climate change: *mitigation, adaptation,* and *suffering.* How much of each depends on how quickly we can act together to learn to care for Creation.

Either we work to *mitigate* the change by reducing dependence on fossil fuels and protecting the water, or we *adapt* to the rising seas by relocating populations and learning to live with drought and flood, or we expect to *suffer* from the effects of climate change. Already we see it will likely be some combination of the three: we will try to mitigate and adapt, but we will also suffer, especially those most vulnerable on the planet.

The ecological crisis is a spiritual problem at root. When we left the primordial Garden, we lost our way, we forgot our connectedness to the earth and to the One who created it.

The biblical narrative of how the world began is not meant to offer a scientific explanation, but, rather, to remind us of our origins, our oneness with all creation. As people of faith, our response to the ecological crisis begins there – with reconnecting
to that long ago story and to the sacredness of the earth, and understanding our role in protecting it.

John Philip Newell reminds us,

“In the Celtic tradition, the Garden of Eden is not a place in space and time from which we are separated. It is the deepest dimension of our being from which we live in a type of exile...Eden is home, but we live far removed from it.”

(*Christ of the Celts* [San Francisco: Jossey-Bass; 2008], p. 2-3)

We need to find our way home.

It has been my honor recently to meet Sharon Day, and it is our joy to welcome Sharon to our Lenten Lunch in Westminster Hall to hear from her. Sharon is an Ojibwe Water Woman, practicing and teaching the tradition of praying for, respecting, and advocating for the waters of the earth. In 2013 Sharon and several other women went up to the headwaters of the Mississippi at Itasca and scooped some of the pristine water there into a copper vessel. They then walked the length of the Mississippi, carrying that clean water from the source, taking turns, walking in shifts.

They went past *Bdote*, the place where two rivers meet, where creation began, and continued south down the river, past La Crosse and Dubuque and on to St. Louis, then Memphis, and into Louisiana, until they reached New Orleans – still carrying the copper bucket of fresh, clean water from the source, always praying for the river as they walked.
At that southern point the Mississippi is the second most polluted river in America, second only to the Ohio, which flows into it. When the Mississippi pours into the Gulf of Mexico, the river is nearly dead. It enters the Gulf barely able to sustain life because of the lack of oxygen in the water.

The Water Walkers came to that place where the river meets the Gulf, and they did what they set out to do months earlier: they sang songs honoring the water and prayed over it, and then poured the fresh, clean, pristine water into the nearly dead river. “We did it,” Sharon says, “To remind her what she was like at the start.”

Therein lies the power of the biblical story of Creation that begins in the water, the power, really, of every story of the origins of the earth, whether in the Urubamba Valley in the Andes, or at Bdote just a few miles from here, or long ago in Eden.

These stories remind us of what we were like at the start, and they give us hope that, working together, we can begin to restore this wounded world.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.