

The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 24, 2017
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Matthew 28:1-10 - Rivers

And now, the end, or perhaps the culmination, of our month of Creation: **water**. The focus this Sunday is on **rivers**. I was both delighted to get this topic, since I have a history with rivers, and so glad I came last, since I have needed that time to figure out how I am going to connect the gospel reading with the topic. So, here goes. The first reading is from Genesis, but I am going to use an earlier verse from one of the other Sundays. In the second chapter of Genesis, it states, "A river flows out of Eden to water the garden, and from there it divides and becomes four branches." A river flows out of Eden in the beginning of the Bible. And in the last chapter of Revelation we have, "Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb, through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations." Not only is the Bible bookended by trees, it is also bookended by rivers. For me, there is a sense of coming back to where we began. I see a **cycle**. And rivers themselves are part of a cycle that I learned early in school: the water cycle. In areas that are not desert, there is almost always water somewhere. But it is not the same water that was there last year. Or, in the case of streams and rivers, not even the same water that was there an hour ago. There is a sense of continuity and abundance, but we are only looking at a piece of a larger thing. Those molecules of water have come from the sky and descended as rain. Yet the sky is not really the beginning. The water on the ground evaporated and became water vapor, and formed clouds, and eventually they rained and returned the water to the ground. It is part of what seems to be a loop without beginning or end.

But there is another reality to rivers. There is a **both/and** known well to those who live nearby. Rivers are not always peaceful. They both provide life and they take life. The passage in Genesis reminds us of that, with the story of the great flood. Water can bring destruction. But it also depends on our point of view. Our point of view today is heavily influenced by having buildings and people in harm's way. Therefore, floods are bad. But in a larger picture, river flooding allows nutrients of the soil to be picked up and deposited elsewhere. Flood plains are well known for their fecundity when we are thinking of crops. There is often a pattern of spring floods, and for many years farmers tried to benefit from this cycle, rather than fight it.

There were two rivers in my childhood. When I was in elementary school, my family spent time picnicking with my godmother's family, usually on Sunday afternoon. The fathers of our two families had died about the same time, and my sister and I were close to the ages of my godmother's daughters. Sometimes we went to the mountains. But my favorite place was the rock (and we called it "the" rock) beside the **Moorman** River. This was upstream from Charlottesville, because the Moorman River and the Meecham River

join to make the Rivanna, which flows through Charlottesville. And even better yet, since I did not swim well at that age, there was a creek that fed into the river near the rock. And I loved creeks and their inhabitants. There were plenty of crawfish, frogs and salamanders. The rock itself had plenty of space for a picnic, and sloped down to the edge of the river. And the river was one of those rocky ones that could be deep and slow, and could also have shallow rapids over the rocks.

When I was 12, I started going to Camp Nimrod, in Bath county, a mountainous county in Virginia on the edge of West Virginia. There we swam and canoed and played in the **Cowpasture** River. It had those same characteristics – deep and slow or shallow with rapids. I spent 7 summers there between 1969 and 1978. There were so many camps along that river, but this was just past the peak of that kind of summer camp – the kind that was not focused on one sport, and before liability insurance started limiting what could be done. I can still hear and see that river. As a counselor I taught canoeing and then swimming. I was a river rat, and I loved it.

But there was **another side** to that river. Flooding. Usually it happened between camp seasons, and we would know about it because we would come back to a new wooden swimming dock that replaced the one that had been washed away. They finally went to floating docks, connected together and tethered to a wire running high across the river. And that was how I experienced the other side of rivers. It was my day off, and I had been hiking in the rain with another counselor. We came back to a crisis at camp. The river was rising. The docks needed to be unhooked and pushed out into the middle of the river, and the canoes needed to be paddled downstream and pulled up to high ground. Fine. We jumped in to help. The river wasn't as high as it would soon become, but it was plenty strong. What we did was successful for the equipment, but I realized later it had not been a safe thing to do. We were teenagers; we did not know enough to fear. **Rivers were fun, right?**

Where does this bring me? It brings me to the two themes or images that run through my experiences and these readings this morning. One is the theme of larger **cycles**, cycles that are essential, but cycles where we may only see one part. The other is the nature of many things to be **both/and**. Rivers are both essential to life, and can be a danger to life. A lot depends on where we might be at the time, or what we want to protect. The water cycle was part of this planet long before it started affecting people. And it must be reckoned with. We can only build levees and dams so long, and there is serious doubt about whether we are doing long term good. We can learn to live with natural cycles, or we can try to force our way upon them and see what happens. I think of the Serenity prayer: God, grant me the serenity to accept what I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference.

And then, the gospel. It also has a both/and, and a cycle. In this passage, we only hear about resurrection. But resurrection came after Jesus' death. Too often we want **only** resurrection. We want good things upon good things, with no letting go or death of some

things in between. Jesus did not go straight from Palm Sunday to the resurrection. The crucifixion came first. Death and life. As unwilling as we may be to accept it, often things have to die in our lives before a new thing can appear. And this may happen over and over, all the way to the end of our lives, which is the largest letting go.

And then what Jesus says. I notice this each time this resurrection story is read. Where did Jesus tell the disciples to go? **Back to Galilee.** Back to where the story began. But with a huge difference. They would not be the same people who had begun that journey, and they would not be alone. They would find the Risen Jesus. They would find him in their daily lives. Their three years with him were not for nothing. Many times in our lives we will realize we have come full circle, and we are back where we started. Only – we have been changed. We are not quite the same person we were when we left.

This is what I hear when I read my favorite part of T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*:

*We shall not cease from exploration
And at the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.*

Is life to be lived as a straight line with the focus on accomplishment and productivity? Or is life to be lived as a circle or a spiral, with the focus on knowing and loving God, ourselves and others, better and better? What is the river saying to us? It flows and flows, yet it is still there in front of us. It goes through cycles of providing water, and cycles of rearranging all in its path. And it does it over and over again. And yet, it is still there.
AMEN