

River Sunday (3Sept17)
Genesis8:21b–22;9:8–17
Revelation22:1–5

Psalm29
John7:33-34,37-39a

A lot of this Season of Creation seems to have been confronting where our perceptions don't square with the world around us as God created it. I hope those have been worthwhile considerations, but they have meant less living with creation this season.

So today I want to begin by taking you to Otter Creek. Otter Creek was down the slope from my house outside of Eau Claire where I grew up. It gave a chance to explore the woods, from ice cracking under my booted feet to the musky musty skunk cabbage as the first green thing in those woods, and frog song to crunching fall leaves. Among memories along those waters were jumping down sandy ledges and too many stinging nettles, slowly finding cool liquid relief. The best memory is the first trout I caught, still my biggest brown. I can recall how my spinner moved through the eddying water of that bend's pool and still feel the surprise of that smooth skin and soft belly in my hands, after having only held fish with rougher scales. But as a reminder encounters with nature are not all splendor, it was beside our Otter Creek swimming hole that I tried chewing tobacco for the first time.

Friends and I regularly talked about following the creek up to its source, a project we never really attempted, partly because it was slow progress with so many meanders, but also because, why would we need to find an origin when already every place we found ourselves had so much to engage and delight us?

Still, for tracing to origins, I also go back to my family's first house a block from the Yellow River up in Spooner, and continue tracing those flowing waters here along the Yahara River chain of lakes. In between, some of my identity and existence emerged from the confluence of the Chippewa and Eau Claire rivers. Like when I lived in Washington, also where the Wenatchee River began to flow together with the great Columbia, confluences are said to temper the weather and

have lore of serving as native American gathering places. From that pre-history, and long after rafts of white pine lumber floated past, below dams that generate power for our lives, these still are places of new beginnings as that merging of rivers in Eau Claire, for example, has given rise to Phoenix Park, from industrial wasteland to become again a gathering place to exchange goods like vegetables and artwork, and a new music center to serve for education, enlightenment, and enjoyment, all flowing up and emerging from the rivers.

I can't take you for a tour of Otter Creek or soak you into my history with these rivers, but I'm hoping these stories call to mind your places, the waters you have known and how amid your life "a river runs through it." As Al Heggen said at the Capital Brewery Bible conversation Tuesday, describing his own affinity for the Upper Iowa River in Decorah, we each hold dear such places where our lives have flown together with the streams. Carrie McGinley spoke of the Mississippi starting so small and visiting the Great River museum in Dubuque and maybe to travel the length of it. See, our very selves are part of the confluence.

Amid these currents that flow with our past, to now, and time yet to come, we know it's not always peace like a river. There can be turbulence. It seems like a long time ago that earlier this summer I was complaining of the trickles of water soaking into my basement and my CSA farmer worrying if plants would survive in fields inundated and saturated by rainfall. Much more clearly, we're holding horrors from Houston as rivers poured down streets and people you know were trapped by rising floodwaters.

Those news reports and images create for us another understanding of confluence. Rivers not only flow along with the story of our lives. Not only human culture has been at the confluence of waters, from the development of agriculture by ancient Mesopotamians (whose identity is summarized in the name that means "between rivers"), or those native Americans wintering in intertribal peace, or how our cities have arisen

from the life of waters. Besides those forms of confluence, we also notice confluence in meaning of the waters themselves. They are not unequivocally peaceful or universally beneficial. In waters and with rivers, the value or worth mixes and intermingles, swirling to engulf with surprising depths beside the wading stone-skipping calms. The good and the bad flow together.

In simple natural terms, for example, we have to observe that flooding can't be equated only with the bad, damage or destruction. The Mississippi was used to spring thaws that swept waste from the backwaters and renewed habitats for a whole ecosystem of plants and animals. As we've installed dams, we think we're minimizing negative outcomes of ebbs and flows in river level, but our manufactured environment has meant loss of diversity and wellbeing in the river's wetlands.

Again, the Nile was a dwelling place for civilization precisely because it was prone to flood. When the rushing waters rose, they carried along and deposited fresh soil on the floodplain. Sure, water was up in the fields. But that was what brought life, brought the nutrients that allowed another season's fertile farming.

Such paradoxes or confluences of good and bad come in the Bible, as witness to the flow of our lives. Psalm 137 laments that it's impossible to sing faithful songs of joy by the rivers of Babylon while in enemy captivity. But the prophet Isaiah (ch2) expects nations will stream together, and down by the riverside we ain't gonna study war no more. These opposites co-exist.

With today's readings, as we require fearful storms to gain the beauty of the rainbow, the terrifying story of Noah and the flood annihilating almost the entire earth in some way exists so we can get the promise. As people who didn't have to live through that flood and as that calamity recedes into the background, we're met mostly by the message of abiding love, the assurance of providence, that the good God intends for our

lives will continue. That, and not devastation, is the focus.

At least that's the intention. It's rawer and a harder word this week when we've witnessed more stormwaters and are left wondering where God's presence or intention has been in Texas, if God has forgotten, if the promise was true.

Or maybe the terrifying conclusion is that we can combat God's goodness and drown out the blessing God voiced in Genesis and intended to continue. Maybe Hurricane Harvey is less an Act of God than an Act of Humans: climate change warming the oceans multiplied its power, coastal development tore out shoreline buffers, and harm is even in the way we construct cities.

Similarly of our ruin, the waters that give us life and gave rise to our civilization we not only pollute, but slurp to parched, causing goodness to wither. My vacation travels followed part of the course of the Colorado River, in many ways the lifeblood of the southwest. But we suck those waters dry, straining out all the goodness of life. The river is diverted to the desert to grow iceberg lettuce in California, and to gaudy fountains of the Las Vegas strip, and to evaporate from Lake Mead piled up behind the Hoover Dam. This river carved us the Grand Canyon, yet now infamously goes for years without even reaching its mouth, every last drop taken by humans along the way.

This may be a repercussion of our lives, simply of our existence, or it may be due to a result of our sins. But saying that means we must fearfully confront whether we've overruled God's goodness with our badness, the promise with our curse, the intention for life with our deadly mistakes.

Of course, that is not the message of our faith, though. We proclaim that evil will never have the last word, that even death is not final, that God will not give up on life. Holding this tension, we have that peculiar observation that waters are neither unambiguously good nor explicitly evil. That is the message of your baptismal waters, as well. Those are life-giving waters, by also bringing death. As Luther says in the Small Catechism, in baptism "the old person

in us with all sins and evil desires is to be drowned daily, and on the other hand daily a new person is to rise up to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.” Drowning and new life, dying and rising, death and resurrection: two sides of the same coin. This is not merely the ending of what has been wrong in our lives and interactions with the world, but also the promise of a new creation. Neither can you have the new beginning without the end of the old. You can’t be cleansed and made fresh without being rid of old stains and rottenness. If you imagine you’d prefer not to die, then you won’t be met by new life. If you pretend you’re doing fine, then you can hardly imagine or begin to grasp—much less live into—the gracious goodness God is striving to bring about for you and for God’s earth by this way of living wet.

Our Revelation reading may be the Bible’s culminating picture in its final chapter, the river that flows out from God, nourishing the tree of life, without interruption bearing fruit to feed and heal. Again for paradox, even in this final image, we still need healing among nations, to reconcile relationships. But that opportunity is ceaseless. The flow of grace will not be stopped. The crystal clear and bright waters of the river contain no corruption, nothing wrong. Picture the Colorado, flowing and free. Picture the Jordan River bringing life even into the Dead Sea. Picture a brook babbling and laughing with glee. Picture the green, stinky Yahara purged and joyful. Picture Otter Creek or your own streams, not only a memory but the locations of your future. Picture yourself, splashed clean and fresh, emerging from the water for new life and endless potential. Picture the confluence where your life mingles and flows with all of creation.

In a round river, God is both our source and destination. And this is where God’s current is carrying us. All creation recognizes it. Already we know and expect it, we anticipate and believe it. We brim with God and all creation in this promise for life. Shall we gather at the river?