

COME TO THE WATER

Water as Life **Genesis 2:4b-14**

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This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created. On the day the Lord God made earth and sky— before any wild plants appeared on the earth, and before any field crops grew, because the Lord God hadn't yet sent rain on the earth and there was still no human being to farm the fertile land, though a stream rose from the earth and watered all of the fertile land— the Lord God formed the human from the topsoil of the fertile land and blew life's breath into his nostrils. The human came to life. The Lord God planted a garden in Eden in the east and put there the human he had formed. In the fertile land, the Lord God grew every beautiful tree with edible fruit, and also he grew the tree of life in the middle of the garden and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. A river flows from Eden to water the garden, and from there it divides into four headwaters. The name of the first river is the Pishon. It flows around the entire land of Havilah, where there is gold. That land's gold is pure, and the land also has sweet-smelling resins and gemstones. The name of the second river is the Gihon. It flows around the entire land of Cush. The name of the third river is the Tigris, flowing east of Assyria; and the name of the fourth river is the Euphrates.

It is good to be back with you. It was also good to be at Montreat these past two weeks. I was serving as Conference Pastor for the first two weeks of youth conferences, so, tending to the spiritual needs of roughly 1500 teenagers, their back home leaders, and all the volunteers that make the gathering possible. That is likely all the explanation you need for why my voice sounds the way it does today. I feel better than I sound, I promise.

I may have been away, but I missed you, and I thought of you often, for all sorts of reasons, including our summer worship series, Come to the Water. You can't spend much time in Montreat without thinking about water. It might be Lake Susan, right in the heart of everything. If you attend a conference there, you'll walk past Lake Susan about a dozen times a day, and at the end of youth events, everyone spreads out around the lake, in the dark, to conclude worship by candlelight. It might be the waterfall over the dam, the sound of which will lull you to sleep from just about anywhere on the property. Or it might be the creek, where the young and young at heart go rock hopping, or it might just be your water bottle, which you need up there in the mountains, and which, if you are like me, you misplace at least once a day.

But I had a new experience with water at Montreat these past two weeks. Because of those 1500 teenagers and all the activities that get planned, many of which take place outside, we check about three different weather radars about 10 times a day, so that if a storm is coming, we can adapt the plans accordingly. So I would like to say from the beginning that on Monday, June 5, every radar we looked at, all day long, showed absolutely no sign of rain. And yet, as we were gathered in Anderson Auditorium at about 8 pm on the first full day of the conference, smack in the middle of a worship service, we felt the wind pick up. About six giant rain drops fell, which were then followed by a torrential downpour, with only moments of warning. It caused a little stir throughout the Auditorium, but the preacher, Sue, regathered everyone's

attention, just in time for a giant lightning strike to hit, and take out the main transistor — the main transistor for all of Montreat. And not just Montreat Conference Center. Montreat College, Montreat Conference Center, Montreat the town, and even a bit past the gate headed toward Black Mountain. The entire area, plunged into complete and total darkness. Just for fun, I'm going to remind you about the 1500 teenagers. But don't worry, the power came back on a mere 4 or 5 hours later.

That's the thing about water. It's as calming as a river, as still as a lake, as awe-inspiring as a waterfall, as beautiful as a baptism, as tender as a tear ... but also as wild and chaotic and strong and unpredictable as a storm. A professor of mine once said, "Water is something you can't live without it. But it can kill you in a hurry."¹ Water tends to remind us we are not as in control as we often like to think we are. If we let it, though, it can also remind us of the One who is. And that is a story that begins in Genesis and carries through clear to Revelation and beyond.

Today's scripture passage is from Genesis 2, but for just a moment, I want to us to look back even earlier than that — to Genesis chapter 1, verses 1 and 2. The very first sentence of scripture says: "When God began to create the heavens and the earth, the earth was without shape or form; it was dark over the deep sea, and God's wind swept over the waters." Even before God said, "Let there be light," there was already water. We know nothing of God before or beyond water. Water is essential to life, all life, physically and spiritually.

That water is what makes Eden what it is. Verse 5 tells us: "Before any wild plants appeared on the earth, and before any crops grew, because the Lord God hadn't yet sent rain on the earth and there was still no human being to farm the fertile land, a stream rose from the earth and watered the land." That river in Eden made the land lush and fertile before anything else had a chance to happen.

Now, around the time and place this story would have been told and circulated and eventually written down, the typical farm was a small subsistence farm, combining the cultivation of grains and fruits with the raising of sheep and goats. Life was difficult and precarious, perched on rocky, hilly slopes and often limited by too little good soil and unpredictable rainfall. And yet when the story is told of that first garden, the author describes a mediterranean farmer's ideal landscape, one with a constant source of water from which life and every other good thing comes.² It seems there has never been a time when we have *not* been looking toward God's promised day. We can't help ourselves — and I firmly believe this — because we are oriented toward it. Remember now, that there are two creation stories in Genesis and this is the second one. There's no account of seven days here. Just an account of a stream making fertile the land, and God forming humans from that dirt, which means we have something of that water, something of Eden in us all. And we are always longing for a return to that home.

Genesis 2 tells us of that stream, and then it tells us how it then divides into four rivers: the Pishon, the Gihon, the Tigris, and the Euphrates. Two of these rivers are identifiable, of course — but the other two are not. More than a few theologians have spent considerable amounts of time using this incomplete information to pinpoint the location of Eden. No less a theologian than John Calvin spent considerable amounts of ink documenting his own musings about all this, despite his own critiques of reading scripture literally. Again, there is something in all of us that longs for the ideal. That wishes for the paradise in which everything is good and right.

Miguel De La Torre, however, suggests there is little good to come from being literal in such endeavors. "Regardless of where Eden may or may not be located," he says, "what makes the mention of the four specific rivers interesting is that the author attempted to locate the story within his or her known physical world."³ In other words, from the beginning, the story of God was never intended to be distant and detached. God's story is right here with us, wherever we are located. Geography matters, not because it limits God to one physical place, but because it reassures us that there is no physical place where God is not. That is the good news of this story. That is the good news that is way better than any theory about where Eden might

have been could ever hope to be. God is not mystical and otherworldly; God is of this world, this place, this address, your address, every address. *That's* the geography that matters. *That's* the geography of grace.

The gift of life starts in Eden, but it flows out from there to wherever you are. Wherever we are. Wherever anyone is. Wherever anyone has yet to be. And it carries us along with it, where Jacob wrestles with God at the River Jabbok. Where river reeds protect an infant named Moses. Where the Israelites cross through the Red Sea to freedom, and cross the Jordan River on stones. Namaan the Syrian is cleansed of leprosy in a river. Psalm 23 calls us to rest beside still waters. Psalm 46 reminds us, "There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God." Isaiah promises that the waters will not overwhelm us, while Amos dreams of justice rolling down like waters, and righteousness like a never ending stream. Ezekiel envisions a wondrous river flowing out from the the new temple, ankle deep, knee deep, then thigh deep, bringing life to all it touches. Stagnant water becomes fresh, providing habitat for fish, birds, and people, and watering the fruit trees on each side of the river. Jonah runs away from the call of God, but even out at sea, even in the belly of a whale, he finds himself rescued by the grace of God. Jesus is baptized in the Jordan River. He changes water into wine and tells a Samaritan woman that he is living water, that will never run dry. He teaches about the importance of something so small as a cool cup of water to someone in need, calms a raging storm, and eventually, at the end, as he hangs upon the cross, water flows from his side. The Ethiopian eunuch is baptized in water he and Philip happen upon. Lydia and her community are baptized in a river. And in Revelation, the River of Life, which will have carried us all the way from the beginning, flows out from the throne of God right through the middle of the city of God, and anyone who is thirsty is invited: "Come," Jesus says, "Let everyone who wishes receive the water of life as a gift."

We'll trace that path, we'll follow that river, throughout the summer. But we trust in a God who is with us always, not just a God who meets us at the end, when that river finally does run through the streets of heaven.

I mentioned at the start of this sermon about how a massive storm that came out of nowhere knocked out all the power in Montreat. And of course, nearly every person present had a phone with them. But the storm took us by surprise, and it was a honest few moments before the first person reached for their phone. And in those few moments, there was one, and only one light, in the entirety of the Montreat mountains. It was the Christ candle. It was the only light not impacted by the storm in the slightest. It was the only light not dependent upon anything else for its flame. It was the only light to be found, anywhere. And it was just for a moment. Because those phones were handy, and we were grateful for them, because that was how we made it across the dam and back up to Assembly Inn, and that was how we found our way down dark hallways and that was how we brushed our teeth and everything else. But for a moment, when the lightening struck and we were in the dark, unable to see even the person beside us — the Christ light never even flickered.

The River of Eden, that will become the Pishon and the Gishon and the Tigris and the Euphrates, that will become the River of Life for the healing of the nations — that river will carry us. But as anyone who's ever read the Bible will tell you, or as anyone who's ever rafted down a river will tell you, or as anyone who's ever felt the pull of a current or knocked their shin on a hidden rock will tell you, it won't always be a smooth ride. To claim otherwise would be disingenuous. But no matter what, the One whose wind blew over the water at creation, the One whom even the wind and the waves obey, the One whose light no storm can extinguish — *that One* goes with you, wherever the water takes you.

You can bet your life on it.

Sermons from Shandon Presbyterian Church

¹ Dr. Carson Brisson of Union Presbyterian Seminary

² *Eden: Moral Power of a Biblical Landscape*, by Theodore Hiebert, 2002, The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University, accessed online at: <https://ifl.web.baylor.edu/sites/g/files/ecbvkj771/files/2023-02/creationarticlehiebert.pdf>

³ *Genesis*, by Miguel De La Torre, page 46, in the *Belief: A Theological Commentary* series.