

“A River Runs Through It”
Genesis 2:4b-25

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Douglas M. Donley
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University Baptist Church
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Our worship theme for this year at UBC is Sacred Spaces. We have spent the past year and a half physically distanced from one another. It has given us pause to recognize the sacred work that happens not just in physical space, but in cyber space, liminal space, emotional, tactile and mystical space. Our scriptures and our imaginings have pointed us to recognizing sacredness in all of these spaces. We welcome you on this journey.

And on this day when we celebrate our garden project near this physical space, it makes sense to hearken back to other sacred gardens and rivers from which creation began. This church was founded 171 years ago as the First Baptist Church of the town of St. Anthony. The city in a territory that didn't have a state back then emerged because of the falls just a few blocks from here. Long before they were named for St. Anthony, they were considered sacred by the Dakota people. It was called **mnirara (curling waters) or owahmenah (falling waters)**. The land we are standing on now was likely a portage route around the falls and a center for commercial trade and ceremonial devotion. Downstream a few miles in B'Dote or the confluence of the Mississippi and Minnesota Rivers. This confluence is where the Dakota people say creation began.

Today's scripture reading speaks of a garden that was planted in the confluence of four rivers. I specifically chose to end the scripture reading before the conflict began, you know, the serpents and the audacity of humanity to know more. There is something about the calmness of a river that brings us a sense of awe. Something about a garden compliments a river or is it the other way around?

Bill Staines wrote a song many years ago.

I was born on the path of the winter wind and raised where the mountains are old. Her springtime waters came dancing down and I remember the tales they told. The whistling ways of my younger days too quickly have faded on by but all of my memories linger on like the light in the fading sky.

River take me along in the sunshine sing me a song, ever moving and winding and free you rolling old river, you changing old river let's you and me river roll on to the sea.

A dozen years ago, we had as our worship theme Rivers of Paradise. We still use this language in our worship and devotion. We spent the year recapturing the ancient tradition that said a faithful life is not so much about receiving a heavenly reward after a life of toil, but creating paradise here on earth while we're living a breathing. Art in early churches depicted rivers and vines and gardens, as if they were depicting the Eden from whence we came. They also featured a living Jesus who had conquered the cross. An emaciated victim Jesus forever hanging on an instrument of torture, didn't enter into church art for another 1000 years, right around the time that the church embraced atonement theology that sent paradise to heaven after a life of suffering instead of something we can attain here on earth. And so we seek to reclaim and remember the rivers that run through our lives and are attached to God's original intention. Sometimes they flow into and out of our darkest moments, mystically connecting us with one another. In the good times, the water flows smoothly. In the rough times the water runs in torrents destroying and recreating the streambed. But the divine rivers never stop flowing. That's what we need to recover and celebrate.

And so we celebrate bits and pieces of that original intention and find inspiration in gardens along the banks of rivers, both of which about this great sanctuary.

And so this sermon is entitled, “A River Runs Through it”. Before this grand building was built a hundred years ago, early baptisms were held just a few blocks from here in the mighty Mississippi and its tributaries. Winter and summer, I’m told. It was no accident that this Baptist Church celebrated the River and immersing ourselves in its waters held power to transform lives.

There is a scene at the end of the film by the same name as this sermon. An old man reminisces about his life and offers this final speech in his mind while tying a fly to a fishing line.

“Of course, now I am too old to be much of a fisherman, and now of course I usually fish the big waters alone, although some friends think I shouldn’t. Like many fly fishermen in western Montana where the summer days are almost Arctic in length, I often do not start fishing until the cool of the evening. Then in the Arctic half-light of the canyon, all existence fades to a being with my soul and memories and the sounds of the Big Blackfoot River and a four-count rhythm and the hope that a fish will rise. Eventually, all things merge into one, and a river runs through it. The river was cut by the world’s great flood and runs over rocks from the basement of time. On some of the rocks are timeless raindrops. Under the rocks are the words, and some of the words are theirs.

I am haunted by waters.”

— Norman Maclean, *A River Runs Through it and Other Stories*

A river runs right by us, or is it through us? It started out as a trickle in Lake Itasca, but then merged with waters flowing south of the Laurentian divide. Eventually the river adopted the Minnesota, St Croix, the Des Moines, the Chippewa, the mighty Missouri and the muddy Ohio gathering speed and intensity, sometimes flooding fledgling cities on its way to the gulf of Mexico. And we are part of that, a river running right by us and through us. Some of it is a physical river, gathering storm water and runoff and pesticides and becoming home for trout and Walleye and sturgeon. Some of it is spiritual, like stories that get passed down, only to change and morph or grow into better stories. Sometimes, after a calamity, we return to the ancient stories and wonder about what wisdom we might have missed along the way to our doom.

There are three creation stories in Genesis, if you count the flood. The first one is where God creates the world in six days and then rests on the seventh. It’s familiar. Creation begins as God brings order out of the primordial soup. Light, darkness, heaven, earth, plants, animals and finally humanity are created by the dramatic word and work of God who art in heaven hallowed be thy name. Everything is good. Nothing is bad.

But there is a second creation story, some of which we read earlier this morning. Unlike the first story, God is not far off. In this story, God is the planter of a garden who exists nearby. God actually walks in the garden, like a breeze. Into this garden, God creates more complexity. Not everything is good about creation.

There are good trees and bad trees. Good fruits and forbidden fruits. There are serpents about—calling the first creatures to forget the rules and eat the forbidden fruit. What we see in the second story is humanity moving further and further away from God until we can no longer live in the garden of paradise.

We cannot look at the Bible as simply fact or fiction. It is a mirror through which people have searched for and have wrestled with God. Myth is a form of psychology. That is the language of the Bible. The second creation story is about the relationship between God and humanity and humanity with itself. The larger agenda is what does knowledge do to human community?

In order to understand this story, we need to know that there are a few word-plays in the original Hebrew. The first person is formed out of the earth. The word for earth in Hebrew is *adamah*. The first person is *adam* which really means earthling.

The first earth creature is not male. For there is no distinction between the genders until the second is created. At that point the man is *ish* and the woman is *isha*. To say that Adam was created before Eve is not biblically accurate. They were both the essence of the first earth creature *adam*.

Hear these echoes of the rivers of Eden and its beauty in the Song of Songs:

“A garden locked is my sister, my bride. A garden locked, a fountain sealed. Your channel is an orchard of pomegranates with all choicest fruits, henna with nard, nard and saffron, calamus and cinnamon, with all trees of frankincense, myrrh and aloes, with all chief spices—a garden fountain, a well of living water, and flowing streams of Lebanon.” (4:12-14) Note the fragrance and the feast of the senses. Note the water flowing out of it and connecting with all of us—or at least with our longing.

The prophets call us to remember the rivers of worth, especially when we have turned the wrong way. The Prophet Amos rails against the people who think that religion is just about praising God. He says, “Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps, but let justice flow down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” (Amos 5:23-24)

When Israel was in the wilderness of exile Isaiah invokes the rivers of paradise to remind the people of their longed-for future: “For YHWH will comfort Zion; God will comfort all her waste places, and will make her wilderness like Eden, her desert like the garden of YHWH.” (Isaiah 51:3)

Paradise meant caring for the suffering and the oppressed as Isaiah says in the 58th chapter: “Loose the bonds of injustice, undo the thongs of the yoke, Let the oppressed go free, bring the homeless poor into your house, offer your food to the hungry, and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then you light shall rise in the dawn, you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail.” (Isaiah 58:6-11 excerpts)

Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Parker put it this way: “This is what it means to say that paradise is in this world: the actual tastes, sights, fragrances, and textures of paradise touch our lives. They call us to resist the principalities and powers that deny the goodness of ordinary life, threaten to destroy it, or seek to secure its blessings for a few at the expense of many....In Galilee, the legacy of paradise would feed a movement of resistance, led by a rabbi named Jesus of Nazareth. Like a tree planted by the water, his movement took root, moistened by the waters of paradise and shaded by its trees and vines.” (*Saving Paradise* pp.26, 27)

Jesus said to the thief on the cross, “today, you will be with me in paradise.” Was it heaven, or was it that part of us that realized that the cross of evil torture and cruelty no longer had power over any of us who followed after him and took his teachings seriously.

Paradise. We almost ignore the glimpses of it when it crosses our path. We think of our world as doomed. The rivers are forever polluted and can't be redeemed. And that despair is what the world's polluters are counting on. But we have a secret weapon and it's right here in our very hearts, minds, souls and collective strength.

I think of the water protectors walking from Itasca to St. Paul a few weeks ago to preserve this watershed. I think of those who remind us that water is life. Not only can it give us sustenance, but it can douse a wildfire and restore some sense of calm in our lives. I love walking the Mississippi on a summer or fall day. Just blocks from here, bridges give us vast views of this river that is ours and not ours. It belongs to us all and we belong to it. The waterfowl dive and float. The kayakers practice their art. Fishing poles test patience and offer reward. Colors dance in brilliance. And as we gaze out at the crevasse it has carved, we are transported to other rivers that point us in a better direction. And we connect with our history and our future—a confluence where creation happens once again.

The Mississippi Watershed Management Organization has trained hundreds of water stewards who put in countless hours and raise money to protect this sacred watershed. They fund and create hopeful oases of beauty across the cities that not only enhance clean water, but inspire people to imagine better partnership with our land.

The rain gardens we dedicate today are a small piece of a bigger picture, our little part to restore a bit of holiness to this little confluence of streets and buildings and hearts and imaginations. Assuming it rains again, the rain gardens will filter 133,000 gallons of storm water per year. Think of all the sediment and chemicals and phosphorous that we are preventing from flowing directly into the Mississippi. And not only that, the educational signs will remind people about God's natural filtration system in pollinators and plants. Their roots will keep topsoil in place. Already, honeybees are visiting the blue, pink, yellow and purple flowers planted in late August. Who knows, we might help encourage some student to take up landscape architecture or sustainable food systems, or simply being a better member of society.

My friends we live in and around holy grounds. Places where holy things happen, if we just recognize it and celebrate it. As poet Mary Oliver suggested, that's what we're called to do with our one precious life.

Remember, my friends, that God has planted the garden of your life. We tend its soil. We water it with our toil and hopes, sometimes with our tears. It's full of temptation, and knowledge and life and conflict and beauty and excitement and blessing and hope and comfort and in it we are never alone. God is as close as the gentle breeze and the ever-flowing stream coming down from the mountain, and from the water capturing filters that bypass the streets and sewers on their way to the water table. And it's here right now—God's ultimate gift. May we tend it wisely and visit it often. It has everything we need.

In our longing and commitment may we recommit to a paradise-view of the world, where we recognize the beauty of the garden and the responsibility that comes from discerning good from bad. May our actions and our posture as Christians help us to revisit paradise not as a Pollyanna escape mechanism, but a renewed commitment to imagining the world as God would have it—imagining our lives as God imagines our lives. For we were made to ride the rivers of paradise flowing out of Eden to a place of blessed release from the powers and principalities of this world bent on destruction.

And as we ride that current, and join with other streams of blessing and justice and peace and commitment, then the world starts taking on a new landscape. And in the process, we are made new as well.

Revisit the Holy Garden, my friends. Ride its rivers to an even better place of insight and creativity. For we follow one who makes all things new and longs for us to join together in vision and hope and courage as we carve our way through this life until we join with the eternal sea.

As Norman McLean wrote:

“Eventually, all things merge into one, and a river runs through it. The river was cut by the world's great flood and runs over rocks from the basement of time. On some of the rocks are timeless raindrops. Under the rocks are the words, and some of the words are theirs.”

Some day when the flowers are blooming still. Someday when the grass is still green. My rolling waters will round your bend and flow into the open sea. So here's to the rainbow that's followed me here. Here's to the friends that I know. Here's to the song that's within me now I will sing it wherever I go.

*River take me along in the sunshine sing me a song,
ever moving and winding and free you rolling old river,*

*you changing old river let's you and me river roll on to
the sea.*