

Easter 6C  
May 26, 2019  
John 5:1-9, Acts 16:9-15  
Revelation 21:10, 22:10-25

## **WATERSHED MOMENT**

**There's a stream of water running through our texts this morning.**

- **It's there in the story from Acts**, where Paul and his companions, skipping from port to port across Aegean Sea, finally land in Philippi, and meet a woman named Lydia when they “go down to the river to pray...”
- **It's there in the Revelation of John**—the great river and water of life—bright as crystal—flowing through the center of the city of God;
- **And it's there inside Jerusalem's Sheep Gate**, at the pool of Beth-zatha, where Jesus encounters a long-suffering man who's waited decades for healing to come.

**A series of watersheds—physical and spiritual—connect our readings this morning**, inviting us to consider what we too often take for granted—especially here in Western Washington: the precious, lifegiving, life-sustaining resource of water.

**It's been a lean spring for water here in the Northwest.** Four weeks into May, our statewide snowpack is the 4th lowest it's been over the past 30 years.<sup>1</sup> Last week Governor Inslee declared drought conditions for nearly half of Washington's watersheds. And while Seattle's water supply looks adequate for the time being, we are all invited to pay close attention to how much water we're using, and what we're using it for.

For Christian communities who center themselves in the sacred waters of baptism, how we treat the water that flows from our TAPS and into our FONT, into our sinks and showers, into our bathtubs and toilets, gardens and swimming pools, truly matters.

**Preserving water is a sacred vocation that belongs to each one of us, for we all live in a watershed.**

A rising chorus of data from every field of science tells us we've arrived at a WATERSHED MOMENT in the history of planet Earth, a moment pregnant with peril and promise; a moment that demands serious, sustained engagement from human communities and nations around the world.

New Testament scholar Ched Myers reminds those of us who follow Jesus that as “citizen inhabitants” of specific places, environmental justice and sustainability ought to be integral to everything we do as disciples.

What he calls watershed discipleship, “requires us to embrace deep paradigm shifts and broad practical changes of habit in our homes, our churches, and our denominations.”<sup>2</sup>

**This kind of discipleship is part of what the Spirit is telling us through these texts this morning. But there's more in this scene from the book of Revelation, which commends itself to us.**

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<sup>1</sup> *Low snowpack, hot spring lead to drought declaration for nearly half of Washington State.* May 22, 2019 by Evan Bush, Seattle Times staff reporter. <https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/gov-inslee-declares-drought-for-about-half-of-washington-state/>

<sup>2</sup> This website is rooted in the work of New Testament scholar and watershed disciple Ched Myers. <https://watersheddiscipleship.org/watershed-moment/> His book, *Watershed Discipleship: Reinhabiting Bioregional Faith and Practice*, is a potential selection for next spring.

Today the river of the water of life that flows from the throne of God helps us draw connections between the particular rivers of our lives and the watershed of God's river of life that flows through the world.<sup>3</sup>

[Barbara Rossing](#), who teaches at our Chicago Seminary (and who some of us know from encounters at Holden Village), helps us see what's unfolding in John's vision in a new way.

**As John goes on an “architectural tour of the New Jerusalem” in these final chapters of the book, she points out, there is no temple in the city (21:22), for God's presence extends through the entire city's landscape, and all of God's people serve and reign with Christ.**

The New Jerusalem is a “welcoming city, not a gated community,” Rossing says. Even foreigners are invited to enter into this radiant city, whose lamp is the Lamb, Jesus.<sup>4</sup>

“In our time,” she writes, “when nations and neighborhoods seek to secure themselves against outsiders, the church can claim Revelation's vision of openness and multicultural welcome for all our cities.”

Furthermore, the recurring image of the “throne,” a central image for the entire book, suggests that the place where God reigns will be relocated from heaven, where it was in chapter 4, and to the center of the city of God.

And so the New Jerusalem to which John testifies can be read as a wonderfully Earth-centered vision for our future, a vision of hope rather than abandonment for the world. Contrary to the escapism or “heavenism” that dominates some interpretations, the Revelation vision suggests that our future dwelling place with God will be on a radiant Earth—Eden reborn.

Here, at the very center of that urban Garden, flows the river of life with the tree of life in its midst; its 12 fruits satisfy hunger in every season, and its leaves offer healing (the word is *therapeia*) for the nations of the world.

Rossing writes:

“At a time when Rome claimed to reign forever, Revelation boldly proclaimed that it is God who reigns—not the Empire—and that God's servants will also reign with God...”

We need this “vision of God's life-giving watershed in the center of our cities renewing hope for our future. We need New Jerusalem. We need the tree of life, the healing of the nations...”

“Through each of our cities...” she concludes, “there is a river flowing from the heart of God and the Lamb. It is the life-giving river of the water of life, into which each we are baptized and by which we are renewed.”<sup>5</sup>

**Our gospel story takes that grand vision and distills it in this personal encounter between Jesus and a man who's been waiting long years for his watershed moment to arrive.**

**The setting is old Jerusalem, near the Sheep Gate, at a pool called Beth-zatha.**

Along the porticos that surround the pool lie wounded people of every description—blind, lame, disfigured, paralyzed. Each of them is waiting for the waters of the pool to be stirred up, believing that if they manage to enter the pool when the waters are stirred, they will be made well.

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<sup>3</sup> Barbara Rossing, Commentary on Revelation 21, 22, in *Working Preacher*, 2013. [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=1695](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1695)

<sup>4</sup> Rossing, op. cit. All subsequent quotes and paraphrases that follow are from this source.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. In the April 2019 issue of National Geographic, architectural renditions of future cities incorporate water gardens and features much like this description.

## **Among them is one who's been waiting for 38 years.**

### **We don't know much about the man, yet we can't help but wonder how a person spends 38 years waiting for healing.**

- Maybe, as the years have passed, he's seen others go into the waters and come out whole;
- and maybe he figures it's just a matter of time before his turn will come.
- Maybe spending his days here has become so automatic that even though the strategy has been proven pathetically ineffective, he remains.
- Maybe he still persists because he can't see any other options, and no one is willing to level with him and say: THIS ISN'T WORKING.

### **So along comes Jesus, and he asks the man a question—one with some bite to it: DO YOU REALLY WANT TO BE MADE WHOLE?**

The man gives Jesus an explanation for why, after 38 years, he's still there, and then Jesus—with what I read as a kind of impatient flourish—commands him: STAND UP; TAKE YOUR MAT AND WALK!

### **And immediately, the man stands up, picks up his mat and walks.**

There are all kinds of reasons we give ourselves for why we can't change, why we can't put down the bottle, or relinquish our anger; why we can't let go of a grudge, or tend our body more carefully; why we can't live more generously, love more freely, and on and on...

**This morning Jesus cuts to the chase with his question:** DO YOU WANT TO BE WELL OR NOT? It's a deeply personal question, for sure, as it was for this man. But it's also a question that belongs to us as community.

WHAT WOULD IT MEAN FOR US TO LIVE OUR LIVES NO LONGER FROZEN IN HABITS THAT FAIL TO SERVE US OR THE WORLD, BUT TO FOLLOW JESUS INTO THE LIFE THAT TRULY IS LIFE?

Our watershed moments are more than personal epiphanies—as important as personal epiphanies are. They are like the raindrops falling on the hills and mountains that surround us here; drops which, when combined with millions of others, open up channels toward a transformed future.

Through the waters of baptism, through the gift and guidance of the Holy Spirit, Christ calls us to be a community of watershed disciples.

A people apprenticed to his way of living in the world. A people ready and eager to claim the healing he offers and to let it flow—like the river of life—through our relationships and neighborhoods, and into every nook and cranny of our every day lives.

As we gather at his Table, remembering Christ's watershed moment of sacrificial love, we say YES to this calling. And what once was dammed up in us begins to flow. May it be so! Amen.