

The Karuk people call it Katamiin – the Center of the World; that place where the Salmon River, swelled by creeks and snowmelt from the Marble Mountains, meets the waters of the Klamath River, and wraps around the rocky mount called Á'uuyich.

Fueled by the energy of the rivers' confluence, ceremonies are held at Katamiin each summer—most especially the Brush Dance: a ceremony that gathers the community around a cedar-lined pit where dancers and singers perform prayers for the sake of a child who needs to be made whole.

In her forward to the book WATERSHED DISCIPLESHIP, Denise Nadeau speaks of the connection between WATER and SPIRIT. “Water is spirit and a relative” she writes. “Water is alive; it is sacred; it is part of a holistic system, a greater interconnected whole; and we have obligations to water as a relative with whom we are in relationship.”¹

Water is sacred. Water is our relative.

Halfway around the world, beneath the 11th century basilica of San Clemente in Rome, famous for its mosaic depicting Christ as the Tree of Life, are the remains of the 4th century church honoring Saint Clement.

Beneath the 4th century church lies the foundation of something deeper still—a 2nd century Mithraic temple where gladiators once came to offer prayers before heading into the Colosseum for combat.

Further below this 3rd layer there is yet another one, containing the charred remains of homes destroyed by the great fire of Nero's reign in the year 64.

And beneath all of these layers—audible before it is visible—is a bubbling spring of cascading water, flowing unceasingly, as it has for untold centuries.

Why have these holy places been built and rebuilt, century after century, over this place? Because water is sacred. The relative we cannot live without.

Today we've gathered around the sacred waters of this font to witness the naming and claiming by God of another beloved child: Violet Beatrice Lauren Zandi.

Our gathering takes place at the confluence of two rivers: the RIVER CALLED GRACE and the waters of THE CEDAR—the SOURCE from which this baptismal water flows.

Why, we may ask, does the SOURCE of the water that's poured into our font matter?

¹ *Watershed Discipleship: Reinhabiting Bioregional Faith and Practice*. Ched Myers, editor. (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2016) p. xi

It matters because watersheds matter; their health, or lack thereof, affect our own.

It matters because our lives are shaped by what we receive here—as surely as the lives of the spawning sockeye building redds and laying eggs in the Cedar right now, are imprinted with the memory of their natal stream.

It matters because the waters of baptism follow us wherever we go.

What Tertullian said in the 3rd century still holds true today:

“...We, little fishes, after the example of our Savior Jesus Christ, are born in water, nor have we safety in any other way than by permanently abiding in water.”

Like those sockeye fry, Violet has been reborn in these waters, and it's our job to be her allies, her mentors, her lovers and friends, as she negotiates the currents of a world that would rather treat her as something to consume, than as a sacred child of God.

Violet needs to know—all our young people need to know—that God, that we, will show up for them whatever it takes. That we're in this life together and for good.

In today's gospel when Jesus is asked which commandment is first of all, he responds: The first is, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' And the second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'

The core values of the Judeo-Christian tradition could not be clearer—
LOVE OF GOD AND LOVE OF NEIGHBOR.

But living on the cusp of environmental crisis is helping us to see that our definition of “neighbor” has been much too narrow.

We are beginning to see more clearly than ever that “neighbors” we must love include more than the other two-legged beings with whom we share this planet home.

Loving neighbor means knowing and loving every being, species, and habitat—within the watersheds we call home.

In an essay entitled “The Futility of Global Thinking,” farmer and geologist Wendell Berry writes:

“No place on the earth can be completely healthy until all places are... The question that must be addressed is NOT how to care for the planet, but how to care for each of the planet’s millions of human and natural neighborhoods—[each of] which is in some precious way different from all the others”.²

There is no love of God without love of neighbor, and loving our neighbor today must mean investing our energy in knowing about and caring for the physical watersheds in which we live and move and have our being.

Yesterday our family took our annual trip to the Snoqualmie valley to Jubilee Farm, and the route we had to take to get there was more serpentine than usual because of flooding due to recent rains.

At the farm we learned that the vegetable crops that were inundated when the river overflowed its banks—no matter how healthy they may appear—cannot be sold. For the river is contaminated.

It reminds me of another saying from Wendell Berry:

“Do unto those downstream as you would have those upstream do unto you.”

Caring about and for the water that flows in our watersheds, the water the winds its way through our lives, is part of our baptismal vocation—whether that water is Fauntleroy Creek, Longfellow Creek, the Cedar, the Snoqualmie, or the Duwamish.

Addressing new converts preparing for baptism, 4th century Bishop Maximus tells them:

“In the baptism of the Savior the blessing which flowed down like a spiritual stream touched the outpouring of every flood and the course of every stream.

We must be baptized by the same stream as the Savior was. But in order to be dipped in the same water, we do not require the regions of the East..., for now Christ is everywhere and the Jordan is everywhere... Thus even if ... a river should have some other name in this world, there is in it nonetheless the mystery of the Jordan.”

What St. Maximus knew in the 4th century we are coming to see now in the 21st century a new way, that all waters holy, all streams sacred, and that protecting the water that fills our fonts and flows through our watersheds is the vocation of every Christian community, wherever it may be.

² Quoted by Myers in *Watershed Discipleship*, p. 8

Water is sacred. Water is our relative.

And in the promised-filled waters of baptism we find our true identity and true vocation.

♪ Water of life, water of love, water of birth sweetly flow!

♪ Water of life, water of thirst, water of Earth sweetly flow!