Sermon copyright © 2015 by Pastor Erik Kindem, Peace Lutheran Church, Seattle, WA. All rights reserved.

Epiphany 1B/Creation Sunday
Peace, Seattle
January 11, 2015
Isaiah 55:6-11, Rev. 22:1-3, Mark 1:4-11

RIVERS OF LIFE

Where does the water in your baptismal font come from? It was a deceptively simple question we were being asked. But the more I reflected on it, the further and deeper the question took me.[1]

One moment I was climbing Glacier Peak with crampon-clad feet; next I was soaking my feet in Railroad Creek at Holden Village; then I was standing on the banks of the Cedar River watching the bruised, crimson Sockeye make their last valiant efforts to sew the seeds for a new generation.[2]

These and many more memories of journeys in and through water flooded my brain, all evoked by that one, simple question: *Where does the water in your font come from?*

To mark my birthday Wednesday, I headed east toward the Cascades in hope of getting out from under the fog and into the sunshine, and my hope was rewarded. Just east of Issaquah the clouds began to thin, and by the time I reached exit #32 the ceiling had lifted and the sky was a deep blue dome above.

I parked my car, donned my pack, and set out for Rattlesnake Ridge. Two miles and 1100 feet later, the trail emerged from the forest onto a broad, cascading rock ledge which afforded me a 300 degree view of snowcapped mountains, verdant valleys, and the headwaters of the Cedar River Watershed.[3]

THIS, I thought, is where the water in our font comes from.

It's the water from the Cedar and Tolt River watersheds that runs through our pipes, cleanses our bodies, cooks our food, quenches our thirst, and fills our fonts. And in Seattle we enjoy some of the finest and purest water of any city anywhere.[4]

Waters from northwest rivers have been supporting and shaping life here for millions of years.

- The CEDAR and the TOLT.
- The DUWAMISH, SNOQUALMIE, SNOHOMISH, and SKYKOMISH.
- The PUYALLUP, the WHITE, the CHEHALIS, and COWLITZ.
- The SKOOKUMCHUCK, NEWAKUM, NOOKSAK and SKAGIT.

The names themselves remind us that Native Peoples have lived with these tempestuous rivers for thousands of years before new immigrants started calling the region home.

But the story of these rivers stretches back far beyond any human habitation.

Not only do the great rivers of our land return the rain and snow back to the Salish Sea in the grand WATER CYCLE that the prophet Isaiah references today,[5] they are life-bringing highways, concentrating and distributing nutrients, feeding wildlife, irrigating crops, transporting fish, and shaping the landscape.

Together they form the collection and distribution system for fresh water upon which all life depends—they are the circulatory system of Mother Earth.

---

[1] The question was posed by Dr. Samuel Torvend during the 2008 Summer Theological Conference at Pacific Lutheran University, Tacoma, Washington.
[2] I served as a chaperone for my son's 4th/5th grade class on their field trip to the Cedar River to study the Sockeye migration first hand. You can find teacher Scott Rose's video by following this LINK.
[3] http://www.wta.org/go-hiking/hikes/rattle-snake-ledge
[4] Seattle Public Utilities video on the source of Seattle water @ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WXoiZBkKsDo
[5] Isaiah 55:10-11

Sermon copyright © 2015 by Pastor Erik Kindem, Peace Lutheran Church, Seattle, WA. All rights reserved.

We're celebrating rivers today! The rivers that fill our font and sustain our lives; the rivers in which we, after Jesus, are born and reborn.

And that's where our gospel takes us…to the Jordan River, and to John standing there at the limen, the boundary between Israel's past and its future.

John announces: ONE MORE POWERFUL THAN I IS COMING! … and no sooner do the words leave his mouth than THAT ONE, Jesus of Nazareth, makes his entrance, wading into the river to be baptized. And then…

HEAVENS TEAR, SPIRIT SWOOPS, VOICE DECLARES:
YOU ARE MY SON, THE BELOVED; WITH YOU I AM WELL PLEASED.

What kind of Voice it was, no one can say for sure. The way Mark tells it, perhaps Jesus himself was the only one who could decipher that glorious thunder.

But in my imagination the Psalmist got it right:

The voice of the LORD is a powerful voice;
The voice of the LORD is a voice of splendor.
The voice of the LORD breaks the cedar trees…shakes the wilderness…
makes oak trees writhe and strips the forest bare.
And in the temple of the LORD all are crying, "GLORY!" [Psalm 29, ELW]

A voice like that has much in common with the surging force that ripped boulders loose from their moorings up at Hyak recently and turned Snoqualmie Falls into a churning cauldron.[6]

And if we read on to verse 12 in Mark, we find, indeed, that Jesus is DRIVEN IMMEDIATELY from the river out into the wilderness, THRUST THERE as if caught on the leading edge of an avalanche and deposited by the same divine energy that swept over the waters at creation.

But if Jesus has access to such power, he doesn't show it, not yet anyway.
And when he does show it, it will be manifest not as the brute force of nature or as the malevolent force of weaponry, but as the power to heal.

All that the future holds for him and the community he will summon begins here, at the River Jordan.

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 nor the river in Jewish lands, for now Christ is everywhere and the Jordan is everywhere. The same consecration that blessed the rivers of the East sanctifies the waters of the West. Thus even if perchance a river should have some other name in this world, there is in it nonetheless the mystery of the Jordan."

Waters…mysterious waters. They threaten death and bring life. They inspire and frighten us.
They protect us in our mothers' wombs and then bear us out into the world.
Full of danger and full of promise, they draw us in.

[6] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VK-rWXCiFtU

Sermon copyright © 2015 by Pastor Erik Kindem, Peace Lutheran Church, Seattle, WA. All rights reserved.

On our final full day in Rome last June, our family went on a tour of the Church of San Clemente, one of the older Christian church sites in that ancient city. A few short blocks from where gladiators trained for battle, we entered the basilica with our guide Jose Peralta and saw the stunning mosaic of Christ on the Cross, depicted as the Tree of Life, from which the four rivers of paradise flow, restored.[7]

Sprouting from an acanthus plant[8] at the base of the Tree of Life are numerous spiraling vines, which nourish a breathtaking variety of images: birds, deer, baskets filled with fruit, a shepherd with his sheep, a peasant woman feeding chickens, to mention just a few. Taken together, they symbolize the fecundity of nature and human culture, which find their origin in the life-generating power of the Cross.[9]

Excavations, we discovered, are always going on in Rome, and at San Clemente, excavations beneath the current 12th century basilica have uncovered the remains of a much earlier 4th century church also dedicated to Saint Clement.

The street level entry to the 4th century church sits 15 feet below the current ground level. But from above you can look down and see the ancient fountain—still active—where road-weary pilgrims would stop to wash and refresh themselves before entering Saint Clement's shrine.

This 4th century church, however, is by no means the earliest building there.
For below it, yet other layers of structures have been found, dating to the first century and possibly beyond, including the remains of a Mithraic temple…

…and further below still, the SOURCE that is the reason these holy places were founded here in the first place: **A spring we first heard and then saw, still gushing, still pouring out water through limestone rocks far beneath the city, as it has for thousands of years.**

> The angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the city. One either side of the river is the tree life… and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.[10]

We in the Northwest are fortunate to have plentiful fresh water. In years to come, as water becomes more and more precious, the bountiful waters of this region will draw people here as never before.

But the *quantity* of water isn't the only issue. The *quality* of our waters, and their ability to support life is also at stake.

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

The way we use this gift of fresh water matters to us whose lives are shaped by the promises of the Triune God we received in baptism.

The liturgy of the worship life we share in this place follows us into the rhythms of our lives at home and school, work and recreation, and into the ethics of our social-political-economic lives.

---

[7] The congregation I serve received a National Clergy Renewal Grant from the Lilly Foundation, administered by Christian Theological Seminary, in 2013. The final stop on our family's four-month pastoral sabbatical was Rome.
[8] The acanthus is associated with healing and regeneration in Greek. See more @ http://biblefocus.net/consider/meaning-of-acanthus-greek-verus-hebrew/index.html
[9] The description of the mosaic by David Foote as published in the November 22, 2012 edition of CRISIS Magazine augments my memory of our visit there during my sabbatical in 2014. His full article can be found here: http://www.crisismagazine.com/2012/a-sign-of-contradiction-the-apse-mosaic-of-san-clemente
[10] Revelation 22:1-2, NRSV

Sermon copyright © 2015 by Pastor Erik Kindem, Peace Lutheran Church, Seattle, WA. All rights reserved.

When we know this to be true, then tracing the water in the baptismal font back to its source becomes a meditation on our Christian vocation in the world.

And that meditation leads us to once again SING:

Water, River, Spirit, Grace, sweep over me, sweep over me!
Recarve the depths your finger trace in sculpting me.[11]

[11] Refrain from the hymn *What Ruler Wades through Murky Streams,* Thomas Troeger: © 1984; rev. 1993, Oxford University Press, Inc. Today's worship began with a choral Call to Worship and a congregational Thanksgiving for Baptism, for which Troeger's hymn served as bookends.