

WGUMC May 7, 2017 "Somebody Loves Me Like a River"
Ezekiel 47:1-12

I've known rivers:

*I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the
flow of human blood in human veins.*

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

Langston Hughes puts into words a truth that is in our veins, too: we are drawn to rivers. As I think about it, I have never lived very far away from one. I grew up along the Missouri and Yellowstone Rivers. My college sat on the banks of the Charles River. I served in my first church in a little town on the Snake River. I met my husband at the confluence of the Willamette and McKenzie Rivers. Kristen was born near the San Lorenzo River. In Marin, east of town was the Petaluma River. Then we get to San Jose and find the Guadalupe. That's a river? At least it was for several weeks this winter.

What my own history tells me is that human beings need rivers as our bodies need blood. It's no surprise, then, that there is a river in Ezekiel's vision of the great restoration that

God is planning for the people of Israel when they come home from exile. The temple will be rebuilt and from underneath its threshold will flow in all directions a great river, the river of life.

When you live in a city, it's sometimes hard to remember that rivers bring life. We are accustomed to thinking of rivers as the means by which trash and toxic chemicals get into the bay. But for most of our history, rivers were considered to be holy, and they were a symbol of purity. There was a river in the Garden of Eden in Genesis [Gen 2:10] and there is a river flowing from the throne of God in the Book of Revelation [22:1].

From the beginning to the end of the Bible, rivers come from God, and deep in our collective consciousness is the notion that going down to the river to pray will bring us closer to God. It worked for Jesus when he was baptized in the River Jordan and the heavens opened and a voice said, "This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased." If you, too, want to

be a beloved son or daughter of God, if you want to get closer to God, come down with me and get to know a river.

One of the first things you learn is that if you want clean water, you'd better go to the source. Growing up in Sioux City, Iowa, I spent time boating and swimming in the Missouri River. There's a reason they call it the "Big Muddy." Each year, it picks up millions of tons of sediment, along with farm and feedlot runoff, and carries it 2,300 miles to the Mississippi and eventually into the Gulf of Mexico.

But what I knew as the Big Muddy starts out clean and pure in the mountains of western Montana, where three snow-fed rivers come together. One of them, the Gallatin, starred in the movie, *A River Runs Through It*, along with a very young Brad Pitt. In the movie, based on a true story, Pitt's father is a Presbyterian pastor who likes to get close to God while fly-fishing on the river. All around him is the Gallatin Range, looking

like the walls of a great temple. Just like Ezekiel, he can see a river flowing down from the altar of God.

The Gallatin River was named for Albert Gallatin, the Secretary of the Treasury, by Lewis and Clark who traveled by boat up the Missouri hoping to find a Northwest Passage to the Pacific Ocean. Those intrepid explorers teach us a second lesson about rivers. The trip up the Missouri was grueling and took fifteen months. The trip down the river took less than three, which just goes to show that travelling is easier when you are going with the flow.

That's something that the One who made the rivers wants us to know. We spend so much time paddling upstream, against the flow, against God and what God wants for our lives. If we would only turn our canoe around we would discover how much easier the journey through life can be. When we stop fighting it, grace is the current that carries us along and will get us where God wants us to go.

I remember floating in an inner tube down the Yellowstone River with a friend when I was in high school. It was so peaceful. But that's another thing about rivers: they may seem very calm as you float along, but don't be fooled; the current is strong. Remember, it was just a river flowing along that carved the Grand Canyon. So if you only look at the surface of things, you may not think that God is having much of an impact on your life. You may not always see the ripple effects of God's grace. You may not have any white water adventures with God or any dramatic encounters with the divine, but that doesn't mean that God isn't slowly, ever-so slowly, carving out some beautiful canyons in your soul.

But sometimes we do encounter rough rapids on the river. The Rogue River in Oregon is a class 3+ rafting river. But it is placid compared to some people I know. We all have times of crisis and chaos in our lives. And in those times, when our one-

person kayak is heading right for the rocks, rivers can remind us that we are not alone. In fact, we are all connected.

On our long driving vacation last year, we took Kristen to see Glacier National Park. I've been a few times, but I'd never really seen it, because the park had always been completely fogged in. But last year, it was bright and beyond beautiful.

At the visitor's center at the summit of Going to the Sun Highway where we actually got to see the sun, I came upon an interpretive sign for Triple Divide Peak, the hydrological apex of the North American Continent. As its name suggests, it's a three-sided peak. The water that falls on the western side eventually makes its way into the Columbia River and the Pacific Ocean. The water that falls on northeastern slope ends up in Hudson Bay and the Arctic Ocean. The water on the southeastern face flows into the Missouri River to the Gulf of Mexico in the Atlantic Ocean.

I took a picture of the sign because I was struck by the thought of how everything comes from the same source. People on this continent can swim in different oceans. We can think and act like we live on different planets. But the water that gives us physical life comes from the same place. Likewise, the living water that gives us our spiritual life is also coming from the same source. It is flowing from the same God.

And you can get to know this God the same way you get to know a river: by getting your feet wet. If you're a little hesitant, you can do it step by step. In Ezekiel's vision, the river starts as a stream that gets wider and deeper as it goes. I think the same is true of the spiritual life.

At first the stream is only ankle deep. People who only want to go ankle deep are the folks who engage with God only superficially, maybe just at weddings and funerals. They are the folks who experience God vicariously through other people's experiences. Or they may be folks who come to church every

week but just to warm the pew. I suspect that they're a little afraid of the water and what the river might do.

But some will get up the courage to go a little farther. Another thousand cubits and the water is now knee deep. This where a lot of Christians live, where faith is real but only when it is convenient, only if it makes us feel comfortable. We can take knee-deep faith because we like to fool ourselves that we are somehow in control.

To counter that, the guide in Ezekiel's vision takes him another thousand cubits and now the river is waist deep. This is where you start to feel as if the river could sweep you off your feet. This is where God starts to get a hold on you. You can feel the current, how strong it is. Before you know it, you are going on a mission trip to Mexico. You're going on a Walk to Emmaus. You're committing to intensive Bible study. You're doing overnights at the Village House. All the while, you're starting to get a feel for this river.

Now most people think that this is far enough, that this is a faithful life. And we could have a pretty good life living waist deep in the river of God. But your spirit guide wants you to go even farther. Another thousand cubits and you will have become a part of the river. In Ezekiel's vision, the water there is deep enough to swim in but wide enough that you can't get to the other side. This is a life totally immersed in love. This is a faith that has plunged us, body and soul, into the heart of God.

I don't know about you, but I want that life. I want to immerse myself in that love. So I go to the source. I don't go to the temple. It was destroyed long ago. But symbolically speaking, it was reconstituted in the Risen Christ. Christ has become the temple, the dwelling place of God, and from him the river of life continues to flow. As he says in the Gospel of John, "The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." [John 4:14] I know a song

that goes, "Somebody loves me like a river, somebody like a flowing stream," but this is no vision, this is no dream. Thanks be to God!