

Stepping In

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, September 27, 2020, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scripture: [Psalm 46](#)

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I've been thinking about rivers this week. That might surprise you after listening to today's scripture reading. In this Psalm that is rich with all kinds of imagery, there is only one line that refers to a river and the river isn't even the subject of that line; it's the object. The fact that I've been thinking about rivers this week might not surprise you if you knew it is the theme for this fourth Sunday of the Season of Creation.

I've been thinking about rivers this week, about the rivers that I've encountered and that have encountered me. Having grown up in Lexington, Massachusetts, ("the birthplace of American liberty") you might guess that the Concord River is important in my life story. It's not. Even the Charles River, which separates Cambridge and Boston, isn't really all that important to my life story. The Piscataquog River, which, unless you're from the south-central New Hampshire, you've probably never heard of, plays a role in my childhood. Vermont's Green River holds a strong childhood memory, as does the Deerfield River in western Massachusetts.

As I reflected on rivers, I realized, though, that the two most rivers in my life are the Columbia and the Snoqualmie, both in Washington state. And I found myself pondering why that is and I think it has something to do with baptism. While I was serving a church in Richland, Washington, as an Interim Pastor, I performed a handful of baptisms in the Columbia. And during the decade I served as a pastor in Carnation, Washington, I performed somewhere around 30 baptisms and reaffirmations of baptism in the Snoqualmie. Those two rivers are important to me because they are spiritually powerful for me. And they are spiritually powerful for me because of my interactions with them, because I stood in them waist deep and welcomed new disciples of Jesus as they made and renewed their baptismal commitments.

I've been thinking about the rivers in the Bible this week. The first river that came to mind is the river the 22nd chapter of Revelation, the river that Roberta spoke about in last week's *Kairos Moment*, the river that flows through the new Jerusalem from the throne of God. Do you know the hymn, "Shall We Gather at the River"? "Shall we gather at the river/ Where bright angel feet have trod/ With its crystal tide forever/ Flowing by the throne of God?" Robert Lowry, the composer, was referring to this river.

Rivers show up in more places than the last chapter of the last book of the Bible. The second creation story in the book of Genesis (the older of the two creations stories told in the first two chapters of that book) says that God created a lush garden surrounded by four great rivers. And in that garden, God created human beings, and gave those human beings the responsibility of being stewards of creation.

Then things went wrong. "Humanity failed the requirements of life in paradise. Disaster followed. God exiled the woman and man from the garden. Childbirth became

arduous. Men dominated women. Brothers murdered and deceived one another, wrangling over their inheritance and fighting over blessings. Fathers raped daughters. Tribes invaded and colonized lands, killing or oppressing their inhabitants. [Even so,] somewhere, paradise remained in the world, haunting every tale of folly, injustice, or greed.”¹

The hope of paradise keeps coming up in the Hebrew Scriptures. In the Song of Songs (4:12-14), the author uses the imagery of this lost garden of delight to sing of a love and joy that is an antidote to the banishment of Adam and Eve.²

Amos preached against injustice and exploitation perpetrated by the wealthy, promising that the gifts of paradise would be restored to them if they would “establish justice” and “seek good and not evil.”³ “But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream,”⁴ he said. The Biblical imagination of paradise-restored relies on images of the power of rivers.

The book of Isaiah has many images of paradise in it. The image of the Peaceable Kingdom where “the wolf shall dwell with the lamb” is one of them. It is with images of paradise that Isaiah promises divine delivery from the Babylonian exile (see Isaiah 51:30). Again and again, Isaiah says that God cares about the suffering and the oppressed and that faithful people who are committed to the welfare of all would restore and sustain paradise.⁵

And Jesus, when he began his ministry, Luke tells us, turned to Isaiah. While Jesus didn’t read all the way through to Isaiah 61:11 (at least as Luke tells it), we know where this passage is going. “The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners ...” the passage begins. And the reading ends with this imagery: “For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.”⁶ His inaugural address is a call to restore paradise.

The Catholic Cathedral of Rome is not, as one might suspect, St. Peter’s Basilica (which, technically, isn’t in Rome; it’s in Vatican City). The Cathedral of Rome is St. Giovanni in Laterano. This is where the Pope’s official seat as bishop is. The church dates back to around 300, a gift from Constantine. This photo is of a mosaic in the main apse of the church. The large gold field with the eight larger figures was added about a thousand years later. One of the eight larger figures in the gold field facing the cross is St. Francis, who wasn’t made a saint until 1228, so we know it had to be added after that.

It is the art that remains from the 4th to 6th centuries that interests me, for this older art provides a window into Christian theology of that period. At the top of the mosaic,

¹ Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, *Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of This World for Crucifixion and Empire* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2008), 16.

² *Ibid*, 17.

³ *Ibid*, 18-19.

⁴ Amos 5:24, *NRSV*.

⁵ Brock and Parker, *op. cit.*, 19-21.

⁶ Isaiah 61:1,11, *NRSV*.



in the dark blue sky of the heavens, is a bust of Jesus.⁷ Winged seraphim hover around him. Directly below him is a dove facing head down. From the dove's beak flows a stream of water. Below the dove is a cross, segmented, with a large jewel in the center of each section. The stream of water falls behind the cross, forming a pool at its base. At the center of the cross is an oval medallion showing Jesus standing in the water and John pouring water over his head. Two stags stand at the base of the cross, looking out at us. Their presence calls to mind Psalm 42:1, "As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God."

Flowing out of the pool are four rivers. Two sheep, snow white, slightly smaller than the deer and directly below them, drink from the rivers. The rivers split to the left and right, leaving a triangle below the cross. In this triangle is a golden city. And across the entire base of the apse is a fifth river and a lush meadow, dotted with birds and flowers. In this fifth river, swans paddle serenely in pairs, a couple cherubs fish from a boat, another rides a swan, and another wind surfs.

The four rivers tell us where we are. They are carefully labeled: Pishon, Gibon, Tigris, and Euphrates. They are the four rivers of paradise from the creation story in Genesis 2. We are in paradise. The fifth river is also labeled. It is the Jordan. Without a doubt, the early church connected baptism with the restoration of paradise.

From the beginning of the church, Christians have prayed that God's kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven. This prayer is a prayer for the restoration of paradise. When I pray this prayer, I'm not trying to get God to do something about restoring paradise. I pray this prayer to motivate myself, to call me and my community to be about doing God's will

⁷ This description is based on the description in Brock and Parker, *op. cit.*, xii-xiv. The photograph used here is from <https://www.flickr.com/photos/hen-magonza/4631983619/> and will probably give you a better view of the artwork.

on earth. I pray this prayer to remind me to see the potential for paradise here and now. I pray this prayer to call my community to its mission: to be about creating paradise here and now.

“We can come to know the world as paradise,” write theologians Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, “when our hearts and souls are reborn through the arduous and tender task of living rightly with one another and the earth. Generosity, nonviolence, and care for one another are the pathways into transformed awareness. Knowing that paradise is here and now is a gift that comes to those who practice the ethics of paradise. This way of living is not Utopian. It does not spring simply from the imagination of a better world but from a profound embrace of this world. It does not begin with knowledge or hope. It begins with love.”⁸

However, stepping into paradise in this life is not an individual achievement. It is the gift of God’s community when it trains perception and teaches ethical grace. “Paradise provides deep reservoirs for resistance and joy,” they write. “It calls us to embrace life’s aching tragedies and persistent beauties, to labor for justice and peace, to honor one another’s dignity, and to root our lives in the soil of this good and difficult earth.”⁹

Amen.

Questions for Reflection:

- What are the important rivers in your life’s story?
- Where and how do you experience paradise in this life?
- How might Niles Discovery Church be about the work of restoring paradise?

⁸ *Ibid*, 409.

⁹ *Ibid*, 410.