

Sermon for Sunday, June 30, 2024  
River Sunday

Genesis 9:12-17  
Revelation 22:1-5  
Matthew 28:1-10

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Today is River Sunday and we certainly have seen the power of water and of rivers this week; especially as we consider the Rapidan Dam on the Blue Earth River and the collapse of the house on the eroding banks of that river. Then there's the usually sleepy Cannon River winding its way through Waterville to Northfield and east to Cannon Falls, Welch, and ultimately to the Mississippi, flooding fields and roads as it goes. It has not been a sleepy river this week! We are witnesses to the power of water on a personal level in the last ten days.

The Bible contains a multitude of passages with references to water and to rivers. Now the Genesis and Revelation Scripture readings have obvious water and river references. But what's the point of the addition of the resurrection story from Matthew's gospel? How should we connect or think about these three passages?

With the help of our Wednesday evening worship conversation I was given an insight into one way that pulls all three passages together. The insight uses the idea of a timeline, a salvation timeline, that flows from ancient times to the present and beyond, just as a river does.

How should we connect or think about these three passages? The short answer is that these three passages provide a Scriptural timeline describing how God fulfills God's covenant with humanity. These passages are not so much about water and rivers as they are a statement describing a timeline of God's covenant extending across history. *(Pause)*

A covenant is described as "a written agreement or promise between two or more parties especially for the performance of some action." Clearly there wasn't a physically written agreement between God and humanity after the flood described in Genesis 9. But there is something else: the rainbow. The rainbow is the visual sign reminding and reassuring humans that the promise of God remains. It's not like a contract that is stored away in a safe that

one can pull out and examine to reassure one's self that the promise still exists and continues. But that piece of paper can get pretty tattered after a length of time. The rainbow does not.

There are people who believe that the flood story is a literal depiction of an event that truly happened. But I want you to consider the symbolism that lies under this story. Why was there a flood? Because God looked at the earth and saw that it was filled with violence and corruption. From this observation God determined that the earth needed to be washed clean of the corruption that was harming humanity and the entirety of God's creation.

Now think for a moment about the amazing advances that have been made in weather prediction. I even have a little pop-up on my computer that tells me it will rain in 3 hours! That wasn't even a dream 50 years ago. The ancient people who first told the story of Noah and the Ark didn't have weather radar! They could only look at the sky and the clouds and make a guess about what the weather was going to do next. All they knew was that if a cloud came up in the west, it might rain. They observed that when this cloud moved off to the east often a rainbow would form. This rainbow, a phenomenon of great beauty that appeared after the storm, had to have meaning. Together with God's word they attached a word of covenant to the appearance of the rainbow. From it they derived hope. Now they have a promise and so do we; a covenant that God made that has never been broken.

Some say that it's pretty likely that there is a rainbow occurring somewhere in the world at any given moment. I really like that idea. By extension then God is always being reminded of God's covenantal promise to protect the earth from flood.

One could argue that the covenant that God made that day with Noah is not just about the lack of a flood, it is also about salvation. The covenant is a promise not just of life, but of the saving grace of God who has promised to protect us. Returning then to the start of a timeline: we have in Genesis a very ancient promise of salvation through the symbol of a rainbow.

Now we could shrug our shoulders and choose to disregard this ancient symbol. BUT the Old Testament continues with story after story of humanity's failure to live as God intended. The cleansing effect of the flood didn't last very long. The OT is also filled with story after story of God's actions to save, correct, and guide God's people. God kept trying but humans seem to be pretty prone to

failure. So God determines to take action in a way that is going to provide salvation once and for all. To accomplish this God sends a part of God's self in human form: God sends Jesus. He was no symbol! He was a real human being, born of a real woman, while conceived through the power of the Holy Spirit. He was true God and true man at the same time. In and through Jesus God acted to bring salvation to the world. In a figurative way you could say that the rainbow, the ancient symbol of salvation, was replaced by a cross. That's why the passage from Matthew is included in our Scripture readings for today because in it we hear how God fulfills the ultimate in human salvation when God raises Jesus from the dead. Jesus' death and resurrection is like a point on the salvation timeline.

But the timeline (and the promise) don't end with Jesus' resurrection! The resurrection is of vast importance of course but here we are 2000 years later trying to live out our lives; trying to avoid getting washed away by the power of mighty rushing waters whether those waters are rivers in flood or physical and mental challenges that we face in our personal lives.

Therefore there is another point on the salvation timeline. This point is placed on the far future end of the timeline. We hear it described when we hear the story of John's vision of the City of God in the reading from Revelation. Just like the rainbow this vision is a symbol of the salvation promised to us by God. It includes a river flowing with the water of life, the water that we humans need to survive. Notice that this water is described as "bright as crystal." None of our flooding rivers are flowing bright as crystal just now: in fact they are very brown, very muddy. But the river of life in the City of God is clear and clean.

Last week I had reason to drive to Faribault and did so along highway 3 which at places is close to the Cannon River. The floodwaters had subsided some and were not obviously flooding the lowlands. But the river itself was still very high. In a couple of places there were tangles of trees and debris that had piled up against bridges and box culverts. When water erodes river banks it often takes down the trees growing near the edge. We have mention of a tree in the passage from Revelation: the tree of life growing on both sides of the river (not quite sure how that works but...) I'm thinking that the river that flows from the throne of God is under God's control and the waters will not undercut those trees causing them to fall or to fail.

In addition those that live along the banks of this river have nothing to fear and look forward to the nourishment that they will receive from the fruit of the tree of life.

To recap: on this River Sunday we flow along the entire span of human time beginning with the covenantal promise of the rainbow, continuing on through the covenantal promise of salvation that comes to us through Jesus, and extending on beyond the end of time to the covenantal promise of life after death in the city of God. Through all of these promises runs a river: a river of life. That river does not bring us harm: that river brings us life! Amen.

"Life revolves around rivers; civilizations came to birth alongside rivers; humanity chose to settle by rivers that nourish and sustain them. But rivers are also watery graves and are ferocious in their ability to destroy and take life, through their overflowing and through their drying up and thereby snuffing out life."