

Living Water

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Wall Street United Church

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Ezekiel 47: 9, 12 New International Version

Swarms of living creatures will live wherever the river flows. There will be large numbers of fish, because this water flows there and makes the salt water fresh; so where the river flows everything will live. [...]

Fruit trees of all kinds will grow on both banks of the river. Their leaves will not wither, nor will their fruit fail. Every month they will bear fruit, because the water from the sanctuary flows to them. Their fruit will serve for food and their leaves for healing.

Sermon

INTRO: The Babylonian Captivity

Let's start by going way back in time. Let me tell you the story of what's called the Babylonian Captivity. It's the year 586 BCE, and the city of Jerusalem has been attacked and conquered for a *second* time by the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar II. (There will be a test later to see who can remember, and spell, his name!)

The Babylonians had already asserted economic control over the city of Jerusalem some years earlier, and therefore expected to receive tribute from the Judahites, which is what the people who lived in the Jerusalem area were called at the time. By the way, that's where the more modern term Jew comes from – Judahite.

But the Kingdom of Judah had attempted to rebel, and so the Babylonians returned to put down the rebellion. One of the first things the Babylonians did was destroy the Temple, which was the heart of Jerusalem. Then, in order to more effectively control the city with a minimum of bloodshed, the Babylonians kidnapped and carried off all the religious and political and economic leaders.

For almost 50 years, these Judahites were held in captivity by the Babylonian King. Interestingly, they were actually treated quite well as far as we can tell — and, in fact, as time went on they were allowed to engage in commerce and practice their own religion. They were not enslaved, but they were second class, and they weren't allowed to leave. All they wanted, of course, was to go home.

The passage we heard this morning is proclaimed by the prophet Ezekiel, who was one of those Judahites held in Babylon during that time.

The first part of Ezekiel's book that we did not hear understandably reflects despair, and a lot of it is about asking God why the Judahites have been abandoned.

There are other writings in scripture that come from that period where we hear the same thing. Psalm 137, for instance, is one of the best known psalms or songs of lament from that era. It's not written by Ezekiel, but it reflects the mood. You probably know it from the version made famous in 1979 by Boney M: *"By the rivers of Babylon, where we sat down, oh yeah we wept, when we remembered Zion."* That is a direct quote from Psalm 137!

The song was actually written by a Jamaican reggae band called the Melodians, because Psalm 137 had meaning for them as descendants of enslaved people. When they sang it, Zion referred to Africa, not Jerusalem, and Babylon meant Western culture of slavery.

The experience of the Babylonian captivity is really important and has resonated down through history with many oppressed peoples. But we do have to be careful and clear when we use the word Zion today.

A historical connection to a land can never be used to justify the oppression or slaughter of another people. That's something that the modern state of Israel is unfortunately engaging in against Palestinians in the name of "Zionism." The Babylonian Captivity teaches us that all oppression is wrong.

Ezekiel imagines a better world

But back to Ezekiel.

Ezekiel moves from the sorrow expressed in Psalm 137 and the early chapters of his book into visions of possibility. Isn't that wonderful when we can move from despair to hope?

The section we heard today is near the end, when Ezekiel records visions of a future where not only people but the whole world is renewed by clean, flowing water. He no longer just thinks about himself, but about all of creation.

Our deepest understandings of what could be possible in this world often come from people who experienced injustice, colonization, or oppression. People who experienced the Babylonian Captivity, for instance, and those who are descended from people who were enslaved.

Out of their reality, they imagine a better life, while those of us who have what we need unfortunately sometimes take it for granted.

So Ezekiel envisions a better world.

And living where he is, he is inspired by the world around him. In Babylon, water flowed in abundance. The city was located in the 'fertile crescent' on a floodplain between the Euphrates and Tigris rivers. It must have seemed impossibly fertile to the inhabitants of semi-arid Jerusalem! (In fact many scholars believe that it may have reshaped some of the ways the story of the Garden of Eden was recounted, since in Genesis we are told it is between the Euphrates and Tigris rivers!)

Water in Jerusalem

But the water we heard about in the reading this morning isn't from Babylon and isn't just any water. Ezekiel is talking about a vision of water flowing out from beneath Jerusalem itself and feeding the world.

And it reminded me of the time I spent in Jerusalem back in 2012. We stayed in a guesthouse within the Convent of the Sisters of Zion, who worked with the

Palestinian people for justice. We were told that the convent had been built over what is known as “the stone pavement”—the pavement where many people once believed Pontius Pilate had condemned Jesus to death. We now know that isn’t quite true. Although many people were judged and condemned there, the pavement itself wasn’t built until about 100 years after Jesus’ death.

But why was it built? If you descend beneath the present-day street, down to that first-century pavement, where the scratch marks of Roman soldiers can still be seen — marks left as they gambled over prisoners’ clothes and belongings — you still haven’t reached the bottom.



Turn your head. Look off to the side. There you will find another stone staircase going deeper still, beneath the pavement. Take those steps, slowly, carefully, for they are old, and keep going down until you arrive at what is known as the Struthion Pool.

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There, water has been collected for thousands of years, keeping this arid city alive. The ancient first century pavement, now over your head, was built to protect this pool — a pool that was uncovered in Jesus’ time, and that he most likely drank from.



Water is life, my friends.

We recognize that in our baptism. The words we spoke this morning were an echo and a reaffirmation of our baptismal vows. Water reminds us that we belong to God, and that we belong to the world. And the relationship we form with God is not separate from the one we forge with creation.

In baptism, we are reminded that we are part of something larger than ourselves — bound to God, to one another, and to the world that God has entrusted to our care. What a beautiful world!

Season of Creation

This means we really have to challenge ourselves to think about how we as humans care for — or don't care for — this world and our water. Ezekiel offers us a vision of hope, and as we look out at the state of the environment in our time in this Season of Creation, we certainly could use some of that.

Perhaps you, like me, have sometimes wondered how we ever got here, with the forest fires, and the terrible flooding, and the melting glaciers, and the dying fish?

Did you know that 2.1 billion people still lack access to safe drinking water in our time? (Unicef) That's 1 in 4 people around the globe. Some of those people live in Canada, in Indigenous communities — 38 Indigenous communities, to be specific.

And in some places around the world it's not *just* safe drinking water that's in short supply, it's *all* fresh water. Droughts are threatening the survival of animals, plants, and human food sources. Huge Data Centers to support AI are draining water sources. These issues force people to migrate, which in turn creates *more* pressure on the water resources of the places they turn to. And that leads to violence.

As you can see, it's those that have the least who are impacted the most by the water crisis.

It's all interconnected. The water crisis we are currently in is damaging relationships — between humans, between humankind and God, and between humans and other living beings. (Season of Creation Resource)

Are you depressed yet? Well, hang in there. Sometimes, like the writer of psalm 137, we have to lament. But remember, lament can lead us to hope and new visions. Ezekiel was pretty down too at the start of his book, but he didn't stay there — and we don't have to either.

Christian Hope

The question is: what does it mean to be a Christian — a disciple — in times like ours?

How can we live our baptism with courage, integrity and solidarity?

One thing we can do is remember as we said in our statement of creed this morning, that we are not alone. We face the world together, with each other, and with God. And it is still a beautiful world. And you are each such a beautiful and beloved part of it.

So let us be grateful.

A second thing we can do is face the truth. We remember that Jesus said, "*I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life*". Truth matters. We can't look away.

So let us educate ourselves.

Thirdly, out of this togetherness and knowledge we *proclaim* the truth, as people have done throughout history, and just as so many Christians do in our day.

So let us speak out about water issues.

Finally, and throughout all this, we must continue to dream dreams of all that is possible. In Joel 2:28 it says that "*when the Spirit is poured upon us (hear that water language?) then our old people will dream dreams and our young people will have visions*."

And people are. There is hope. In the Australian Outback, a group of Aboriginal people a year ago used a solar powered robot to dig 1000 narrow pits in the hard desert floor. Today wildflowers have appeared. In Africa, the internationally

funded Great Green Wall, which is a tree planting project along the northern Sahara to stop its spread, plus a return to traditional harvesting, has meant that Lake Chad is at the highest level it has been for decades.

So our visions *can* become reality! Let us too embrace that Spirit of hope and possibility just as Ezekiel did.

Conclusion

In today's passage Ezekiel dreamed of water flowing under Jerusalem and *out* into the world. But the interesting thing is that the water that actually flows under Jerusalem flows *into* it, not out! The water I saw in the Struthion pool came from rainwater and a stream north of the city. No water flows *out* of Jerusalem, not in our day and not in Ezekiel's.

But he saw that it could. He had a vision.

He saw the possibilities of a story that is not yet finished.

And perhaps the water that he saw flowing out really represents all the truths, and the hope, and the possibilities that Christ shared with us and that we embrace through our baptismal vows. Christ is our living water.

Perhaps it represents the commitments we make to justice, for people, for the world, for water, for each other.

Perhaps it represents the work of our hands and the sound of our voices that protect the waterways and springs and oceans of the planet.

Perhaps it represents the love we are called to share, abundant like Ezekiel's water, beautiful like sunlight on a river, and endless like the love of God.

Amen.