

The River that Makes Us Glad

A sermon preached at St. Brendan's Episcopal Church, Deer Isle, Maine, on Sunday, September 27, Season of Creation, 2026 by the Rev. Dr. Jenny Reece revdrjmr@gmail.com

Texts: Ezekiel 47:1-12; Psalm 46; Revelation 22 1-7; 16-17; John 7:37-40

Prayer: Holy God, who created all things, we give you thanks that you also created us out of the dust of earth and stars to bear your image; and we give you thanks that when we marred that image, you renewed it in us again in Jesus Christ; and we give you thanks that you have gathered us here on this island today, to marvel at all that you have made and at all that you have done. Open us now, we pray, to your Spirit, flowing like a stream of clear water from the body of our Saviour into our bodies and our hearts. And may this living water flow through us to heal and tend a broken and thirsty world. And so may my words and the meditations of our hearts be blessed by you, our rock, our fountain of hope in the wilderness, and our redeemer. Amen.

“There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High.” Rivers make me glad.

I was born in Scotland, on the east coast, between the River Dee and the River Don. I caught my first trout in the Feuchie Stream, a tributary of the River Dee. Yes, in Royal Deeside, where Balmoral, favorite palace of Queens also stands. But to the river we are all alike, royalty and commoners, to the river there is no rich or poor, no races, no ethnic divisions, we are all just those poor sticks of humans stuck on their banks as their cleansing, life giving waters wash on by. In North America I have lived beside the St Lawrence, the Mohawk, the Hudson, the Charles, the Raritan, the Millstone, the Delaware, the Rappahannock, and more; and now in Maine I live on the banks of the little Narramissic river which runs between Alamoosick reservoir and the Penobscot River as it bends around Verona island and meets the ocean in Penobscot Bay. I have made my home, by God's grace, in that great life-giving Penobscot watershed, as you have made yours down here in the East Penobscot Bay, and as they have done at St Andrew's way up in Millinocket where I preached a

couple of weeks ago. Though miles separate us, the Penobscot waters connect us with each other and with the Penobscot people who share the name and who have dwelled and fished and hunted and tended its banks for hundreds, thousands of years, and still do. The river connects us all to each other and to all the fish and otters, water-rats and ospreys and newts and frogs that it nourishes. Every day the Narramissic river brings me joy as I walk beside it, pray beside it, watch it, listen to it and talk back to it. In our culture we live by the myth that we are separate, individuals, disconnected. But if we pay attention to our rivers and waterways we know our lives are joined with theirs and with each other.

““There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High” In this verse, the Holy Habitation of the Most High the dwelling place of God, is imagined as a city, a city made glad by streams of living water. But I wonder: is it not the river itself that is the holy habitation. In the prophet Ezekiel’s vision in his 47th chapter, which is a vision of the temple restored and renewed, the emphasis is not actually on the bouse of God—the healing presence of God is in the river, issuing from it, a stream, deeper and wider, ever deeper and wider, a stream of God’s presence known in love, mercy and healing.

To understand the import of this vision you have to know where Ezekiel was when he had it and wrote it down. He was not in Jerusalem. He was in Babylon. You see, if you remember, one of the huge turning points of the history of the people of God, as big as the exodus itself, was the defeat and destruction of Judah and Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 587 BC and the subsequent exiles of a great part of the population especially the religious and secular elites into Babylon. Tha Babylonians have desecrated and torn down The temple – the holy habitation of God. For those exiled people of God, where is God’s presence? There is no sacrifice, no ritual, no way to affirm God’s presence with his suffering people. Ezekiel in his exile with the people begins to have visions of restoration and new life—you are perhaps most familiar with

his vision of the dry bones coming to life again with the breath of God—we read it at the Easter Vigil each year. And now at the end of his book we have the culminating vision—the temple rebuilt! But the focus of the vision is not on the temple itself—we don’t get descriptions of all its gates and courtyards of its gilded cherubim and its enormous arches—no, the presence of God is not in the building or its adornments, but in what is flowing out into the world, first a trickle, then a deepening, then deeper and deeper, stronger and stronger, now too deep to cross—the river flowing from the heart of God into the world to heal it to turn salt water into fresh, to bring life out of death, to transform and renew a defeated people and a groaning creation.

The people of God learned something in Babylon it seems. God’s presence does not depend on the temples we build. God’s presence, God’s healing and restoring presence, is what flows out from us here in church, not what we find and hoard here.

This stream of God’s presence flowing out from the house of God to the people is revisited at the end of the Bible by John of Patmos, again speaking to a people exiled, persecuted, lost, after the destruction of the second temple, without a place they can call God’s House, God’s Holy habitation. There again, it is a river that is imagined, a river whose life giving life renewing waters bring healing not only to the people but to the nations—the nations that as the psalm says “make much ado” and totter and fall. Then and now.

And in the midst of the loss, the destruction, the calamity, Jesus stands among us. .” “See, I am coming soon! “It is I, Jesus, who sent my messengers to you with this assurance of God’s presence: let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift. “

The words of Revelation not only recall Ezekiel’s vision, but the words of Jesus himself as he stood among the people at the Festival of the Booths and said:

Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and . . . drink!

Oh thirsty people, can you hear him calling to you today?

The setting of these words of Jesus is important: it was Feast of Tabernacles, the third in a series of Jewish Feasts, a seven or eight day thanksgiving festival. In it (as it says in Lev 23) the people left their houses and built temporary booths of palm branches and willow leaves. They would live here for a week to remember the days of wandering in the desert. And to remember how God had provided for them even there with manna and quail and water from a rock. Every day there was a procession in which priests would carry pitchers through Jerusalem to the Pool of Siloam singing words from Isaiah, “Therefore with joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.” On the last day, the priests’ pitchers were empty—symbolizing the disobedience of the people, resulting in death in the wilderness, and their thirst for God. It was at this moment perhaps that Jesus called out those words of invitation:

“Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink.”

Can we hear the voice of Jesus today? The Psalmist wrote two and a half thousand years ago, but Psalm 47, verse 7 also describes today’s conditions and anxieties: In the midst of the “much ado” of the nations, and the shakiness of national and international affairs, in the current concerns about the warming of the earth and the destruction of the natural world, how can we hear the life giving, gentle, but persistent, voice of the man Jesus of Nazareth? The one who offers water for our thirst and healing for all our hurts renewal instead of destruction, peace instead of war, and life instead of death

I propose that one of the ways we become open to hearing the call of Jesus is by paying attention, close attention, to where we are. To the ground on which we stand. To the air we breathe. To the river that runs beside us and to the waters that surround us—oh and yes to all the otters, lobsters, ospreys, eagles,

skunks and beetles, trees and fruits, we share it with. Our neighbors. Do you know your river? The waters of your bay of the great ocean?

I have been learning about the Penobscot since I moved to my house in Orland. I have been learning the history of the rivers of Maine, so impacted by the practices of the paper mills and other industries that sprung up around them as we took the gift of the trees and maybe took too much. The forests and the forestry helped us to survive, its true, but in doing so we poisoned them, and ourselves too, We built dams for our power needs, and forgot to care for the fish who needed to move freely upstream and down.

But in the last decades, we have begun to come to our senses, In 2012 first the Great Works Dam and then the Veazie Dam were removed and then elevators and bypasses for the fish were installed in Milford and Howland and since then more dams have come down and more fishways constructed until now about 2,000 miles of river and streams are open for sea-running fish while we still maintain crucial power generation still in other locations. Thanks be to God. To know these things is to realize how God is working among us all the time, calling to us to be filled with the living water of God's love in Jesus Christ, and then emptying us out so that we can share that joyful stream with our neighbors the human ones, the other living things, the rivers, and the very rocks themselves.

To end with I want to include some words from the late great poet and farmer and prophet Wendell Berry. Back in 1989 he wrote these words:

We have lived by the assumption that what was good for us would be good for the world . . . We have been wrong. We must change our lives, so that it will be possible to live by the contrary assumption that what is good for the world will be good for us. . . . We must recover the sense of the majesty of the creation and the ability to be worshipful in its presence. For it is only on the condition

of humility and reverence before the world that our species will be able to remain in it.”

And in one of his most profound, and certainly shortest poem, he speaks of the attitude we must take as we stand in the midst of challenging and uncertain times as we surely do now.

“February 2, 1968”:

By Wendell Berry

*In the dark of the moon, in flying snow, in the dead of winter,
war spreading, families dying, the world in danger,
I walk the rocky hillside, sowing clover.*

I walk the rocky hillside, sowing clover.

I walk beside the river, gathering crab apples and making jam,

You walk beside the Eggemoggin reach and make windows to keep your neighbors warm.

‘Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water.’” Do you hear your Saviour’s voice? Will you allow him to give you living water and assuage your thirst? Will you pay attention to his ongoing renewal of life in the world of nature? What do the waters of the Penobscot River, the East Penobscot Bay, Jordan Bay, Eggemoggin Reach, Gray Bay, say to you? Do you find God’s Holy habitation there? What is flowing out of your heart to other people, and to the other inhabitants of this planet? Jesus did not promise a trickle or a stream or a flow... He promised a river. Let the river of God’s love transform you, and flow through you into the whole of creation.

Amen.