

**Sermon: Take Me to the River**

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **Revelation 21:10, 21:22-22:5; John 5:1-9**

The book – or, more accurately, the letter – called Revelation is a vision from Christ to John, who wrote, ‘I was in the spirit on the Lord’s day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet saying, “Write in a book what you see.”’

John was writing in exile from the island of Patmos at the end of the first century to seven churches in Asia Minor, modern-day Turkey. His letter is a prophecy of warning and hope concerning the last days, which John was convinced would take place in his lifetime.

Another John was busy writing his Gospel concerning a man named Jesus, the incarnate Word of God. John’s is a story about salvation through God’s grace and truth.

The one element connecting the two readings is water.

The Gospel passage starts out, ‘After this there was a festival.’ After this what? Which festival? If we back up a bit, we learn that Jesus had just performed his second sign after coming to Galilee. That sign was this: he healed the son of man who came up to Jesus professing his faith that only Jesus could make the boy well. And it was so, even though Jesus never saw or touched the boy.

John doesn’t say which festival it was, but by mentioning it, he lets us know that Jesus went up to Jerusalem for it, and so time had passed since the boy’s healing. NT storytelling.

Today’s healing is not recorded in the other Gospels, nor is the pool mentioned anywhere else in either the Hebrew Scriptures or the New Testament. This is one of those short-but-intricate passages where information is often hiding in plain sight.

In the five porticoes surrounding the healing pool lay many invalids, and John is careful to tell us that they include the blind, the lame, and the paralyzed. One man was there who was *ill*. John makes no mention regarding the nature of the man’s illness, but we do know that ‘ill’ is different than blind, lame, or paralyzed.

My guess is that this is the story of Jesus healing a socially ill man. Even though he has been lying by the pool for thirty-eight years, no one has ever noticed him or his efforts to get into

the pool after God's divine action stirred the waters. For thirty-eight years, no one ever tried to help him. He's not blind, lame, or paralyzed; he's an outcast. Jesus made him well by first verifying that he *wanted* 'to be made well,' and then commanded him to stand up, which he did.

If we keep reading, we discover that this is one more reason why they wanted to kill Jesus: not just for breaking the sabbath but also for making himself equal to God.

We know that Jesus was often accused of breaking the sabbath, but when I first read that last line, I wondered if John really wanted to write, 'Now *that* day was a sabbath to remember, baby!'

Because what were the actions that made the man well? What 'work' did Jesus do that broke the sabbath? Jesus never laid a hand on the man, and neither did the man ever touch the water. So, was it the standing up part that showed the man's willingness and desire to rejoin the community, or did the healing occur when he took up his mat and walked away into the crowd?

He never professed faith in Jesus. He just wanted to be made well, and for him that meant being noticed, being loved, and that's the healing provided by Jesus.

Water and rivers play key roles in the Bible, starting with the Tigris and Euphrates, two of the four rivers mentioned in Genesis 2. Then there's the Nile, out of which Pharaoh's daughter drew the baby Moses in Exodus 2; and the River Jordan, which the Israelites crossed when they entered the Promised Land and also in which John baptized Jesus in Matthew 3.

The Bible also includes many references to *metaphorical* rivers and streams, from the waters of Creation in Genesis 1, the waters of shalom in Ezekiel 47, to streams of living water in Deuteronomy 1, and so on. The people living in the ancient Near East understood these metaphors because having a river nearby meant life, a more abundant life than you might have otherwise. In the wilderness, there were plenty of seasonal streams called *wadis*, which only reliably flowed in the rainy season. For this reason, God was very specific in declaring through prophets like Amos to 'let justice roll down *like waters*, and righteousness like an *ever-flowing stream*' – the waters of justice ought to be reliably present always.

So, what we have here in today's first reading is the ultimate: the river of the water of life flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb, Jesus Christ. This river flows through the middle of the street in an abundant urban garden. There is no bad side of town in this city – the fruitful tree of life stands on either side of the river. Everything is good in this garden. Here the nations can be healed by the leaves on the tree. Here we will see God's face.

This is how God intended it to be from the beginning. The angel said to John in exile, ‘These words are trustworthy and true.’ Things might not work that way now, but they will then.

We have plenty of rivers around here: The Fore and Back Rivers are local to us in Hingham and Weymouth; in Marshfield, we have the North and South Rivers; in Boston, there are the once-lovably-dirty waters of the Charles River; further west, we find the mighty Mississippi; and, beyond that, the Colorado, which provides power and water to five states yet doesn’t quite make it to the ocean any more.

In our world, protecting water sources – or simply having access to it – is an ongoing challenge for millions of people. Around here, we are blessed with lots of wells and aquifers, most of which are free from pollutants and contaminants. Globally, though, like the sick man in John’s Gospel, not everyone has access to fresh, clean water. For too many people, a *wadi* will have to do.

And every now and then, a hurricane blows through. With the destruction and ongoing misery experienced in places like Puerto Rico and Mozambique, it’s tough to talk about ‘the river of the water of life.’

Ours is a watery planet, but it’s a closed system – we have, more or less, the same amount of water available to us today that Adam and Eve had way back when. But sometimes there is simply too much wind and too much water in the same place all at once. When that happens, our compassion must become an ever-flowing stream.

In Genesis, the river flows out of Eden to water the world. In Revelation, the source of the always-flowing water of life is God, and the water of life is meant to heal and sustain us all, equally. Rivers *flow* – and the water at any point along the bank today is not the same water from yesterday nor will it be the same water tomorrow. God will not wait for the *end times* to renew us. The renewing water of life flows from God now, today.

John the Exile’s vision of the river of life is more than a metaphor; it is our hope for the future. John the Evangelist’s story of a sabbath-breaking healing is not even a faith story. It’s a story about transformation, of choosing to change your life because you’re tired of being soul-sick; anyone can choose to live in the light of God. Following Jesus Christ, then, is a journey toward God, and we follow him on a well-lit path written in the books of his Good News.

Amen.