

When the Rivers Run Dry

A Sermon by John Parker Manwell
The Paint Branch Unitarian Universalist Church
April 19, 2009

Call to Worship

from the poet, Langston Hughes [SLT #528]:

I've known rivers:

I've known rivers ancient as the world

and older than the flow of human blood in human veins.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.

I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.

I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.

I heard the singing of the Mississippi

when Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans

and I've seen its muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset.

I've known rivers:

Ancient, dusky rivers.

My soul has grown keep like the rivers.

Come, then, let us worship together.

Let our souls grow deep, as we draw life from the rivers.

Meditation and Prayer

from the prophet Isaiah, 24:4-6:

The earth dries up and withers, the world languishes and withers,
the heavens languish together with the earth.

The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants;

For they have transgressed laws, violated statutes, broken the everlasting covenant.

Therefore a curse devours the earth, and its inhabitants suffer for their guilt;

Therefore the inhabitants of the earth dwindled, and few people are left.

from the UN Environmental Sabbath program, excerpts [Earth Prayers, pp. 70, 82]:

We have forgotten who we are. . . .

We have alienated ourselves from the unfolding of the cosmos

We have become estranged from the movements of the earth

We have turned our backs on the cycles of life.

We have forgotten who we are.

We have sought only our own security

We have exploited simply for our own ends

We have distorted our knowledge [and] abused our power.

We have forgotten who we are. . . .

* * *

Great Spirit, whose dry lands thirst, help us to find the way to refresh your lands.

. . .

Great Spirit, whose waters are choked with debris and pollution,

Help us to find the way to cleanse your waters. . . .

Great Spirit, whose beautiful earth grows ugly with misuse,

Help us to find the way to restore beauty to your handiwork. . . .

We pray for the power to replenish the earth. . . .

We pray for the wisdom to find the way to restore our humanity.

SILENCE. . . .

SONG: #16 'Tis a Gift to Be Simple

Reading

We read this morning from the closing chapter of a Beacon Press book published three years ago by an English journalist named Fred Pearce, titled When the Rivers Run Dry: Water – The Defining Crisis of the Twenty-First Century. After a series of dispiriting chapters on the drying up of any number of major rivers around the world, thanks to human mismanagement, he invites us to rethink the way we look at water:

Rivers are sacred in most religions. For Buddhists, the gods live at the center of the universe, where the great rivers of the world – the Ganges, the Indus, and the Brahmaputra – rise. Hindus go on pilgrimage to drink the holy waters of the Ganges, and – further downstream, thankfully – they cast the bodies of their dead into the same river. [The Jewish and Christian scriptures depict] humanity beginning in the Garden of Eden, where fountains fed rivers that watered the world. . . .

The sources of water are everywhere revered. . . . The Japanese mark the start of rivers with Shinto temples. Africans pray at springs in the depths of their sacred groves. Even Europe is peppered with ancient holy wells.

Rivers are symbols of nationhood, too. Like nations themselves, they are always present but always changing. Ol' man river, he just keeps rolling along. The Yellow River is China's joy and sorrow. Moses parted the waters of the Nile to save his people. The Canadians will trade almost anything except their most abundant resource: water. Russian nationalists in the 1980s rose in anger at the prospect of delivering Siberian water to their fellow socialist republics in Central Asia. The Thames in England and the Murray in Australia, the Loire in France and the Three Gorges in China, trout streams and salmon rivers and even crocodile swamps – all tug at the heartstrings of nations.

But we need new versions of these totems and myths, versions that recognize that the rivers may not be so permanent after all – that without conservation and management, they could run dry. Ol’ man river, he just might stop rolling along. It is hard to say how or where these totems might emerge. . . . But for a start, Spanish opponents of plans to divert the Ebro River were on to something when they called for a “new water ethic” that cherishes water and respects the river.

That is something that Chinese rain harvesters and Indian water priests will understand. So will fishermen and environmentalists and the campaigners for “porous cities.” It is an ethic that recognizes that rivers are more than just sources of water – more than the feedstock for irrigation canals and hydroelectric power stations. It recognizes that rivers provide fish and silt and recharge for underground reserves, that water purges and purifies, that there is virtue in flood pulses and in the mixing of land and water on a river’s flood-plain.

And it requires us to find ways of storing water without wrecking the environment, of restoring water to rivers and refilling lakes and wetlands without leaving people thirsty, and of sharing waters rather than fighting over them. It requires us to go with the flow. And to do it before the rivers finally run dry.

Sermon

We think of the Rio Grande as a major river. Its headwaters are in the Colorado Rockies, and on the map, it flows for over 2000 miles into the Gulf of Mexico, forming much of our border with Mexico.

But now, during much of the year, sometimes all, you can drive along the beach where the Rio Grande should be flowing into the Gulf – and you won’t even get

wet. The river has run dry. What has happened? Some 80% of its water has been diverted to irrigate crops. Mostly alfalfa, which is fed to cattle, and cotton. Alfalfa and cotton are among the thirstiest crops in the world. They have no business being grown where there's not enough water. Yet even all this water is not enough. Huge quantities must be pumped from underground aquifers to supplement the river's water for irrigation.

Paradoxically, less than half of the diverted river water actually reaches those plants – the rest evaporates, or leaks into the soil. So the government is spending huge amounts to line the canals so they won't leak. But you know what? The leakage from those canals is about all that sustains that underground aquifer. Stop the leaks, and the aquifer will drop even faster.

That's the Rio Grande; or rather, that was the Rio Grande.

In his book, When the Rivers Run Dry, Fred Pearce offers similar stories about most of the world's major rivers.

In what is now Pakistan, the British left behind a vast array of canals and dams, to irrigate fields for cotton to supply Britain's textile industry. It has been said that no country but Egypt is as dependent upon one river as Pakistan is on the Indus.

But today this land is increasingly encrusted with salt, and being abandoned. Farmers try desperately to flush out the salt each year before they plant, but there just isn't enough water to do so. Meantime, little if any river water reaches its once rich delta. All this forces farmers to migrate to the already desperate city of Karachi, and sets one province against another as they compete for scarce water.

Next door, India, like many other countries including our own, illustrates the disaster of using water in ways that just don't make sense. In Gujarat, for example, farmers pump vast quantities of underground water to grow fodder for cows that produce milk that would be worth far less than the cost of the electricity used to pump the water – except that the government deeply subsidizes the electricity. So now, where once you could draw water from wells only thirty feet deep, now you have to go down 1300 feet, and still the wells run dry. Vast areas once irrigated have had to be abandoned, and as in Pakistan, those who once farmed them have fled to the desperately crowded cities. But so generous are those subsidies that the pumping by those who remain on the farm still causes widespread blackouts.

The Yellow River, in China, flows for some three thousand miles from the mountains of eastern Tibet, through the Gobi Desert, all the way to the Yellow Sea. It's drying up, just like the Rio Grande. And partly for the same reason – too much water diverted to agriculture, to grow the wrong crops in the wrong places. Vast numbers of people depend on the river – both for water to grow their crops, and on its being managed so they will not be flooded. For that reason, Chinese governments have for centuries stood or fallen on their ability to manage the river's flow, and it's a top priority today. Beijing, in fact, has now decreed that the river *must* reach the sea. Unlike King Canute, China's rulers haven't depended on mere fiat – they've put in place a huge bureaucracy with elaborate measuring systems so they can close off the irrigation canals when the river level drops.

But no decree can make up for drought in the river's upper reaches. Devastating

dust bowl conditions are developing, and no one knows why. Meantime, the reduced flow causes not just water shortage, but rapidly increasing silt buildup, so that the river bottom rises and the water must be contained behind dikes – and the dikes must be built ever higher. Thus the Yellow River has been called the “hanging river” because in places its level hangs far above the land. Pearce fears catastrophic flooding when the dikes can no longer be raised enough. And the unknown consequences of global warming, already under way, now overhang even the hanging river.

Going even beyond its monitoring of the river’s flow, the Chinese government has embraced a vast project to renew its flows by diverting huge quantities of water from the Yangtze River into the Yellow River, at a cost of more than \$60 billion. Even in one-party China, battles are being fought these days between environmentalists and plan supporters, over these plans, but the government seems likely to prevail. No one knows the ultimate cost, either in money or in consequences to those who now depend on the water which will be diverted.

Consider now another river, familiar to all of us through both the stories of the Bible and those of the media of our own time: the River Jordan, which flows – or did flow – from Lebanon into today’s country we call Jordan – a mere 200 miles. For thousands of years, the Jordan has flowed into the Sea of Galilee, then out, and on down into the Dead Sea. In 1964, Israel completed a dam, behind which giant pumps now lift the water into a huge pipeline to supply the cities of Israel. It was a major engineering feat. These pumps alone take an eighth of the electricity output of all of Israel’s power stations. No fresh water at all has flowed into the Jordan Valley for many years now. Neither Syria nor Jordan was consulted. Meantime, without the Jordan’s water flowing into it, the Dead Sea is

rapidly drying up.

Thanks to the Six Day War, Israel has now taken over all of the Jordan Valley, and also the Golan Heights where the Jordan River rises. That's why some have called it the "Water War." It has enabled Israel to use far more water than falls on its own territory, thanks to its control of ground water under the west bank. Even as Israel drills vast arrays of new wells, Palestinians are forbidden to sink any new wells or deepen old ones. The story of the Jordan's water is a story of both environmental disaster and deepening injustice to Israel's neighbors.

Then there's the rapid disappearance of another inland sea, far bigger than the Dead Sea, bigger than Belgium and Holland combined. Not so long ago, the Aral Sea, in Central Asia, was known around the world for its beauty, its beaches and its abundant fish. Now, some 90% of its water is gone. Former coastal ports now stand high and dry, more than a hundred miles from the water. Why? Under Soviet rule, the great rivers that once flowed into the Aral Sea were diverted to irrigate vast fields of cotton. Yet now even with the diversion, there's not enough water left to produce these crops. The United Nations has described what's happening to the Aral Sea as the greatest environmental disaster of the twentieth century.

Not surprisingly, Pearce found his visit to this area "deeply depressing," for not only is there "mismanagement of water on an almost unimaginable scale" which "has turned a showcase for socialism into a blighted land" – but "more disturbing still, I found that in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union nobody seems to have the vision or the will to rethink how this land and its rivers might serve the people living here better."¹ The now independent regimes which

govern these former vassal provinces continue to try to pour ever more water onto their fields to produce ever more cotton, yet the result is ever lower yields and ever more useless, salt-covered fields. Without this water, the Aral Sea is down to three far smaller bodies of water that will soon disappear, leaving behind a vast new desert which grows nothing at all – and desperate human misery.

Similar stories of water mismanagement and waste abound, around the world. The tragedy is that there's really enough water in the world to meet our needs – if we use it wisely. Our water problems are self-inflicted, the result of human ignorance, selfishness and mismanagement.

They reflect the temptation of governments to showcase grand but reckless projects, like dams, rather than engage in the more difficult process of educating their people about long-term risks and helping them to see their common interests in using their water wisely. They reflect the lack of knowledge, in past years, of some of the consequences of river diversion and irrigation schemes. They reflect, very often, a willingness to put the interests of some political and ethnic groups over others, and certainly to put each country's own interests above those of their neighbors. But most of all, they reflect our human hubris – I don't think there's any other word. We think that we know better than the Earth itself. We're ready to play God. We think we have the answers, and too often they're simple ones. Yet the only simple answer is that when it comes to ecology, there *are* no simple answers. Everything affects everything else, and there's so much we don't yet know.

But there is one simple truth that in our heart of hearts, we know, and that is that the waters of the Earth belong to all of us – and every person has a right to safe,

affordable water.

As humans we need to be aware of our vulnerability to hubris, and to restrain our temptation to identify our own self-interest only with our own generation and our own nation. If we're going to change, we need to begin with a fresh look at our attitudes toward the Earth itself. The rest will follow from a change of attitude.

“Be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth and subdue it,” God told the first humans in the Genesis the story of the Earth’s creation. “Have dominion over” all its creatures.² Western culture, in modern times, has found it easy to read these words as giving humans *carte blanche* to do with the Earth as we see fit. Our industries, even perhaps most of *us*, have seen its water and its minerals as unlimited resources awaiting our use. Until recent times, the smaller size of the human population, along with limits on human technology, have limited the devastation that our plundering could cause. But now, the devastation has grown all too obvious.

Today’s theologians have tried to soften the impact of these words of Genesis. Some say that “dominion” might more accurately be read as “stewardship,” implying our human responsibility for the consequences. That’s worth pondering.

But even without this encouragement, by now we can hardly avoid seeing our human responsibility for these consequences. The modern environmental movement is the result, and the church is playing catch-up.

I have not preached about these issues often, either. I guess I’ve assumed that I’d be preaching to the choir. We didn’t need it. I think all of us have known, at

least in our head, that global warming was a problem. We have thought of ourselves as environmentally responsible. But for me, at least, it wasn't a passionate priority. Then along came Al Gore, with his movie. He helped me to see the urgency and magnitude of the issue, with his dramatic pictures of melting glaciers and polar icecaps. Being aware isn't enough. Saving our planet Earth demands our passion. How might we cultivate that?

Phyllis and I live on the water. Our living room and deck look out across the Back River. Most Sunday mornings, we are up before sunrise, preparing for church. So many times, as the sky grows light, I am overwhelmed with gratitude at the beauty that surrounds me. I feel like going out and bowing to the Earth.

Imagine, wherever we are when we arise, looking out upon the world, opening our eyes, and drinking in its beauty, each day a little different. Imagine seeing it with eyes of reverence and a heart of gratitude. Whatever our understanding of God, imagine seeing the Earth, with all its systems, as *alive* – with beauty, with life, with holiness, even with the sort of integrity and intelligence which James Lovelock sensed in calling it Gaia, after the name of a Greek goddess.

Imagine, even, commissioning a banner, or a piece of sculpture or stained glass, to place here in this meeting house, to remind us that our relationship with the Earth is a sacred one, and that our stewardship of our planet is at the core of our mission as a church.

This is one major change in attitude that would benefit the world – cultivating an attitude of reverence for our sacred planet Earth. Another is to cultivate, even more than we already do, an awareness of our human interdependence with each other and with all living things, and with the Earth as well, on which we depend

for the food we eat, the water we drink, and for our homes and all that fills them.

Our culture tugs us incessantly in the other direction, toward seeing ourselves as self-sufficient and the Earth as an unlimited stockpile of materials for the things we use and make. But who among us is self-sufficient? And who today can still believe that the Earth's resources are unlimited?

These two things – cultivating each day a growing sense of reverence for the Earth, and stewardship; and with it, a growing awareness of our interdependence with each other and all life: In themselves they won't change the world; but they'll change us. They'll change the way we choose to live. They'll move us to shift from our culture of individualism to a culture of cooperation. We'll find ourselves working with our neighbors to give us better choices, in housing and in transportation, in energy and in the way we build, to the end of reducing our footprint on the Earth.

Because it's not just about the rivers. It's about the rising oceans. It's about disappearing fisheries and farmland, climate changes that bring drought to some, flooding to others, and growing extremes of weather for all of us. It's about the resulting famine, disease and displacement for millions, and wars over disappearing resources.

It all starts with changing ourselves, and letting go of our human hubris. But as we do this, who knows where it will end?

Closing words

For our closing words, this excerpt from a Gaelic benediction:

Deep peace of the running wave to you,
of water flowing, rising and falling,
sometimes advancing, sometimes receding.
May the stream of your life flow unimpeded:
Deep peace of the running wave to you.