

“Healing and the River of Life”

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These readings were suggested as part of the Ecumenical Season of Creation worship service. The Season of Creation is the time between September 1 (The World day of prayer for the care of creation) and October 4 (St. Francis' feast day) and it's a season to specifically pray and consider our role in caring for creation.

Ezekiel 47:1-12: Water Flowing from the Temple

47 *Then he brought me back to the entrance of the temple; there water was flowing from below the entryway of the temple toward the east (for the temple faced east), and the water was flowing down from below the south side of the temple, south of the altar. ² Then he brought me out by way of the north gate and led me around on the outside to the outer gate that faces toward the east,^[a] and the water was trickling out on the south side.*

³ *Going on eastward with a cord in his hand, the man measured one thousand cubits and then led me through the water, and it was ankle-deep.*

⁴ *Again he measured one thousand and led me through the water, and it was knee-deep. Again he measured one thousand and led me through the water, and it was up to the waist. ⁵ Again he measured one thousand, and it was a river that I could not cross, for the water had risen; it was deep enough to*

swim in, a river that could not be crossed. ⁶ He said to me, "Mortal, have you seen this?"

Then he led me back along the bank of the river. ⁷ As I came back, I saw on the bank of the river a great many trees on the one side and on the other. ⁸ He said to me, "This water flows toward the eastern region and goes down into the Arabah, and when it enters the sea, the sea of stagnant waters, the water will become fresh. ⁹ Wherever the river goes,^[b] every living creature that swarms will live, and there will be very many fish once these waters reach there. It will become fresh, and everything will live where the river goes. ¹⁰ People will stand fishing beside the sea^[c] from En-gedi to En-eghlaim; it will be a place for the spreading of nets; its fish will be of a great many kinds, like the fish of the Great Sea. ¹¹ But its swamps and marshes will not become fresh; they are to be left for salt. ¹² On the banks, on both sides of the river, there will grow all kinds of trees for food. Their leaves will not wither nor their fruit fail, but they will bear fresh fruit every month, because the water for them flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food and their leaves for healing."

Both of our Scripture readings today are prophetic visions. The first you heard, from Revelation, is part of the vision of John, in exile on the Island of Patmos. The majority of that vision is horrific and terrifying. John's vision laid bare the atrocities, injustices, cruelties, and corrupt use of power that plagued his world and yet at the end of his vision comes hope for a world made new, for a world healed and made right.

The traumatic and terrifying reality that Ezekiel faces is war and destruction. He is exiled in Babylon. The temple, which appears in his vision, has been destroyed in his reality and with it much of the hope the those in exile had to return. Ezekiel's visions do not shy away from the reality of the horror of what has happened to the people, and yet in the vision we read today, his vision is one of hope. It is a vision that says what you thought was impossible, what was lost beyond repair, is actually not lost beyond all hope—with God all things are possible. The vision in Ezekiel is very similar to that of Revelation. I imagine that the images of renewal and healing were known to the author of Revelation.

In our times there is much that is in need of healing. It's hard to pin down if our crisis is political, social, economic, or ecological because it's all of these things and they're all interrelated. For the Season of Creation our focus is on environmental and ecological concerns: climate change, extreme weather events, the decline of biodiversity, drought, and all the suffering these things bring- but these things impact all of society, our economics and particularly our ability to produce enough food to support our populations, it impacts politics as nations fight to gain access to necessary resources and in their panic turn to war with one another rather than cooperation.

The beginning of the book of Ezekiel takes place before the attack that conquers the kingdom of Judah, before the destruction of the temple, before the exile. Ezekiel warns the people to change their ways, but his prophecy falls on deaf ears and the remainder of his prophecies are given in exile, from Babylon. Our prophets' voices cry out now! Pleading and begging us to change our ways, before the crisis worsens. To be honest I don't think these voices are falling on deaf ears. While there are certainly many who dismiss these warnings and deny that a problem exists, many people do take the warnings of scientists seriously, many try to make actual changes to the way they live, many of those are you- the ones sitting in this room with me! But the scale of the changes that need to be made, must include not just individuals but society. The reality that we need each other has never been more evident and urgent. So what might a vision for our futures look like?

Ancient cultures took visions very seriously. We tend to dismiss them. Nonetheless we have visions all the time. I don't mean we have ideas about what we want the future to be- I mean our brains process these ideas, hopes, desires, and fears in such a way that mental images really appear in our minds. And we tend to dismiss them as daydreams, as fantasy, or we've just trained ourselves out of noticing these images altogether. Pay attention as you pray this week, notice if as you pray for your loved ones, or the world, for yourself, if there are images which accompany your prayers in your minds eye. In ancient times, it would not have been strange to hold on to these images as part of God's presence in our prayers, helping us to notice what is already in our hearts and minds.

Visions are important- like the ones shared in text form in Revelation and Ezekiel; they put hope into an artistic and symbolic framework giving us strength and courage. Most of all, they remind us that what is now does not

always have to be. So, although these visions are highly symbolic, that doesn't mean we should discount them. These ancient visions give us creative power and energy for our own vision of hope for our future.

Notice how closely tied to the natural world both visions are. For John and for Ezekiel the crisis is not specifically one of an ecological nature- but healing is holistic it includes both the natural world and human beings. Healing comes to humans and nations and animal life as well as the waters and the earth- all things are interconnected.

Drawing from the visions of our scriptures the image of water is a powerful one. Water connects all life, it is a limited resource, but it's recycled, meaning that the water that sustains us sustained our ancestors in the past and will sustain our descendents in the future. The rains that fall on us today may once have coursed through the Tigris and Euphrates. Water is the symbol of our rebirth in Christ- it is a sign of our healing each Sunday after we confess- a sign that we are loved, and that in spite of ourselves we are whole in Christ.

For me water is a reminder that grace is a more powerful force than anger. It's understandable for us to be angry at the state of our society's relationship with the natural world. I'm angry about the -increase in single use plastics, -destroying of the earth for data centers, -

But our anger- while it can be a good motivator- won't lead to healing. Our anger may give us righteous energy but in my experience it too easily gives way to frustration, despair, and even nihilism. Grace on the other hand, - which I see as a bit of a combination of gratitude and love- is a far more lasting source of strength and energy. When we cultivate a love of the natural world- we are more willing to work together to heal it than when we turn in anger toward one another with accusations and hatred. Building our gratitude for what we have in the now, makes it hard not to care about the future and nurturing all of creation in the present.