

“Water of life”  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
April 22, 2018

*Revelation 22:1-7*

by Rev. Patrick D. Heery

When I announced on Facebook two years ago that I would be moving to the Finger Lakes of Central New York, one of my friends who grew up in this area but has since moved away, commented, “I envy you. That’s God’s country.”

Now that I live here, I see what he means. Of course, I don’t think he was talking about the endless winters. He was talking about summer days, hiking in the woods or taking in a baseball game at Falcon Park. He was talking about standing in the birthplace of women’s rights or walking reverently along the Harriet Tubman Pilgrimage. He was talking about art shops, and wineries, and farms, and rolling green hills. And most of all, best of all: the lakes.

Formed nearly 2 million years ago by massive glaciers grinding and gouging the land, these long, narrow lakes are among the deepest in the United States and are reputed by the Haudenosaunee to have been hand-crafted by the Creator himself.

When Jenna and I moved here, we quickly learned how seriously you take these lakes. Having grown up and vacationed on the Great Lakes, such as Lake Michigan, we innocently referred to the lake here as “Lake Owasco.” Let’s just say that’s a mistake we will not be making again. We had no idea how the inversion of two simple words could make someone so angry and bright red.

I don’t blame you, though. There is beauty in these lakes. Sailing, and fishing, and picnics at the park. Watching the sun descend over that pale water, as herons sweep over the glassy surface. Memories of Easter sunrise services at Midge’s. In the Adirondacks, Jenna and I threw prayer stones into the waters of Blue Mountain for Ezra and Leo. How many stones, how many hopes, how many lives, are contained in that water?

Genesis tells us that a river flowed through the Garden of Eden. God called the water good. God fashioned humanity from the wet soil of the earth, placing humanity in the garden, beside the river, to care for it. It’s a story about what we lost, and lose again and again. For our own happiness and for the wellbeing of the garden, God gave us just two rules: God asked us to accept that not all of creation was here for our consumption, that there be one tree from which we did not eat; and God asked us to honor our responsibility to the earth and its creatures, as the stewards of God’s garden. We balked at these boundaries and demanded that all of it be for the taking. We ate what we were not supposed to eat. We neglected our duty to the garden.

In this parable, God’s so-called punishment—the expulsion from Eden—was simply a recognition of what had already happened. When God found Adam and Eve hiding, ashamed of their nakedness, they had already become separate from God and the garden. The harmony of God’s created order, God’s ecology, had been broken. Instead of creation there would now be

destruction, as Cain kills his brother Abel in a fit of greed and jealousy. Out of that pain, Cain builds the first city, a den of violence and corruption, walled off from the world—the final act of separation.

We know from the story of Noah that, for them, for those who had polluted the world with violence, water meant death.

We may fear the same. We have not cared for the gifts of creation as we should have. We have polluted, depleted, and privatized the world's waterways. Today, nearly a billion people lack access to clean, usable water. Thanks to climate change, glaciers are melting, oceans are rising, island peoples are being displaced as refugees, and natural disasters are on the rise.

And how about that God-crafted, beautiful Owasco Lake? Last summer, it was pea soup, swamped by toxic algal blooms.

Our denomination's Book of Order says that the water used for baptism should be from a local source. My friend and pastor Rebecca Barnes asks, "Can we imagine polluted waters being poured into the font? What if there were no water to pour and the font were empty?"

The sacrament of baptism fuses spiritual and physical water such that care for one cannot properly neglect the other.

The truth, however, is that we can't go back. We can't restore nature to how it was prior to our interference. We can't take back all the hurt, all the sin. We can't reclaim what was lost. That way is barred, says Genesis. But we can go forward. We can evolve.

In the Book of Revelation, God offers the prophet a new vision of the garden, one that is not opposed to the city but integrates the city. In this vision, the tree of life is planted smack dab in the center of human life. A river—of living water—runs through the city, feeding that tree of life, which heals the nations.

This is a very different vision from the original Eden. In the beginning, God made a river flow through the garden; now, God calls the river to the city, that it might make the city a garden, and the garden a city.

What was originally a sign of the fall, of humanity's breach from creation, from the garden, a den of violence and sin—the city—becomes the place where the garden thrives. In God's final vision, consummate in the reconciliation of Jesus Christ, creation and humanity, garden and city, are united.

All over the world, people are dreaming and creating sustainable, forested cities, urban farms, and permaculture parks (there's one right here in Auburn). Cities are being redesigned into small, walkable communities with access to healthy food, clean water, employment, and education. Our very own Kate Brundage, a high school senior, just this month wrote an article about Owasco Lake and the efforts to help it. Kate envisions a lake, not cordoned off, but enjoyed by people, who, because of their joy, care for the lake and protect it from harm.

That is our future. But God's vision is even bigger. For, God posits a whole new hope for us in Jesus Christ. If Adam took, Jesus gave. He gave his life. He gave away power. He dipped his body into our unclean waters. Because of love.

Our baptism into Christ is the union of what sin separated. It is the healing of the breach. In baptism, God permits no scarcity. Grace—freely given, abundant, and universal in its reach—spills from the font. All who ask shall receive. There can be no privatization, no selective ownership, of that grace. There is enough for all.

We are made one with God.

We are made a people of living water. We belong to the water, from which Moses was drawn as a babe, and to the water struck from a stone in the desert, as Moses led his people to freedom. We belong to the water that Jesus used to wash the feet of his disciples, and to the water Jesus offered an outcast woman at a well. We belong to the water that baptized an Ethiopian eunuch, who said, “Look, here is water. What is to keep me from being baptized?”

We belong to the water that is poured into the baptismal font, to the water that we drink, to the water that sits in the lake not far from here. We must care for these waters. Become the good stewards we were meant to be. We must take time to enjoy it, to stand by the waters, and hear the thrushes and the chickadees and the frogs croak. We must behold the vision God offers us—a river running through the city, a tree of life, a living water, uniting garden, city, and God. **Amen.**