“A River Flowing”

Valley Presbyterian Church – October 25, 2026

4th Sunday in the Season of Creation Psalm 46

Rev. Dr. John Wahl Revelation 22:1-7

The arc of the Biblical story begins and ends in a similar geographic place. In the Eden of Genesis, there is a garden with a river running through it, dividing into four branches as it flows. Within this lush setting grows the Tree of Life; the symbol of God’s generous provision and accompaniment, making it seem like a heaven on earth.

In the final chapters of Revelation, a new city descends from heaven to earth; there is a new river flowing through its center and, again, a Tree of Life which grows on both of its banks, abundantly providing food in every season. So closely located to the divine are they in this new Eden that God is their never-ending light.

In between these two blissful visions, the scriptures are filled with stories of people who struggle to navigate their relationship with God in desert and wilderness spaces. And when God’s people do come to the waters, they often encounter, there, blustery winds or stormy seas. In our first reading, the Psalmist recognizes that among fearsome natural dangers, the river of God still runs through the holy city. God is present anywhere they reside; even with perils all around them, they are not alone.

Rivers provide a symbolic representation of ever-flowing water; it is said that in a river, new waters – and along with them, new opportunities and possibilities – arrive with every moment. In many religious traditions, life can be compared to a river with all of its twists and turns, eddies and branches, wide at some points and narrow at others, sometimes moving along at a slow crawl, at other times with rushing waters.

Most of us, when we look upon the course of the river of our lives, want to see a good ending for the work that matters most to us. We want to see the planted trees grown, children living in health and safety, the damage around us repaired. And, sometimes, we are given a little glimpse of the impact of our life’s efforts: such fragments inspire hope.

But a great deal of our work passes on from us – maybe into another pair of hands – before anyone can say whether or what it has achieved. We, then, have to trust that others will pick up our work after we are done; *all we can really ask*, as one classic Christian devotion says, *is that the work of this day would be for good*.[1]

I think about this expression when considering our efforts to help protect or preserve the climate. We may never be able to know whether a particular home was spared a flood, or if a certain child did not develop asthma, or if a woodland animal was able to survive a forest fire because of what we have done or failed to do with regards to protecting or renewing the environment. That uncertainty can make action feel inadequate.

Last Monday, members of our book study group attended a panel discussion on the development of data centers, held at Federated Church. The presenters discussed some – but certainly not all – of the political, energy, employment, and environmental considerations around planned construction of large-scale data center projects in our Ohio communities.

This is complicated, multi-faceted topic. We do not yet know all the potential effects that these projects could have, for example, on rivers and streams; which particles may be released and flow downstream or might contaminate underground water tables. As God's people, we look to scriptures to help us consider how we might act in response to these seemingly unprecedent and unknowable situations.

In Genesis 11, as our book study group recently read about, the people of Babel – or what would become the empire of Babylon – decided to build a great tower. The purpose of this massive building project was to reach into the heavens, to provide a staircase by which the gods could descend and see how impressive the great city was. It would also serve as a watchtower for the city, offering the ability to see who might be coming and allow anyone trying to escape to be tracked down and returned.

The second characteristic of Babel, beyond its high tower, was that the people of the empire would all speak one language. No diversity in thought or speech was tolerated, and any form of dissention would be eliminated. And yet, as Old Testament scholar Carmen Joy Imes concludes, "If they were hoping that God would descend to dwell among them, they got their wish. Yahweh did come down, but the result made their worst fear come true. God determined that their project was illegitimate and

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[1] Christopher West from *preachingforgodsworld.org*

scattered the people, precisely what they were trying to avoid."[2] The tower fell and God's people got back to their divine mission of populating and stewarding all corners of the earth.

Sometimes, as a result of hubris, greed, or fear, humanity feels the need to consolidate and control. We take action – sometimes in the form of these massive building projects – without considering the unintended consequences. What took place in ancient Babel, many people fear, is now happening again with these data centers; and not just with them, but other expansive efforts that would overtake and transform our farmland and forests, streams and rivers.

In her book, *Inhabiting Eden: Christians, the Bible, and the Ecological Crisis*, one of my former seminary professors, Patricia Tull, who still lives on a working farm in southern Indiana, writes about the importance of God's people *living within our means*; about how to set goals to better function at home, at work, at church, and in our various communities. She writes of learning more deeply about ecological issues and forming action plans and habits that will better show our respect for creation and one another. And she talks about how to communicate our values with others: teaching children and young people what is important to us, having conversations with family members and friends, taking note of what you purchase and consume, and supporting the people and projects that allow us to live as God intends: at peace with the creation and within our means.[3]

Next week, I will be at North Church: one of the great privileges of our partnership with North is the opportunity to periodically share with and lead them in worship; and I am excited for you to have the chance to meet their Pastor, Katherine, and get to hear about the impactful ways the gospel is being shared among these folks in downtown Cleveland.

So, after today, I will not be with you again in worship until after our mid-term elections. Despite some blatant examples of bad campaigning and rulings recently made in the Supreme Court, I still do not believe it is appropriate for me – or for any church leader – to use the pulpit as a place to endorse any political party or candidate by name. But I do feel it is important, as God's people, to consider what the scriptures and our faith tell us to have in the front of our minds as we seek to work for good in

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[2] Carmen Joy Imes, *Being God's Image: Why Creation Still Matters*, p. 69

[3] Patricia Tull, *Inhabiting Eden: Christians, the Bible, and the Ecological Crisis*

the world; which includes whether and how we vote and live out our civic responsibilities.

Jesus made it abundantly clear as to what is the greatest commandment: love God; love your neighbor. Neighbors need food, water, shelter, and safety; and can be harmed by decisions made a long way away, by people who will never meet them. We cannot claim to love that person well while treating the water they drink or the air they breathe as expendable.

I do not think we need to pretend that Jesus uses the word *neighbor* to mean a river or a bird. Certainly, he is speaking about human relationships. But those relationships take place within the neighborhood of creation. Our human neighbor's life depends upon soil, water, other species, and a habitable climate; as does ours. The world that Jesus enters is a world that God loves.

That makes the language of love more demanding than it may first sound. It asks who is causing harm, who bears its cost, who gets to speak about it, and who gets to decide what happens next. It asks communities and churches with resources to look at how they use them. It asks us to listen to people who best know the particular rivers, forests, or farms because they have lived there and cared for them.[4]

. What we do now – to the earth and all that inhabits it – will matter to people we may never know. We cannot promise them that we will finish the work, or that all of our efforts will succeed. But Jesus asks us to love God and our neighbor. Perhaps that is enough to begin with: to do the work that this day requires, to share that work with others who care, and to hand over, in time, a world in which good work can continue. Thanks be to God. Amen.

[4] Christopher West