



Cursed Waters: Pastoral Reflections on Water

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On Sunday, June 9, 2002, rain began to fall in our northwestern Minnesota town. That morning, people drove to church across muddy gravel roads and slick highways only to hear the prophet Hosea announce in the First Reading that the Lord’s coming was as sure as the spring rains that water the earth. Hosea may have intended comfort by this comparison, but, for our parishioners, Hosea’s pronouncement seemed to have heralded impending disaster.

The skies continued to pour the next day. On Monday afternoon, brothers Chad and Rusty Billberg were driving home from work in Roseau, a small town fourteen miles north of our smaller town of Wannaska. They were curious as to the effects of the relentless downpours, so they drove Wannaska’s back roads, surveying the fields and ditches. “This is bad,” they agreed. They had never seen water rise so high or so quickly.

We live north of the Laurentian Divide, where the rivers flow north. If water was rising this quickly in Wannaska, the people of Roseau needed to be prepared.

Water—blessing and/or curse? This pastoral reflection reports the experience of one small parish that has experienced both. Interwoven with the story of Riverside Lutheran Church come observations about water in Bible, theology, and church.

Chad and Rusty called friends in Roseau, but at that moment, nobody took the warnings seriously.

WATER UP CLOSE

Together we have served five congregations in this area. Our parishioners love water, in both its liquid and frozen forms. Like most Minnesota pastors, we find ourselves in competition with the lake throughout the year. In summer, people want to be fishing, out on their boats. In winter, they want to be doing the same thing sitting around holes in the ice.

Still, our parishioners have a complex relationship with water. “Around Roseau County,” said one farmer, “we probably curse water more than we curse anything else. I’m sure 90 percent of the crop loss that we’ve ever had has been from water and 10 percent from being too dry.”

Many of us have relegated water to spheres of either utility and inconsequence or beauty and romance. You drink water and use it to flush your toilet (where it goes from there, who knows?). Or, you dream about seeing it on trips to the lake.

In his book *The Unsettling of America*, essayist and farmer Wendell Berry quotes a letter from David Budbill of Wolcott, Virginia: “What I’ve noticed around here with the militant ecology people (don’t get me wrong, I, like you, consider myself one of them) is a syndrome I call the Terrarium View of the World: nature always at a distance, under glass.”¹ Budbill contrasts those who have a “living relationship” with the land to those whose “view of the natural world is...delicate and precious, terrarium-like, picture-windowish.”²

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Farmers do not look at nature from behind a glass.*

Our parishioners farm, and they have had severe flooding. That changes a person’s perspective on water. Water is not just a pretty thing to look at. It can destroy you. Farmers do not look at nature from behind a glass. They live in it. Water is not something you merely visit for the weekend. It’s out covering your front yard and your fields. It seeps into your basement.

Christians suffer from this “Terrarium View of the World” in their approaches to Scripture, forgetting the raw power of water in the biblical narrative. The story of Noah, for example, makes for an exciting children’s story and lends itself well to toys, nursery decoration, and baby shower wrapping paper. But in all these cases, we pacify water, treating it as decoration rather than as the earthy force that it is. We put the flood in artwork and Sunday School lessons, but so often we

¹Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1986) 28.

²Ibid., 28–29.

have no relationship with the reality of its utter destructiveness. Our two-year-old son has picture books about Noah's ark in which the flood is not even mentioned. Noah and the animals are on a boat together—the crocodiles brushing their teeth and the hippos dancing—as if it were a pleasure cruise. God's work in the flood is often viewed from this picture-window perspective instead of as a threat to humankind. Genesis declares, "The waters swelled so mightily on the earth that all the high mountains under the whole heaven were covered....And all flesh died that moved on the earth...; everything on dry land in whose nostrils was the breath of life died" (7:19–22).

RIVER RISING

The town of Wannaska is small. There is no population sign, but local residents have an unofficial count: "Not quite sixty," they figure. We have a convenience store, a café, and a hardware store that doubles as a post office. Those businesses are high enough in elevation that flooding poses no real threat. The church, however, is aptly named Riverside. Nearby runs the South Fork of the Roseau River, which usually wends quietly by the church. Most of the year you hardly notice it. In spring or after heavy rains, however, it makes itself known.

Back in 2002, as Chad and Rusty were driving around the country roads, surveying the rising water, they ran into their cousin Tyrone. Tyrone works for the county and was driving his pickup truck around the area, leaving orange flags in the roads, warning people to drive with caution. The water was leaving some roads impassable.

Seeing fields and ditches filling with water, they knew the church would be in trouble. The three of them drove there and, sure enough, the river was overflowing and creeping into the parking lot. That evening a bridal shower was underway inside. Chad and Rusty's father, Dale, came over to the church and together they reasoned that it was no longer safe to be there. Dale went inside and told the women they would have to end the party early. Fortunately they had already eaten the cake. Ruth, the bride, opened her presents quickly, and the women dispersed.

The men had no sandbags, but since Tyrone graded roads for the county, he took matters into his own hands, driving his grader to the church, putting the blade down into the dirt parking lot, and scraping up a berm around the building.

That initial dike bought them some time, but the water was rising; they needed more dirt, and fast. Once water spills over a dike, there's no pushing it back. Across the highway sat an elementary school with a parking lot made of dirt and gravel, so Tyrone drove over there and bladed some windrows. They called a fellow church member, Kraig Lee, who drove his bidirectional loader to scoop up the windrows and haul them back to the church.

Kraig also happened to own the hardware store in town, so he raided his own store for a pile of tarps. Soon enough, the store would be open around the clock for people seeking emergency supplies—tarps, water pumps, and rain boots. There

was no checking prices or ringing up sales; everything at Lee's Store was available for saving the church and town. Without sandbags, the men spread out the tarps in the church parking lot, covered them in gravel and dirt, and then wrapped the tarps back on top to create a waterproof barrier. Still, the water continued to rise and would eventually reach the top of their dike.

Word was spreading, and more people showed up at the church. They called the county offices, which kept a reserve of empty sandbags, a load of which soon arrived. The Billbergs owned a gravel hauling business, and their dump truck was in Roseau for repair. It was not finished, but it was operational. They called the mechanic, who unlocked his shop for them. Dale drove up to Roseau, brought the truck back to Wannaska, and began hauling loads of sand to the school parking lot, where volunteers shoveled it into bags.

The church parking lot had become a lake, with the water up to people's knees. It was no longer accessible by car, and the strong current made it unsafe to walk across. Kraig Lee carried all the sandbags in the bucket of his tractor from the school parking lot, across the highway, and over to the dike. Anyone who wanted to get to the church had to travel the same way—in the bucket of the tractor. Kraig crept along slowly. Any wake would topple the dike.

WATERS OF DEATH

Like our typically placid views of water, our views of baptism are often tame and sentimental—the infant gowns handed down from one generation to the next, the family pictures after the service, the light sprinkling of water over the nascent child of God. But as the destruction of flooding makes clear, water is not just babbling brooks and picturesque beaches. It is also one of the world's most powerful forces, able to bring about death and destruction.

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That is one part of what God is doing in baptism: death and destruction. Like water that tears away at the earth around it or drowns out whole farm fields, baptism kills. That is what it is meant to do. In the waters of baptism our sinful selves are put to death. In baptism, God doesn't use water to reason with us, talk us into becoming better people, or affirm how good we've already become. No, God uses water to kill us, to kill our sinfulness, because that is the only way he can deal with the reality of our sins. In doing away with our sinfulness, God is forgiving. God is cleaning things up and making them new.

Romans 6 makes the destruction of baptism clear. Paul declares that those who have been baptized in Christ have not just been covered with water or gone swimming in a river; rather, they have been baptized into the death of Christ. That is, the water and word of God has put to death those who have been baptized, just

as Christ himself was put to death upon the cross. Romans 6:4 helps us make sense of the purpose of this death by water and the word, concluding, “Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.”

Two recent Lutheran hymnals—*Lutheran Book of Worship* and *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*—have used Luther’s so-called “Flood Prayer” in their baptismal liturgies. Both, however, have construed this prayer as one of thanksgiving, which is a departure from Luther’s original. Luther mentions God’s condemnation of the unbelieving world and his drowning of obdurate Pharaoh. The *LBW* removes the reference to Pharaoh. *ELW* follows suit and does the same with the unbelieving world. In both hymnals, the minister introduces the prayer with, “Let us give thanks to the Lord our God,” and the *LBW* speaks of the “gift of water,” all adaptations that shift Luther’s tone from penitential supplication to thanksgiving.³

Such a shift might strike an odd chord with our parishioners. As we have noted, people in our area curse water. One of our parishioners does not like singing the “Johnny Appleseed” prayer with its reference to the sun, the rain, and the apple seed. He is nervous that God will hear the word “rain” and get carried away.

Our parishioners live interdependently with nature; they care for it, and it cares for them. Yet it haunts them. This is an old problem. In his Genesis lectures, Martin Luther suggests that Adam and Eve, troubled by their bad consciences, were frightened even by the mere rustling of leaves in the evening breeze and that this caused them to hide from the Lord.⁴ Gerhard Forde, commenting on this section of Luther, speaks of the “voice” of the law: “When man is separated from God anything and everything can betray him....After the conscience has been smitten, after one is cut off from God, any little thing becomes a potential source of ‘the voice.’ The rustling of the leaves on a dark night in a strange place frightens us because, I suppose we could say, we do not have life in ourselves and something—anything—‘out there’ can take it from us.”⁵

Indeed, God created the seas and “saw that it was good” and likewise all the creatures that fill the waters (Gen 1:10, 20–21). In Gen 2 we read that the plants and herbs of the field are just waiting for the rain to fall upon the earth. And yet those good, life-giving waters have humbled our parishioners and left them powerless. They need the rain for their fields, but only so much. They cannot control how much they will receive. Ultimately, they cannot stop floods from destroying their homes, farms, businesses, or their church. God’s gift of water has betrayed them.

³*Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg; Philadelphia: Board of Publication, Lutheran Church in America, 1978) 122; *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006) 230.

⁴Martin Luther, commenting on Gen 3:8, in his *Lectures on Genesis*, in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 1, trans. George V. Schick (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1958) 170.

⁵Gerhard O. Forde, *Where God Meets Man: Luther’s Down-to-Earth Approach to the Gospel* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1972) 14.

HELP IS ON THE WAY

In June 2002, nobody had anticipated such floods in northwestern Minnesota. Every year, spring thaw saturates the earth and turns fields into lakes, so Wannaska residents are no strangers to high water. Usually it drains without cause for alarm. In 2002, the thaw was long past, and an early summer shower seemed harmless. The weather reports called for rain, but nothing like what was received. Brad Dokken, a reporter for the *Grand Forks Herald*, grew up in this county. He recalls that the meteorologists predicted serious weather, but they had not expected the storm system to move as slowly as it did: “It basically stalled once it hit northwestern Minnesota and continued to dump rain.”⁶

Given their lack of preparation, the people of Wannaska mobilized rather quickly to protect their church. As the sun went down, some of the same women who had left the wedding shower earlier in the evening returned to fill sandbags. Many of them brought food for the crews. Throughout the night, they built the dike higher. With floodlights at the school and the church, workers took turns sandbagging and walking along the dike, looking for weak spots. Few of them slept, but those that did stretched out on the pews for short naps.

The sun rose around five o’clock the next morning. The crew had built the dike as high as it would go. The original crew had had no sandbags and had built the dike’s first layer with gravel wrapped in tarps, which makes for a poor foundation. “You get water-saturated gravel,” said Curtis Amundson, one of the volunteers. “It gets like a quivering mass of jelly.” They were able to pile sandbags up to their knees and then halfway to their waists. Beyond that, the sandbags just fell down again.

Not long after sunrise, one of our church matriarchs, Vivian Eggen, received a phone call from her daughter Colleen, who had been at the church all night: “Mom, you like to talk on the phone; get a hold of people. We need help.” Vivian’s first phone call was to the radio station in Roseau, and she was surprised to find herself on the air. Listeners across northwestern Minnesota heard her pleading for volunteers. She was a longtime teacher in Wannaska; no doubt many of her former students’ ears perked up at their teacher’s voice. By the time she got to the church, she saw friends as well as strangers offering to help, people who had been on their way elsewhere when they heard her on the radio.

The dike had been built, but more sandbags were needed to shore up the weak spots. All day on Tuesday, workers kept arriving at the church, filling sandbags and stacking them behind the dike. In several spots, leaks sprang and water trickled in, so crews dug holes in the ground in which they placed sump pumps that carried the water back over the dike. Several times, the wall began to tip, and workers had to brace themselves against it, shouldering the dike into place, holding back the water.

⁶Brad Dokken, e-mail message to authors, July 14, 2011.

The water was still rising, and the dike was built as high as it would go. Church members could only watch and pray as the water crept ever closer to the top. At just the right time, relief came. As the water sat almost level with the dike, the flood finally reached the highway that ran between the church and the school. It spilled over. Now the gorged river had somewhere to go besides the church. The school sat high enough that it was safe, and water filled the low-lying fields and woodlands across from the church. Until that moment, sandbaggers had been unaware that their dike was fractions of an inch higher than the highway. As water gushed across the highway, fatigued volunteers breathed a collective sigh of relief.

WATER AND THE WORD

In our alienation from God, God's good creation betrays us. Jesus, however, mercifully speaks of God as our Father, who still cares for his rebellious creatures. Even the slightest rustling leaf might terrify us, but Jesus points to foliage to remind us that God cares for the lilies and will certainly care for his children.

In this old world, the creation continues to groan in travail, and we ourselves wait for the redemption of our bodies. We will, one day, be set free from our bondage to decay—including our fear of flooding—but in the meantime we proclaim that God will be merciful to sinners and care for them, despite the circumstances that make such care seem unlikely. Daily we ask for the bread we need, and daily we trust that God will give it.

What does faith look like? It looks like a farmer on his tractor, dropping precious seeds into the earth, under uncertain skies.

Our parishioners will not stop cursing water and fearing floods, but at the same time (the Holy Spirit willing) their preachers will not stop speaking the word of Christ that creates faith. It is not only crop insurance that gets our farmers planting seeds each year. Threat of flooding is ever present, but our parishioners have heard of this God and his faithfulness from their parents and grandparents, their ministers and Sunday school teachers. What does faith look like? It looks like a farmer on his tractor, dropping precious seeds into the earth, under uncertain skies. God has grabbed hold of these stewards by the ears and is using them to feed his creation.

Yes, and God has grabbed them through the very same waters that have tried to destroy them. Or, we should say, he has grabbed them through the waters that truly *have* destroyed them. God put them to death in baptism, using the water that covered their fields, the waters they curse more than anything. And in that sacrament God has also joined them to Christ's resurrection, creating them anew, making them into creatures who trust their Creator and care for the creation.

Water's power is evident when it destroys homes and fields. Its power is less evident in the sacrament, since it derives its power solely from the word, a simple word comprising a handful of syllables: "I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." Trusting our ears rather than our eyes, we know that God not only destroys here in baptism but also gives life, eternal life.

THE CHURCH SPARED

When the flood had passed, the churchyard was a mess, to say nothing of the school parking lot across the highway. Still, Wannaska fared much better than Roseau, the town to the north of us. Roseau's dikes had broken on Tuesday afternoon, and water raged through the heart of the downtown, filling basements and causing millions of dollars of damage. Fuel oil tanks tipped over. Sewers backed up. Mold spread. Businesses, homes, and churches had to be rehabilitated or, in many cases, demolished and rebuilt. Some were gone for good. In the country, the river was several miles wide at one point. Fields of crops were ruined.

In Wannaska, the river never reached the church. Church members can only guess at the extent of the potential damage if the dike had been breached. We might have had to rebuild the entire basement. We might have simply closed the doors. In actuality, some water had seeped in through the foundation, and with crews working so hard outside, no one had time to tend to it. All told, there were a couple inches of standing water in the basement. Some sheetrock had to be torn out and replaced. But that was the extent of the damage. The church had been spared.

Perhaps John of Patmos had in mind people like our farmers when he added the next verse: "Nothing accursed will be found there any more." A river will be there—not one for cursing, but rather for blessing.

CURSE NO MORE

Our congregation is named Riverside for obvious geological reasons, but its name also harkens back to a river that runs through the Bible. Psalm 46 tells of "a river whose streams make glad the city of God" (v. 4). It is refreshing to hear of a river that cheers rather than frightens. John of Patmos paints an intriguing portrait of this river in Revelation: "bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city" (22:1–2). With our town's history of flooding, and with all the flooding in the news this past year, it seems like a strange way to reassure people, announcing that their heavenly home will have a river coursing down Main Street.

Perhaps, though, John of Patmos had in mind people like our farmers when

he added the next verse: “Nothing accursed will be found there any more.” A river will be there—not one for cursing, but rather for blessing. God intends, finally, to give us water as an eternal gift.

Since 2002, our congregation has built a permanent dike between the church and the South Fork of the Roseau River, a solid wall made of earth and covered with grass. It is hard to imagine we will need, or even desire, such a dike around the river of life. That river feeds the tree of life, whose leaves will heal the nations. Like children arriving at the beach, who would not run to those shores and dive in? ⊕

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