



Texts in Context

The River Flows

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You will read this article in winter 2012, but as I write, we have been told that today in Austin we will set a record for Texas summer heat as we top out at 112 degrees. My thermometer in the shade registers 110.5. We have had now over seventy consecutive days of three-digit temperatures. Grass crunches underfoot. The lawn is a brittle, dim-yellow thatch. We are not promised any rain. In fact, the person who predicted this summer's drought says we will see this dry spell through the winter months and even into next summer. The fires have started again and people have lost homes, livestock, and land. Deer cannot produce milk and are abandoning their fawns. The rain-plant-insect-animal system is out of balance. This is my "context" for this *Texts in Contexts* article.

The text I consider here is Rev 22:1–2: "Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations."

This is an iconic text. It evokes images of the end times, and it is a text many of us want to lean into. After all, here we find bright water, the source of which is the very throne of God and the Lamb. The water is accessible in the midst of a city, and it provides vigor for the trees and their nations-healing capacity. The whole description suggests the profligate nature of this river in its river-city-trees-healing-nations relationship. It makes sense that the church has appointed it for Easter reading. Easter is our great time of leaning forward. The text appears in the Revised

Viewing the river of the water of life in Rev 22 in light of present concerns related to water—especially in the context of severe drought—produces a different reading and a different sermon than other contexts might yield.

Common Lectionary on the Sixth Sunday of Easter, Year C, amid the Great Fifty Days when we are leaning into living out new life, resurrection life. Still, at this writing, I think of this text in the midst of the Texas drought.

WORKING TOP-DOWN AND BOTTOM-UP

Elsewhere I have spoken of top-down and bottom-up work with texts, and I will engage that pattern of sermon work here.¹ While top-down work is orderly, linear, and focused in its logical progression, bottom-up work is associative. Bottom-up work requires paying attention to details and connected ideas even though we do not yet know if they will be a part of the final product (for example, a sermon). It used to be that many of us thought we would study a biblical text, conduct our exegetical work in an orderly way, arrive at a message, perhaps spend a little time associating ideas that could provide an analogy or good story, write the manuscript, and so be done with this predictable and orderly sermon preparation process. But honest evaluation of our creative process shuffles that order. We have immediate associations with texts because we do, and these associations are beneficial to the sermon preparation process. Our preparation process is a creative one and as such is an ongoing dialectic of top-down and bottom-up work.

Immediate bottom-up associations in my particular context included water as the theme of this issue of *Word & World*; the Texas drought; our human need for water; the Revelation passage; our Austin aquifer system and Barton Springs; other bodies of water I visited this summer; how the ground reacts to water when it has been dry for too long; the dieback on our trees; rivers in America; rivers in cities; rivers and their relationship to surrounding communities and to vegetation; Leif Enger's novel *Peace Like a River*; the river flows; clean water. Then questions arise: What are our water sources in the United States? What happens when we turn on the tap? What are the dangers to water in Austin, in Texas, in the United States? What do I not know about water? What does the text say to us now that includes a word to us as environmentally bound (earthbound) creatures? Why water in this vision of end-time renewed Jerusalem? These are initial bottom-up impressions. I hold them in play as I turn to top-down work.

TOP-DOWN: THE TEXT

My text, Rev 21:1–2, was chosen because of its relation to water, the theme of this issue. So my research work operates within that context. Top-down research (or detective work as I call it) investigates, as best we can, the text's historical and literary context, the meanings of its genre, the author's intent, the ways the text has been interpreted, and the layers of biblical meaning in the text's images. I am reminded that many scholars think John was a Palestinian Jewish Christian who knew about persecution (cf. Rev 1:9) and was traveling around what is today west-

¹See Jennifer L. Lord, "Preaching Now: Paying Attention in a Gadget World," *Communitas* 7 (Winter 2010) 1–9.

ern Turkey. Scholars surmise that the author who recorded this work lived near the end of Emperor Domitian's reign (81–96 C.E.). The Christians of the area were attempting to survive in a time of tyranny and peril, since the emperor had revived the imperial cult and required allegiance. The author himself was living in exile on the island of Patmos, and he spoke to the churches of that Asia Minor context: Rome was the political and economic power, and the emperor threatened anyone who placed allegiance to any god other than Roma. Rome, in the text's view, was Babylon. Wild images like colored horses and numbered lamp-stands and multiple-eyed beings and beasts at four corners holding back evil winds speak to tumultuous times and the gravity of struggle between state and soul.

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We may need to go toe-to-toe with those who argue that believers are to read this book's signs of wars and floods and then sit back to wait for the great score-board at the end. The fantastical images came from the hand of a writer who was desperately trying to provide his church with a message about the rulers of his day. John's vision came when there needed to be a strong message that the rule of God and the empire of earthly rulers were not the same thing. Moreover, Christians—those who walk with the name of Christ marked on their brow—were not supposed to stand by and do nothing about this gross confusion.

Others suppose that the believers depicted in Revelation were not yet undergoing persecution *per se*; they were living just before such persecution in the growing shadow of the emperor Domitian and his government. This was their ordeal: the Roman machine was operating in such a way that all trade and commerce was watched, religious connections meant political connections, any rejection of the Roman god and the Roman state signaled resistance and led to economic ostracism. The pressure was to blend in.²

Over against this, we hear the author's witness that God will defeat even this imperial machine. In light of the encroaching destruction and impending persecution, we hear the invitation to come to the great supper of God (Rev 19:17); we hear about tears that will be wiped away and death that will be no more (21:3); we see the glory of renewed Jerusalem (21:9–14). And the river flowing from the throne of God is included in this picture of God's sovereignty.

The text's river image is superimposed on other rivers. It harkens back to Gen 2, the river that flows out of Eden. That primeval river waters the garden (2:10) and branches out to many wealthy lands (2:12). Psalm 46 lauds the river

²See Brian K. Blount, *Can I Get A Witness? Reading Revelation through African American Culture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005).

“whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High” (46:4). Ezekiel 47 reads like a commentary on Rev 22, but we know it is the other way around. In Ezekiel we find already all the characters that come at the end: the throne, the river flowing in the city, the river’s prodigious power that enlivens stagnant waters and gives life to fish and all creatures, and the trees with their fruit for food and healing leaves (47:1–12). There is another river in Zechariah, with its waters flowing east and west, waters that flow out of Jerusalem and enliven all on the day of the Lord (Zech 14:8–9). And, of course, in that region and in our text’s background there is the Nile as well as the River Jordan. There is chaos and unknown and danger in rivers, but there is also blessing and vitality and renewal.

So something along these lines begins to take shape for interpretation of this passage about river as the water of life: the passage is vision, a vision that makes a determined pronouncement of what will be. This pronouncement is layered on top of a political and economic situation that is erosive to believers’ lives. Yet, it is not only a pronouncement about the future. Set in the context of the first hearers, the passage shows how life in God now is, concurrently denouncing all that counters life in God. It announces the truth about who God is and what God intends.

TOP-DOWN: THE WATER

The text’s pronouncement is about the water of life, but how do its images speak honestly to us now? How can we claim these days that water is the water of life? Rather than toss about romanticized notions or unrealistic claims about water as life, I have more detective work to report—more top-down work. So we turn to water.

What does it mean to dare speak of the river of the water of life in the midst of the drought I described earlier? My investigation took me to the big water picture, at least for the continental United States, and for this I interviewed Bill Cox, who currently works as the Environmental Senior Program Manager for Wetlands, Oceans, and Costal Programs at the Environmental Protection Agency Southeast Regional Office in Atlanta, Georgia. Bill and I met at a conference at Zephyr Point, Lake Tahoe, and I interviewed him on August 15, 2011.³ We get the water that we use, I learned, from surface water (rivers, lakes, streams) or from ground water (springs and aquifer systems). When we turn on a faucet (not everyone in the world has this option), we get water. It is pumped through our community’s pipes or from our well. The discussion of water sources and methods of water delivery quickly raises issues related to energy, contamination, and sustainability.

Aquifers are amazing but vulnerable. They can be damaged by farming, ranching, industry, and development. By way of example, some know that the best

³All accuracies in what follows are Cox’s, and any mistakes or misunderstandings are mine. Until recently, Bill was the Assistant Superintendent at Zion National Park, National Park Service, US Department of the Interior; formerly, he was the Deputy Director, Water Protection Division, USEPA, in Atlanta.

practices for hiking and backpacking include making camp a certain number of yards away from any water (streams, lakes, rivers) and following rules for using soap and for toileting—again staying a specified distance from water sources so that substances have a chance to be filtered through grass, rock, and dirt before entering the waters. The same concepts apply to agriculture: good practice includes the use of filter strips along bodies of water, contour farming, and folding materials back into fields rather than allowing animal excrement to be deposited directly into surface waters or aquifers. More, there is a growing shift to low-impact development that plans for systems like tension basins in order to slow down water movement (pavement makes for fast moving water, which in turn erodes all in its path more quickly) and to catch water for reuse. Some cities have added biogardens and retention swails to catch water from paved surfaces and allow it to move through grass before going to the storm drains that go directly to surface water sources. Storm-water runoff from these areas can carry debris and sediment, and these carry construction and industrial chemicals directly to aquifers. There are practices in place (for instance, the EPA's Stormwater Program) for the collection and dispersion of water from these sites. Questions continue about some industry practices, like the hydrofracturing of rock layers (fracking) conducted by those wanting to tap natural gas sources, a technology that could contaminate groundwater supplies.

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But individual households impact aquifers, too. Household wells, for example, use groundwater and tap into aquifers, which means there is a conduit to the aquifer that could relay contamination to that water source. The wellhead must be protected so this does not occur. But even without well usage the individual household adds to aquifer contamination. Our household sewage goes through a system of pipes and pump stations to treatment plants, but both raw and treated sewage can and does leak and spill.

In Austin, our concern is for the Edwards Aquifer. That aquifer provides drinking water for 1.5 million persons in the greater Austin area. We pay a great deal of attention to it and to our beloved Barton Springs pool (spring-fed from the aquifer waters) that, even on a triple-digit day, maintains its water temperature at 68–70 degrees. It is three acres of water, and the main spring feeding the pool averages a discharge of 31 million gallons of water per day; but we are currently in Alarm Stage II for aquifer discharge levels.⁴

We are more familiar with thinking about surface water in relationship to our

⁴Barton Springs/Edwards Aquifer Conservation District, *Drought Status Chart*, at http://www.bseacd.org/uploads/ALARM_current_drought_flyer_8_25_11.pdf (accessed November 2, 2011).

human water usage. We know how we harm these waters. Construction, industry, agriculture, individual households, and people harm water. Apart from sewage and oil spills, we dam for recreation and for energy and for control of water usage, and we quarry and construct housing developments. All of these add up and make a way for sediment and debris to enter our waterways. We blow leaves and grass into storm drains, send carwash soap directly to these waters, add fertilizer to lawns, which rainfall then sends to the storm drains and into creeks, streams, rivers, and oceans. We intentionally and unintentionally dump chemicals of all kinds that create eutrophication, in which plant growth takes over, oxygen is depleted, and the water and its inhabitants become out of balance.

In addition to water source and contamination concerns, there are issues around water delivery systems. These include the individual wells mentioned above, but town and city pipes are the infrastructure relied on by most of us for water delivery. These pipes connect to surface or ground water collection systems. They are aging, so corrosion and leakage increase; some estimates say that there is up to 40% water loss in the lines. Sustainability includes the maintenance and replacement of lines, which happens in some communities but not in others. Reduction of government spending means less money for such infrastructure projects.

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Water, either from the ground or the earth's surface, is prepared for consumption. Procedures range from simple chlorination systems to the more complex ultraviolet-ray disinfectant systems. Water is tested to be certain it meets federal standards, but things enter our drinking water systems that we can neither control nor detect (for instance, people dumping medicines down the drain).

In all of this we spend an amazing amount of energy moving water. We in the United States have decided that deserts should flower more often, that Texas lawns should be green, and that communities (including cities like Los Angeles and many in Arizona) can be built with less than sustainable water sources nearby. When Congress wrote the Clean Water Act, it assigned water quality issues to the federal government, but states retained water quantity issues.⁵ This produces powerful arguments: one group has a permit to put things in the river but there is not enough water flow to dilute it; one state wants water for its oyster beds and the neighboring state needs it for agriculture; one area builds commercial and housing development and fights for improved pipeline delivery or a dam.

I have not spoken of water collection systems, comparisons of water planning

⁵United States Environmental Protection Agency, "Summary of the Clean Water Act," at <http://www.epa.gov/lawsregs/laws/cwa.html> (accessed November 2, 2011).

with other nations, and other micro/macro connections. But basic to water ecology is water treatment. Bill Cox suggests it is a sort of closed-loop system: "What is interesting is that we can't talk about drinking water without talking about wastewater."⁶ The Ohio River, for instance, discharges wastewater above the intake of other cities; those treating the wastewater are given a permit that stipulates how much they must clean it up before discharge, usually in water treatment plants. There are other systems that can clean water. Lagoons provide a place for the heavier material in water to settle out and not be run through the system. At the wastewater centers, anaerobic treatment provides good bacteria to eat the bad bacteria. Sludge is often dried and turned into fertilizer. Destruction of marshlands and lagoons directly impacts energy for water treatment. Cox continues, "Water has an amazing capacity to heal itself but, with all we put into it, it really has to be treated."⁷

In my brief time with this water specialist, I asked about the main water issues facing us and the world. He answered:

Worldwide, it is access to clean water. For us in this country, it is ensuring that we can balance growth and water needs. We have to get out of the notion that, for example, we take drinking water and pour it on the ground to grow grass. We need to rethink what a beautiful yard looks like.

What the agency [EPA] has been doing is working with states and local utilities to explore ways to be more sustainable: to use less water, to reduce costs, to determine actual pricing (we need to charge people what it really costs to get water into the right condition and to distribute it into our water systems). Part of that, too, is to encourage folks in local communities to look at the whole system: wetlands serve as natural filters and help clean the water as it runs off the landscape so the water does not spend the same percentage of time in a plant. Water moving over surfaces has greater power to erode and put sediments into water sources, which means that systems need more filters for cleanup. So, if we don't manage our watersheds we will have to pay for it at the faucet. The fascinating thing is that all these things are connected—like a tapestry. You can't pull threads and expect it not to get ruined. We must look at how the whole thing is pieced together. Why should we protect wetlands, for example? Because in the ecosystem everything has a role in the landscape, and things are not random.⁸

BACK TO THE TEXT

This understanding of connectedness makes a good transition back to the text. There is a system, and everything has its role in the system. What stands out to me now, given this broad overview of water, is that the river *flows* in the passage from Revelation. I'm not sure the river's flow would have seemed so significant had I not learned more about water sources and usage. In the text, the river flows,

⁶Bill Cox, interview by author, August 15, 2011.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid.

and there are trees with leaves for the healing of the nations. This means, in modern context, that this river is not suffering from eutrophic distortion. This means it is not carrying sewage or too much sediment or runoff chemicals that cause imbalance. Nor has it been dammed for one group's use. It is not only for Jerusalem; its end is the healing of the nations. It is trustworthy, flowing water, coming from the throne of God and the Lamb. It is crystal clean.

I am used to working with the Revised Common Lectionary and the way the texts interact and interpret each other.⁹ Note that the First Reading appointed for the Sunday in which our text from Revelation occurs (Acts 16:9–15) tells of Lydia's baptism, and the Gospel for that day (John 5:1–9) reports that Jesus himself becomes the healing pool for the man waiting at Beth-zatha. All of this comes together as Christians are sealed by the act of baptism, which is our washing in the triune God, in the flowing water of life, in the water that itself flows toward the healing of the nations.

So on these Texas days, I can look to the sky and wish for rain, but that is only one part of the whole. The larger picture includes other facts: we have built on this land; we have dammed rivers and built developments and industries; we have engineered but not planned. Rainfall will not make other issues disappear—issues like water energy, contamination, and sustainability. The text sets this image before us as witness: clean, flowing, healthy water for the healing of the nations. This image disrupted the powers that threatened the first hearers. This image disrupts any ways that we—now—capitulate to the status quo. God does not wait to renew in the end times. God renews now. Water of life is God's way now. Our lives in God demand not turning away this earthly life but freely responding to it. We do not turn from the whole, selfishly holding on to what is ours or ignoring the ways we participate in systems that lay waste to such gifts of life. We are shown and given water-of-life lives. In God we have our life by this flow, we live by this movement, we receive and give freely. Our efforts, too, are for the healing of the nations—including the healing of our ways with water. 

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⁹See Jennifer L. Lord, *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Texts to Sermon* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, forthcoming).