

Final Sunday in Creation: River Sunday

READINGS

Genesis 8.20-22, 9.12-17

20 Then Noah built an altar to the Lord, and took of every clean animal and of every clean bird, and offered burnt-offerings on the altar. ²¹And when the Lord smelt the pleasing odour, the Lord said in his heart, 'I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done.

²² As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease.'

9. ¹²God said, 'This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: ¹³I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. ¹⁴When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, ¹⁵I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. ¹⁶When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.' ¹⁷God said to Noah, 'This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.'

Psalm 104.27-33

²⁷ These all look to you to give them their food in due season;

²⁸ when you give to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are filled with good things.

²⁹ When you hide your face, they are dismayed; when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust.

³⁰ When you send forth your spirit,* they are created; and you renew the face of the ground.

³¹ May the glory of the Lord endure for ever; may the Lord rejoice in his works—

³² who looks on the earth and it trembles, who touches the mountains and they smoke.

³³ I will sing to the Lord as long as I live; I will sing praise to my God while I have being.

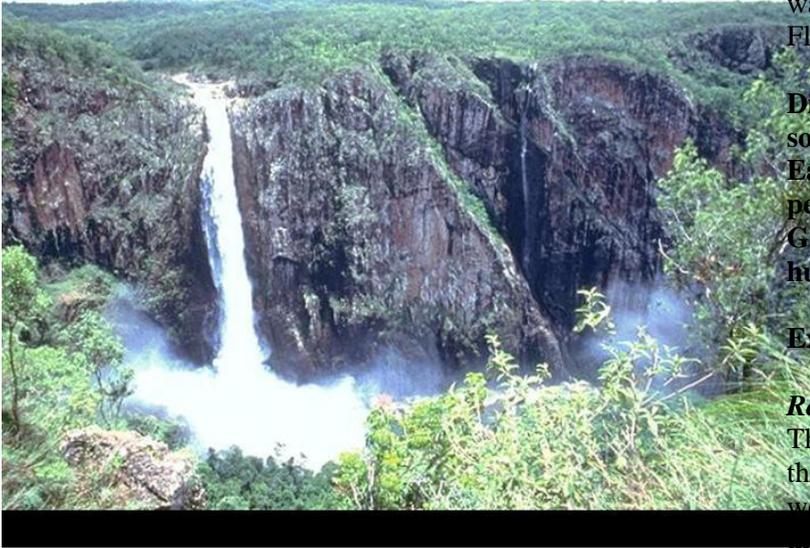
Revelation 22.1-5

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 ²through 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. ³Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants* will worship him; ⁴they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. ⁵And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign for ever and ever.

Matthew 28.1-10

After the Sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. ²And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. ³His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. ⁴For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. ⁵But the angel said to the women, 'Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. ⁶He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he* lay. ⁷Then go quickly and tell his disciples, "He has been raised from the dead,* and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him." This is my message for you.' ⁸So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. ⁹Suddenly Jesus met them and said, 'Greetings!' And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshipped him. ¹⁰Then Jesus said to them, 'Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.'

BIBLE STUDY



A RAINBOW, A QUAKE AND A RIVER

Genesis 8.20-22; 9.12-17

Beginning

The theme of this study is the renewal of creation. We explore the Earth readings for this Sunday to discover the way God renews creation, not only through waters and rivers but also through God's healing Spirit.

Describe a moment in your life when you experienced the renewal of creation, when something that was destroyed or on the verge of extinction was restored to life and led you to celebrate? Have you ever experienced that sense of renewal in connection with a rainbow or a river? Have you heard the sound of frogs in places that were once barren? Or platypus in pools that were once polluted?

Background

The rainbow appearing after the great Flood has long been a symbol of hope and healing for Earth and life on Earth. As such, it is a fitting symbol for the final Bible study in this series of readings. Before we celebrate that rainbow, however, we need to recall the background of why this great symbol was created.

Why did God send the Flood? According to the narrator of Genesis, God sent the Flood because human beings had become 'very wicked' and 'every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was evil continually' (Gen. 6.5). In other words, early humans had sinful thoughts incessantly. Something had gone wrong with God's plan for creation. One species—human beings—was not true to God's design.

This sin of humanity was characterised by violence, a violence that affected not only humans but also Earth (Gen. 6.11-12). Earth was being destroyed by the violent ways of humanity. God therefore decided to send the Flood to destroy Earth and all its inhabitants.

Discuss: Why, if humans are the sinners and the source of the violence, does God send a Flood to curse Earth and all the creatures on Earth? From the perspective of Earth, is that fair? Does Earth, as in Genesis 3 (Land Sunday), once again bear the curse for human beings?

Exploring the Text

Read Genesis 8.20-22

The Flood was a total destruction of all life, except for those species preserved in Noah's ark. All vegetation would have been erased. After all, the Flood lasted more than 12 months (Gen. 7.11 and 8.13). The forty days of rain were but the initial downpour in the flood event. If we accept the story as it stands, billions of species would have been destroyed. That is a curse of massive proportions.

The Flood is a virtual return to the primal scene at the beginning of Genesis with waters everywhere and Earth lying in darkness below them (Gen. 1.2). The skies opened above, the deep opened beneath and the primal waters once again covered creation (Gen. 7.11). Any new beginning would require a removal of this curse and a total renewal of creation—a new creation formed from the residue of the old.

It is appropriate then that on New Year's Day, Earth emerges from the waters as it did in the beginning on Day Three of the creation story in Genesis One. The pivotal moment in the Flood narrative, however, is when God responds to the offering of thanks given by Noah and says: 'I will never again curse the ground because of humankind!' (8.21)

In this word, God admits that Earth was cursed because of humans. Once again Earth bore the curse of human sin. Earth suffered vicariously. God, however, promises never to bring down another curse on Earth and destroy living creatures because humans have turned wicked. This word from God is a message of hope for Earth.

The whole cycle of nature, the times and seasons of creation, that ensure the web of life is preserved, will never be broken again. Earth will be fertile for those humans who serve it as God intended. Creation has been renewed.

Discuss: What reason does God give for never invoking another curse on Earth? Do you think that God acted in anger when destroying humanity and Earth, or does God also suffer through the Flood? What does the ‘grieving’ of God in Gen. 6.6 imply? Read Genesis 9.12-17

In this second Earth reading from Genesis, the focus changes from removing the curse and maintaining the cycles of nature to confirming the promise of a new relationship between God and creation. This promise is confirmed by a covenant, an eternal bond with creation.

The rainbow is God’s special sign confirming this covenant, this personal agreement. It is important to recognise that the covenant is not simply with Noah or humankind, but embraces all living creatures, the kin of humankind in creation.

The covenant, however, extends even further. The rainbow is a sign of the covenant, says God, ‘between me and Earth’ (Gen. 9.13). Earth—its mountains, trees, rivers and fields—are now incorporated in God’s covenant.

Why is the rainbow in the sky? For human beings to remember God’s promise! Perhaps! But more importantly, the rainbow is there for God to remember. When we see the rainbow we can be assured God will keep this promise with creation.

Discuss: If the rainbow is a sign for God never to destroy Earth again, should it also serve as a signal for us to treat Earth in the same way? After the Flood, God renews creation and promises to preserve it. How can we be part of that renewal today?



Read Ps. 104.27-30

We might be tempted to think that the renewal of creation happened after the Flood and will happen again in the end times. The psalmist reminds us, however, that God’s Spirit permeates creation to being new life—continually.

All life waits on God to sustain the seasons as promised after the Flood and to provide the food they need (Ps. 104.27-28). But something far more exciting and profound is happening all this time. In verse 29 the Psalmist reminds us that our very existence depends on two things: God’s presence and God’s breath. God’s pulsating presence fills creation and God’s breath or Spirit gives life to all that exists.

Verse 30 reveals something more. When God sends forth God’s Spirit what happens? Creation!! Life gets created! Creation happens. New creation is happening all the time. Or as the second half of that verse says, ‘the face of the ground is made new’! New creation is happening all round us if we have faith to see it.

It was precisely the ground that was cursed because of Adam’s sin and from which Cain was cursed to flee. It is that same ground that the Creator redeems from the curse and renews each day. Renewal through God’s Spirit is integral to the very design of creation.

No wonder the Psalmist is not only ready to ‘rejoice in the Lord’, but also to call upon the Creator to rejoice in these wondrous works of creation (Ps. 104.31).

Discuss: If the Spirit is at work creating and renewing creation in our planet can we say that Earth is spiritual? Should we then be involved in ministering to Earth as an integral part of our faith?

Conscious of the Crisis

Nothing looks more cursed than a salt plain. Vast tracts of land in many parts of the world have been subjected to excessive clearing, destructive farming techniques and systematic exploitation that have led to increased salinity and death of vegetation. The resulting salt plains are a curse produced by humans.

In some places, the renewal of these salt plains has begun. By reintroducing the original vegetation of the area, some plains may regain their fertility. The Spirit of God can renew creation where we cooperate with Earth and recognise the ecosystem God established in a given place. Rivers can lose their salt and come back to life.

Can you cite similar examples of restoration made possible by cooperating with creation rather than exploiting it?

Rivers Sunday



Exploring the Text

Read Matthew 28.1-3

The resurrection of Christ is also an integral part of the renewal of creation. Christ comes to redeem both humanity and creation.

One of the signals of Earth's involvement in Christ's resurrection is the earthquake that signals the great moment. Before the angel rolls away the stone, before the women look inside and before the disciples meet Jesus there, is a signal from Earth itself, like a drum roll from the ground below. Earth joins in the celebration.

And the Jesus whom the disciples meet is not some ghost or spirit, he is earthy and human. The disciples fall to the ground and grab his feet when they celebrate his return!

Read Revelation 22.1-3

The final chapters of the Book of revelation offer various visions of what a renewed creation might be like. The 'new heaven and new Earth' are a transformation of the world we know or, as Revelation 21.1-2 says, Earth will be transformed by the descent from heaven of a 'new Jerusalem' with a temple and a throne for Christ, the lamb.

From this throne, according to our reading, a river will flow with a tree of life growing on either side. The extraordinary thing about these trees of life is that their leaves bring healing. The trees of life from the garden of Eden now function to bring 'healing for the nations.' The nations of Earth who have been plundered and wounded will be renewed.

The final restoration of creation is announced with the words 'Nothing accursed will be found there any more' (Rev. 22.3). The curses that Earth has born in the history of creation will no more exist. The new creation means the removal of all the curses that Earth and humanity have suffered. New life in the new creation flows as a river for all to enjoy.

Discuss: What is your vision of the new creation? Given the curses that Earth now bears because of environmental pollution and devastation, how would you describe a creation renewed by the healing Spirit of God.

Connecting with Christ

The resurrection of Christ can be viewed as an escape from the real world—escape by Christ and escape for us. We will be resurrected one day, join Christ and escape creation. That is a popular view of some Christians.

The readings in this cycle for the Season of Creation do not support this idea. Rather, the renewal of creation has been a work of God from the beginning. And the resurrection of Christ is a key part of that renewal. The risen Christ is the presence of God in creation bringing healing and renewal. The Spirit is groaning for the final liberation of creation, for the day when the rivers of life will renew all creation.

How should we celebrate the presence of the risen Christ healing our creation? Are rejuvenated rivers a sign of Christ's risen presence?

Closing with Praise

Participants may wish to close by singing a song written jointly with a group of Indigenous Australian elders. The melody they chose and loved is 'Hark, the Herald Angels Sing'.

Rise Creator Spirit Rise

Rise Creator Spirit, rise,
From this land across the skies.
Rise from deep within this land,
Move across the desert sand.
Rise, create this land anew,
Make your Dreaming song come true.
Fill this land with life again,
Make the desert bloom with rain.
Fill this land with life again,
Make the desert bloom with rain.

Rise, Creator Spirit, rise,
From this land across the skies.
Rise from deep in mystery,
Rise to set your people free.
Hear the land cry out in pain,
Hear her people call your name.
Let your rainbow span this Earth
Giving hope and giving birth.
Let your rainbow span this Earth
Giving hope and giving birth.

*Rise, Creator Spirit, rise,
From this land across the skies.
Rise from deep within the tomb,
Making Jesus' grave a womb.
Plunging back into your cave,
Bringing life to ev'ry grave,
Life that rose with Jesus Christ,
Rose to fill our hearts and eyes.
Life that rose with Jesus Christ,
Rose to fill our hearts and eyes.*

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*Prayer
Rise, Creator Spirit, rise!
Enter our hearts so that we might see
your presence in, with and under all things
as you renew all creation. Amen.*